

TODAY'S VOICES

Not just closing doors, but dying

I've been thinking all day, for weeks really, how to describe what it means for a newspaper — my newspaper, your newspaper — to die.

I know many businesses are closing, particularly these days. But newspapers don't simply close. They die.

The world goes on without them, but it's not the same world. Even if it were the same world, hundreds of thousands of readers couldn't be sure because the paper wouldn't be there on your doorstep (OK, sometimes near the doorstep) to let them know.

And when a newspaper's gone, there's little enough to remember. We're a daily. Journalism is, as they say, history written in a hurry, all the news fit to print until deadline comes. A newspaper isn't meant to stand the test of time. It's meant to be true to that day, that moment.

Since I'm infamous at the *Rocky* for stretching deadline, somebody recently showed me a cartoon of God walking into an editor's office, and the editor telling him, "I know you want it to be perfect, but you've only got six days." I've written some columns, I swear to you, in little more than six minutes.

I'm a newspaper junkie. As one, I've spent my life going to basements of libraries to look at what we used to call the newspaper morgue — copies of old dead papers — and read how events were covered contemporaneously, without the historian's luxury of time and results. When Bob Dylan moved to New York from Minnesota, he'd spend winter days at the New York Public Library reading newspapers — not books — from the Civil War. And then he wrote songs that could have been ripped from a newspaper.

What I love about newspapers is that they're not perfect. I once had an old editor (not as old then as I am now) at the *L.A. Times* who used to joke each night that we'd finally put out the perfect paper, only to come in the next day and lament that there'd been an error or two — and that we'd try again. We never got there. We never stopped trying either.

People who talk about the importance of newspapers like to cite Thomas Jefferson, who said that if he had to choose between a government without newspapers and newspapers without a government, he'd choose newspapers. I like this quote better — I don't know who said it — which Jefferson would surely appreciate: "Everything you read in newspapers is absolutely true, except for that rare story of which you happen to have first-hand knowledge."

Readers routinely complain about bias in newspapers. People are human, including newspaper guys. (That's what we old guys are — not "journalists"; we didn't become journalists until about 1990.) But those who complain about bias never worked in a newsroom. They don't understand about daily newspapers — the miracle of producing one each and every day.

The *Rocky* has been a daily since Aug. 27, 1860. We come out every day, no matter what. And now we won't, ever again.

Still, the obit should be easy enough to write. The *Rocky* was 149 years old. And



JOE MAHONEY/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

E.W. Scripps CEO Rich Boehne walks to *Rocky Mountain News* Editor John Temple's office after he announced the decision by Scripps to close the nearly 150-year-old newspaper.

yet, somehow, at 149, the *Rocky* was close to its prime, at least as close as the city of Denver itself. The guys in suits cut our staff, citing something about the declining economics of newspapers. They cut our resources. On certain days, it seemed they were trying to cut our hearts out.

The guys in suits — and I say that as someone who doesn't own one — don't understand what it means to be in a newsroom, or if they once did, they forgot.

They're businessmen, who talk in terms of quarters. We talk in terms of stories. The *Rocky* lived. It breathed. It told stories that annoyed and ones that thrilled. I love both.

I loved, too, that it captured sounds and signs and loud, disturbing, private noises — the noise of the workaday world and the world that people tried to keep secret from the rest of us.

I've been writing for a newspaper since I was 16. There were plenty of newspaper jobs at the time — in the days of hot type, when you read the stuff backwards and upside down, and there weren't yet computers, only typewriters, and the guys in the composing room would slam your

hand if you ever dared touch the hot type. It was romantic, at least if you were a kid and didn't care about making money or getting home anywhere near dinner time.

Whenever I see newspaper people talk about the importance of newspapers to democracy, I think how self-righteous they sound, even if they're right. The *Rocky* wasn't about saving democracy. At its best, it's scrappy and it's lively and it entertains while it informs.

Now, it won't do any of that.

Hell, I didn't sign up for journalism to save democracy or even because I couldn't stand the thought of going to law school. I signed up — and stayed signed up — because there isn't a job where you could possibly have more fun.

I came to the Rocky nearly 12 years ago from the *Baltimore Sun*. It may not surprise some of you why I left. The editor and I didn't get along, and the editor wasn't leaving. So I picked 12 cities in which I wanted to live, and Denver was the one where I got the job.

I had recently gotten back from the Sydney Olympics — do you have to ask why my job is so much fun? — and the Bush v. Gore election was going into overtime. I suggested to editor John Temple that I go to Florida. Temple wanted to know how much it would cost, and I said something snide like, "What's the limit on covering the future of the country?"

A friendly editor stepped in, got me a cheap flight, and I was there for most of the next five weeks. The papers are on the wall near Temple's office: "Standoff," "2 Strikes on Gore," "Not So Fast." At my desk — or what is my desk until they make me go — I have a Florida voting machine from 2000, with honest-to-God chads. My daughter bought it for me when Florida voting machines went electric. The machine cost a buck. Memories? Yeah, priceless.

It was a great story. I love great stories. One of my favorite newspaper quotes comes from Pete Hamill: "The best newspapermen I know are those most thrilled by the daily pump of city room excitement; they long fondly for a 'good murder'; they pray that assassinations, wars, catastrophes break on their editions."

I've covered them all. I've been trapped in fires. I've ducked bullets in riots. I've

interviewed terrorists. I've interviewed Orioles manager Earl Weaver while he sat on a toilet. I wrote the columns, and those who agreed and those who didn't agree let me know, and I can't tell you which I enjoyed more. The e-mails keep pouring in. The nasty ones make me laugh. The nice ones make me cry.

Let me tell you what it means to be a newspaperman. I was in Grant Park in Chicago on Election Night to see Obama make his victory speech. I'd been covering the race — history on deadline — for 18 months, in a time when the *Rocky* was counting every dollar and couldn't afford it. That was commitment — at a level that some guys at corporate might have missed.

As I watched Obama give his speech, I couldn't help thinking that it was Election Night and that where I really wanted to be was in the newsroom — because there's nothing like Election Night, late into the night, in a newsroom.

I'm moving to another newsroom now, but it won't be the same. Before I go, I'll be out for a drink, or a few drinks, with my friends, and I'll think back to the day I met Red Smith, maybe the greatest columnist ever. On the day I met him, I introduced myself, and he invited me out with his friends for dinner and drinks — and more drinks. I was a cub reporter, and I knew I'd entered into a club I'd never want to leave.

I'll go out, and I'll drink to the *Rocky*, and I'll drink to the people who made the *Rocky* the *Rocky*, and I'll drink to the people who read the *Rocky*, and I'll drink to those who let me be part of their breakfast routine and who got the joke when it was funny and who cried with me when it wasn't funny and know now — 149 years in — what it means that the *Rocky* is gone.

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