

Some of my best friends are journalists

At some point my parents left it to my older siblings to correct my behavior at St. Rose of Lima in Brooklyn. Two memories stand out, once for slouching as an altar server, the other in a pew, for not washing from my neck and arms the newsprint that had accumulated one Sunday from more than 100 copies of the News American.

Fifty years ago last month, on the day I turned 12 and became legally old enough to man - boy? - a paper route, my brother Kevin took me to the garage of Mrs. Richardson, the neighborhood distributor of the Hearst daily, who gave me my first job. The discipline and diligence that was lacking in the classroom came out on Church Street, perhaps because I was already partial to periodicals. With a home awash in three Baltimore daily newspapers, the Maryland Gazette, the Catholic Review, Army Times, Life, Look, Sports Illustrated, National Geographic, etc., who had time for assigned reading?

With a few brief interruptions, I have remained an ink-stained wretch. The more funerals I attend, the more appreciative I am of the folks who made that possible.



Weeks out of high school, Al Hopkins and Joe Gross gave me an opportunity to write sports for the Annapolis Capital and Maryland Gazette. Al was not the most effusive guy, but neither was my father. At Halsey Field House, Al singled out the Marines from the Navy men jogging laps. It seemed silly then; now, I recognize it as a lesson in observation. Joe taught the value of passion and a good publicity stunt.

Mike Klingaman got me into the Evening Sun newsroom in Baltimore, and Larry Harris got me fulltime employment there. Molly Dunham taught that if you want to qualify for a big assignment, you need to get out of your comfort zone. Bill Marimow taught that it is more important to be fair than first.

Many acquaintances and neighbors mock the media. I have never fabricated facts, but have witnessed the newsroom dismissal of those who did.

At times, I served my employer better than my family, leaving Mary to deal with the kids. On March 14, 1993, while the eastern U.S. was dealing with an historic late winter snowstorm, I was in Chapel Hill, N.C. It was not that important a lacrosse

game, Loyola College at the University of North Carolina, but a road trip seemed in order. I wrote that it was believed to be the only outdoor sports event played that day east of the Mississippi River. USA Today picked up that nugget.

On that trip, I took holy Communion with the Greyhounds at their pre-game Mass in a hotel conference room, one of many great church memories on the road. Twenty years ago, the NCAA basketball tournament took me to Birmingham, Ala., where the Philadelphia Inquirer's Joe Juliano and I joined a Palm Sunday ecumenical pilgrimage after Mass, then had the best home-cooked soul food ever. A week later, I was walking up No. 2 following Steve Elkington at The Players Championship outside Jacksonville on Easter Sunday when something tickled my ankle. It was a serpent, albeit a harmless little green snake. The year before, Easter Sunday was spent in Augusta, Ga., where I squirmed to hide my Masters credential as the priest began his homily, "Blessed are the poor and ticketless."

The lobby at The Sun included a photo of H.L. Mencken and this quotation: "As I look back over a misspent life, I find myself more and more convinced that I had more fun doing news reporting than in any other enterprise. It really is the life of kings." Wrong about a lot of things, Mencken was right about that.

The Sun allowed me to see the Acropolis in Athens; La Rambla in Barcelona; Pebble Beach; Elvis Presley's grave at Graceland; Fats Domino on New Year's Eve in New Orleans; several Jerry Jeff Walker birthday shows in Austin, Texas; Jerry Falwell in his office in Lynchburg, Va.; and the Tasman Sea west of Melbourne, Australia, where baby penguins screaming for dinner gave way to the Southern Cross.

Because Mary was at my side, that last one is my favorite memory of all.

People resonate more than places. The first time I wrote about faith was in 1979, when a teenage runner named Bob Golliday was dying of cancer. Before coaches had to maintain a Twitter feed, I lingered in the offices of Dave Cottle, Bill Nelson, Fang Mitchell, Skip Prosser, Tony Seaman and Terry Truax. Sometimes, we talked basketball and lacrosse. More often, we talked life.

The secular media gig ran out, but Dan Medinger and Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien brought me to the Review and Chris Gunty and Archbishop Lori keep surrounding me with good people. The Review has allowed me to worship in a rundown cathedral in St. Marc, Haiti; much more regal houses in Assisi and Rome; and throughout the archdiocese. You don't need a passport to see Europe; just head to Baltimore's older churches.



Trying to slow down on the road from Baltimore to Philadelphia with Father Jack

Lombardi in September 2015.

I loved writing sports, where nearly everything is quantifiable. Now I love writing faith, because it is not.

As awkward as I am on a dance floor, my vocation has been blessed with good timing. The Summer Olympic beat fell into my lap just as the North Baltimore Aquatic Club was unveiling a 14-year-old prospect. Both Michael Phelps and Bob Bowman, his coach, taught me not to let anyone else define your limits. Deacon Rod Mortel, who escaped Haiti and one of the worst slums in the Western Hemisphere to run a hospital, reinforced that.

There is still much to learn, from 30-something co-workers, retirees and those in between, like Paula Tiller, a fellow pilgrim on our September 2015 walk from Baltimore to Philadelphia to see Pope Francis.

Inhaling a chicken leg at a roadside stop on Belair Road, Paula slowed me down, instructing me to thank the farmer who fed the chicken, the truck driver who transported it, the Royal Farms counter person who prepared it - and finally, the chicken itself.

She didn't have to say, thank God.

That, I already knew.