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I Read the Obits Today, Oh Boy!

Why I love waking up with the dead in The New York Times

posted by John Stark, July 16, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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Norma Lyon, the 'Butter-Cow Lady,' Dies at 81



Norma Lyon worked on a butter sculpture of "The Last Supper" at the Iowa State Fair in 1999.

By PAUL VITELLO
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Norma Lyon, a self-described dairy farmer's wife and mother of nine who achieved fame well beyond the Midwest as the "butter-cow lady" of the Iowa State Fair, sculpturing tons of U.S. Grade AA salted butter

From NYTimes.com; Rodney White/Associated Press

The first thing I want to know when I get my morning New York Times is who died. I go straight to the obituaries. It's where I meet some of my favorite people — ones I never knew about, like an inventor of Twister.

His obit appeared on Friday. The following day another fascinating one appeared. It was about the man who unleashed a nation of professional dog walkers.

Earlier this month I was delighted to make the acquaintance of a radio DJ. Had I been aware of him when he was alive, I would have tuned in to his show. He played only annoying music — the kind

that's so bad it's unintentionally funny, like William Shatner singing "Mr. Tambourine Man" or Donald Duck quacking "Amazing Grace."

Well, better late than never.

(MORE: Older Entrepreneurs Are Better Than Younger Ones)

Not everyone loves the Times obits like I do. A few years ago a man wrote the obituary page editor wanting to know why his father's death wasn't worth mentioning. He had been, after all, a prominent Staten Island philanthropist who lived to be 100.

The son was outraged at those who made the cut that week: a shady veterinarian who ran a horse-switching scheme and a woman who created life-sized butter sculptures of cows.

The Times' Arthur Brisbane, who writes "The Public Editor" column, addressed the son's query in an article called "[Someone Dies: But That Is Only the Beginning](#)." "Indeed," he wrote, "Times obituaries go not to the conventionally virtuous but to the famous, the influential, the offbeat and to others whose lives, through writerly intervention, can be alchemized into newsprint literature."

In other words, having lived a worthy life doesn't mean it was an interesting one.

Not in comparison to Norma "Duffy" Lyon's accomplishments. The self-taught artist spent 46 years sculpting cows and beauty queens at the Iowa State Fair. Her medium was U.S. Grade AA salted butter. She didn't take the conventional path to success. She blazed her own quirky trail, with a narrative that was easily spun into pure gold.

Her lengthy obit was accompanied by a photograph of her piece de resistance, a diorama of Da Vinci's "Last Supper." If it weren't for the Times obit policy of originality over predictability, I would never have heard of her. Nor would most of the world.

Twist and Shout

I can't tell you who invented the Hula Hoop or the Pet Rock. But I know as of last Friday who gave us Twister: Chuck Foley, who died at the age of 82.

His "aha" moment occurred in the mid-1960s, according to the [Times obit](#). While working for a design firm in St Paul, Minn., he and a colleague named Neil Rabens, who's still living, created the game. They were awarded United States Patent 3,454,279 for their invention, "Apparatus for Playing a Game Wherein the Players Constitute the Game Pieces." Its premise was that simple.

How silly and sexy the party game proved to be. When Twister was introduced, the Times noted, it "scandalized the puritanical and drove chiropractors wild with delight."

The only sad thing, the Times reported, is that Foley never received royalties for his invention, which went on to sell tens of millions of boxes. But that's another American story.

Barking Up the Right Tree

Jim Buck's brainstorm also came in the 1960s when he saw an obvious need that no one else was filling: He started a business for dog walking on New York's Upper East Side.

He died on July 4 at age 81, which made him 567 in dog years. According to the [Times obit](#), "Buck is widely described as the first person to professionalize dog walking in New York City and, by extension, in the United States." His business, Jim Buck's School for Dogs, operated for 40 years. What started as a one-man operation eventually employed 24 assistants walking more than 150 dogs a day.

(MORE: [6 Best Small Dogs for Your Empty Net](#))

Professional dog walkers have been a part of every city since I can remember. There are so many in my Boston neighborhood that they have turf disputes. (It's not the dogs that growl and snarl as they pass one another on the street.) I didn't realize until I read the Times obit page on Saturday that all those leashed dogs getting fresh air owe their wagging tails to one person.

But I do now.

Music to My Ears

On Wednesday, July 3, the Times reported on the death of Jim Nayder, who was only 59 years old when he died of a heart attack. But what a delicious legacy he left.

He was working as an announcer at the Chicago public radio station WBEZ-FM in 1996 when fate stepped in. The show scheduled to follow his wasn't ready to air, so Nayder was asked to "fill in a little."

"Usually, Mr. Nayder played music in such situations," said the [Times obit](#). "That day, he played Slim Whitman — a country artist not afraid to seem corn pone — yodeling 'It's a Small World.'" "Welcome to 'The Annoying Music Show,' Nayder ad-libbed.

The listeners, to his amazement, loved the concept. And so, reported the Times, was born one of the radio's oddest shows, which was only five minutes in length. In a year's time it had been picked up by scores of public radio stations around the country.

The obit listed some of Nayder's song choices — gems that included Jim Nabors singing "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World," George Burns' crooning "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)" and Tiny Tim doing a cha-cha rendition of "Hey, Jude."

How did I not know about Nayder? How did he slip beneath my cultural radar?

I wish I could ask him if he had a recording of Ethel Merman singing "By the Time I Get to Phoenix." I once heard her perform it on "The Merv Griffin Show," but no one believes me. Now that I know about Nayder, I can't wait to buy his compilation CDs, which I found for sale on the [Internet](#).

Obits like those for Foley, Buck and Nayder give me hope that inspiration may one day strike me like a lightning bolt — it's never too late, I keep thinking, to have my inner song heard, whatever it may be.

But the best thing about the Times obits is that so many of them make me smile. Death can be a lovely way to start the day.

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