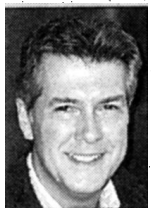


Newspaper, coffee and the way of the world in a hotel lobby



One of the attributes of a newspaper is it's easy to navigate.

No clicking, waiting for stories to load, returning to the home page and clicking on another. Plus, there's no dependence on signal strength or Wi-Fi connections or annoying text message and Facebook update chimes.

A newspaper produces no such distractions as we peruse the headlines, read a bit of an article, jump to another and pick up the first article a few pages later. Our brain is the computer in charge, scanning information, voicing our preferences, not a Google algorithm written by a 20-year-old wunderkind, the screen fading to black when we don't touch it often enough.

So I was a contented soul one Saturday morning in August, ensconced in an easy chair in the early morning hush of the Marriott lobby in downtown Kansas City, steaming cup of Joe and a crisp copy of the Kansas City Star in my hands.

How anyone can start their day any other way, I have no idea.

I thumbed through the local news, bemused by how towns and states share similar challenges, but with a twist. In Kansas politics, Republicans hold sway and a front-page article, "Kansas Democrats Reject Rebranding," explored

turmoil among the Dems, their state chair resigning after suggesting the party shift rightward in order to win. I don't recall Mike Madigan making any such suggestion.

Another front-page piece marked the end of a downtown men's association, the Kansas City Club. Founded in 1882 and boasting past members like Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and Gen. Omar Bradley, its overstuffed leather chairs, cigar humidors and scotch glasses were as empty as the club's coffers. Bankruptcy declared, everything is up for auction, including Truman's poker table. The grainy, black and white photos at the Hoopston library of the town's early 20th century leaders, white men in suits and ties, resolute, not a flicker of a smile, flashed across my mind.

But it was three apparently disconnected articles that intrigued me as I sipped coffee and pondered my route home to Hoopston.

The first, an opinion piece by Leonard Pitts Jr., "All Lives Matter": Words of Moral Cowardice," took exception to Mike Huckabee's assertion that Martin Luther King Jr. would be "appalled by the notion that we're elevating some lives above others" with the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Pitts argued that elevating African-American issues for all Americans to consider is exactly what King did and would do today, when, accord-

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ing to Pitts, "police brutality ... is disproportionate in black lives."

Indeed, the March 4, 2015, Department of Justice report on Ferguson, Mo., noted "nearly 90 percent of documented force used by FPD officers was used against African-Americans" and pointed toward "clear racial disparities" and "discriminatory intent" by the FPD. Now, "documented force" is not necessarily police brutality, and one police department does not reflect all, but such findings add heft to claims that African-Americans may be at a higher risk of physical harm in interaction with police. Thus the need for a "Black Lives Matter" movement in the minds of some people.

The second article, "They Promise to be True to Broadway," about the Kansas City-

based Spinning Tree Theatre production of "West Side Story," analyzed the difficulty in recreating Jerome Robbins original choreography of the iconic 1957 Broadway show. But what caught my attention was the observation of how the "clean-cut" gangs, Jets and Sharks, differ from gangs today in appearance only. The article echoed Pitts when it asserted that "we still live in a time of racial division and outbursts of urban violence." In fact, said co-director Michael Grayman: "We are presenting the original as it was in 1957 because ... nothing has changed."

Seeking a ray of sunlight, I stumbled upon a Billy Graham column in which he was asked: "Does the Bible give us any hope for a better world?" The reverend said "yes," with the proviso this "better world" will not, in his belief, occur until Jesus Christ returns. Only then will we "live in perfect justice and harmony." Despite all the scientific and educational progress mankind has made, the problem, Graham said, remains "within each one of us, within our own hearts and minds."

Well, amen to that last line, but not exactly the hopeful message I suddenly yearned for on a sunny Saturday morning in Kansas City.

I thought again of Pitts and the satisfaction he felt when he observed "a mostly white crowd chanting 'Black lives

matter! Black lives matter!'" in Charleston, S.C., after the massacre of black worshippers on June 17. It was, said Pitts, a "reminder ... we all have access — connection — to each other's pain and joy by simple virtue of the fact that we are all human."

I folded the paper, sipped my coffee and took in the scene. The lobby hopped now, busy people passing through on their way somewhere, many with eyes glued to phones reading texts, checking voice mail, glancing at the news, but moving, always moving.

Perhaps Grayman and Graham are right, I thought. Nothing's changed and nothing's going to change as long as humans call the shots. As much as we try, we are preoccupied with ourselves and our lives. Our genetically wired instinct at self-preservation often superseding best intentions.

Dismayed, but an optimist at heart, I read Pitts' final hopeful paragraphs one more time, tossed the paper on the table and melded into the lobby crowd. Tomorrow morning, I'd awake at home, a cup of Joe and the Sunday News-Gazette in hand.

How can anyone start their day any other way?

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