

The obituary page

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I used to think my grandfather had a strange affliction. He not only read the obituaries, but he kept a log of the deaths of relatives, friends and people he knew. If there were ever any questions about who died when, he'd retrieve his notebook and give us the facts.

My mother also kept a log for a while, though I'm not sure she still does. I do know she reads and clips newspaper obituaries. She has stacks of them on her desk, mixed together with financial papers that my sister and brother-in-law help her keep straight.

This affliction is apparently hereditary. Somewhere on the path toward "maturity," I too started noticing and reading the obituaries. I'm as apt to read obituaries about people I don't know as those I do know. I'm amused when people's accomplishments are trumpeted while their feet of clay are left unexposed. Obituaries stand as monuments to the persons whose lives they recount, a testament to the fact their lives really mattered.

When I asked my friends on Facebook whether they read obituaries, one pastor in Kansas said it's in the job description for small-town pastors. Another said he likes to read obituaries in small towns while traveling and imagine the lives of people who live there. Another reported that her grandmother liked to say that she'd start her day reading the obits, and if she didn't find her name there she'd get on with her day. She lived to 102. Does reading obituaries prolong life?

One friend reported that her brother died unexpectedly this past February at age 37. She and her family were very thankful for all the people who

showed up at the wake because they had seen his obituary. Now she reads them herself.

I read obituaries for reasons similar to why I like memoirs and biographies. I'm intrigued by the way other people have lived their lives, the roads they've taken, the roads rejected.

I also read obituaries to remind me of my own mortality. Sometimes I even imagine what it will be like for others to read my obituary. That's not being morbid; it's being realistic about the end of our days. As St. Benedict put it, "Remember every day, you will die."