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Seasons of change. Or, back to the future.

NOT THAT YOU ASKED, BUT...

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you 'didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw out the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

— P.S. I Love You: When Mom Wrote, She Always Saved the Best for Last, by H. Jackson Brown, 1991.

So I'm throwing off the bowlines, setting sail, catching the trade winds and charting a new course to explore, dream and discover. To borrow a line from singer Bob Dylan, for me "the times, they are a-changin'."

From an early age, around 13 or so, I knew I wanted to be in the newspaper business. I had one of those *Field of Dreams* visions while out riding my bike one day that someday I would have a newspaper of my own in multi-generational family vacation destination Boulder Junction. You're holding said publication in your hands.

I grew up in the nostalgic,

sepia-toned waning halcyon days of the Fourth Estate, back in the days of newspaper columnists like housewife-turned-humorist Erma Bombeck and the *Chicago Tribune's* Mike Royko and Bob Greene, three-inch-thick Sunday newspapers, morning and afternoon dailies in hometown Milwaukee, and comics you didn't need a magnifying glass to read. TV, meanwhile, offered up journalistic-themed entertainment fare like Jack Klugman's sports columnist Oscar Madison in *The Odd Couple* and Ed Asner as a big city newspaper editor in *Lou Grant*. It was an inspiring time to be an aspiring "ink-stained wretch."

I was so inspired, in fact, that, inspired by a fiction Kid Lit book about a group of kids starting their own neighborhood newspaper, I cranked up the Xerox "presses" and served seven good-natured neighbors with copies of my mercifully short-lived kid newspaper, *The White Birch Court News*.

I more formally dipped my toe in the newspaper business as a reporter and advertising business

manager with my high school paper, *The Horlick Herald*, at Racine's William Horlick High School, and immediately fell in love with it all — the piquant scent of printer's ink, the excitement of meeting new people and going new places with every reporting assignment, the lively camaraderie of the "newsroom," the pressing of deadlines, the relief of putting an edition "to bed," and the excitement of plucking the first paper off the press. Good stuff.

My exclusive October 1982 front page and center-spread scoop *Herald* interview with affable local-boy-done-good Milwaukee Brewers manager Harvey Kuenn immediately after the Milwaukee-St. Louis World Series, dubbed the "Suds Series," sealed the deal. I've always credited Kuenn with being the true foundational inspiration for my career in the trade.

College came soon after and I found myself 30 miles north on I-94 writing and cartooning for the student-run *Marquette Tribune* at Milwaukee's Marquette University, dabbling in occasional feature

stories and happily inking my weekly comic strip *Curmudgeon Hall*, satirically taking aim at college life with equal parts *Herman, The Far Side, Bloom County* and *Doomsbury* — and a dash of David Letterman sardonic golly gee irony thrown in for good measure.

But the biggest take-away from Marquette University was the mentorship and friendship of veteran Milwaukee print-turned-television newsman Art Olszyk, who laid upon my shoulders the mantle of responsibility of old school journalism, a cultural odyssey in the "Fake News" world of 2018 along the lines of horse collars and button shoes. In many respects I feel like I've journalistically dropped into the dark alternate timeline of the post-apocalyptic Biff-run 2015 Hill Valley, California in *Back to the Future II*.

I now find myself drawing nigh on my gold watch 30-year anniversary in the print communications business, first writing for monthly city magazines like *Milwaukee Magazine* and *Rockford Magazine* and for the past 24 years clacking

away at my keyboard for a variety of daily, weekly and bi-weekly newspapers in Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin, crossing paths with everyone from Holocaust survivor Fela Warschau and World War II's famed " Tuskegee Airmen" to Grammy-winning Country Music Hall of Famer Ronnie Milsap, *M*A*S*H's* Jamie Farr (Klinger) and children's television icons Bob "Captain Kangaroo" Keeshan and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood's* Fred Rogers and David "Speedy Delivery" Newell.

Not surprisingly, the industry has changed seismically since I first got in the business. Light boxes, border tape, paste-up boards, pica rulers, proportion wheels, Xacto knives, and rubber cement and hot wax guns that deal the roost back in the day have given way to computerized desktop graphic design, while in the newsroom the staple manual and electric typewriters of yore have given way to computers and wireless keyboards.

Those technological developments made the job easier. The *FYI Northwoods News* you hold in your hands — my Boulder Junction-based childhood dream come true — is created, pretty much, on a few square feet on my desk before it is electronically uploaded to my remote contract printer. Easy-peasy. You couldn't even do that with the *Horlick Herald* back in the day, much less any of the many commercial newspapers and magazines that I've written for over the years. *Milwaukee Magazine* took up a whole floor of an historic old textile warehouse in Milwaukee's downtown Third Ward, while *Rockford Magazine* took up a whole floor of the News Tower on East State Street at the Rock River in downtown Rockford, Illinois. Whole buildings have been dedicated to the newspapers that I've written for in various locales in Ohio, Illinois and Wisconsin.

But the biggest industry disrupters have been the rise of the 24/7 news cycle with the advent of cable television and the fast spread of the Internet. Decades of downsizings, mergers and industry consolidation have followed. For the observant, it's no surprise that the newspaper industry isn't what it used to be. Just visit any local store newspaper rack or a remote newspaper box these days — if you can even find one. The Internet-driven rise of e-commerce and the corresponding decline of brick-and-mortar retailers, the advertising bread-and-butter of newspapers, has provided the proverbial double-whammy for the Fourth Estate. Sharp cost increases for newsprint are yet another challenge.

It's been a heckuva ride, but it's

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not an industry that I recognize anymore. And I also see the handwriting on the wall. It's time to "retire," if you will.

As Kenny Rogers once sang in *The Gambler*, "You've got to know when to hold 'em. Know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away. Know when to run."

Waaaaaay back in the day, immediately after graduation from Marquette, I took a detour from journalism and found myself in the employ of Rockford Public Schools for a season as a high school Special Education paraprofessional. While I've had a great ride and made spectacular memories in print journalism, it was always the job at Jefferson High School working with "my" kids that captured my imagination and stole my heart as the best job I've ever had – the most challenging but also most rewarding days of work in my life.

Returning to the classroom in Special Education has long been in my mind and now, well, it's another dream come true. My Fourth Estate retirement gold watch is throwing off the bowlines, setting sail, catching the trade winds and charting a new course to explore, dream and discover as I start a new chapter in my life as a Special Ed-

ucation paraprofessional working with high school students on the autism spectrum at the new Lakeland Star Academy charter school in Minocqua.

Since January, I've been testing the waters, as it were, as a short-term substitute teacher and paraprofessional at Lakeland Union High School, trading in my *Oscar Madison* dishevelment for a dress shirt and tie subbing in a variety of classrooms at LUHS including English, Business, Art, Social Studies, Virtual Learning and Special Education. Harkening back to my days at Jefferson it's been, as the old *Carpenter's* song said, "yesterday once more." Being back in the school setting feels right for this chapter in my life.

To be sure, I will still keep a foot in writing, working on book projects on the side and online blogging *Not That You Asked, But...*, among other projects.

And it's also time to focus more on my family, who have taken the short end of the journalistic stick for far too many years.

My near brush with death in 2016 served as a paradigm-shifting wake-up call to reboot as Eric 2.0. Today rolls out Eric 2.1.

As it's said in *Ecclesiastes*: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." A new season has arrived.