

RHETA GRIMSLEY JOHNSON

IN THE HINDSIGHT OF RETIREMENT, AN ACCLAIMED JOURNALIST REFLECTS ON WHAT SHE REGRETS — AND WHAT SHE DOESN'T

I was in a food aisle at Walmart when my mother died. For about ten days I had stayed as close as possible to her death bed, trying to hear her every utterance, jumping up during the night whenever she called out or was restless. I knew it was her time. But when my sister and niece arrived after a ten-hour road trip to say their goodbyes, we all got back into their car and left to restock groceries.

Mother died with her faithful caretakers at her bedside, but no family. I wonder if she wondered where we all had disappeared to, or if at the end, knowing us well, she suspected we were off on a potato chip and soda mission.

I regret it.

My life is full of such regrets, missteps that are not punishable by law but come perilously close to unforgivable. I regret not being in the high school marching band, for instance, where I could have learned to play a saxophone and experienced musical camaraderie that might have carried over into lasting friendships and a lifelong hobby. At the time of folk music and free love, I thought marching band uncool.

I regret being too immature to appreciate fully my first marriage to cartoonist Jimmy Johnson (Arlo & Janis), a union that launched a couple of solid careers and an enduring friendship but ended in divorce. I don't regret never having children – people always ask – but readily admit he would have been a great father.

I regret not moving to France when I was young and had opportunity and still remembered a good bit of French vocabulary. An Auburn French professor had the inside track on a journalism job in Paris and offered to help. My brain still was limber enough to make fluency possible if I had spent

significant time, or a lifetime, in France. I got married and went to work for a series of community newspapers instead.

With each passing year and visit to France, it becomes obvious that I'll always be a tourist, never a resident, of the country that I believe comes closest to sharing my sensibilities. It's a nation that sells books instead of potato chips from vending machines. Right now, in the Age of Coronavirus, I'm not even welcome as a tourist. And my spoken French remains pathetic.

C'est la vie.

I regret never meeting the late US Rep. Barbara Jordan, of Texas, who helped investigate Watergate with a voice so full of gravitas, righteousness, and dignity that one could be forgiven for confusing her with God. She was gravely ill by the time I made an attempt to interview her, and she refused. I also missed meeting singer and songwriter John Prine, the best lyricist and people's poet since Hank



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Rheta Grimsley Johnson has a few regrets about her life and career as she considers them in retirement. “I have better vision now standing on the high hill of my regrets,” she writes.
Photo by Ellis Anderson.



After years on the road, retired columnist Rheta Grimsley Johnson now spends more time in and around her home in rural Mississippi. "I tend my own garden, or I would if I gardened," she notes. Photo by Ellis Anderson.

Williams. Those two are on a short list of celebrities who would have been worth the trouble to pursue.

The last lighthouse keeper in America was on Coney Island but saved his story for a television crew. I always felt bad about that one getting away.

Others I missed meeting, like the World War II reporter Ernie Pyle, French novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupery, and US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, are boilerplate regrets that at least do not reflect on my journalistic persistence. Those notables were dead and gone before even I began banging on a manual.

If this is beginning to sound like a Frank Sinatra song — regrets, I've had a few — I must emphatically add that I do not regret ending a forty-three-year newspaper career several years ago.

I have asked myself why I have been so satisfied with retirement, absenting myself from the journalistic melee. Only once, and that after the

death of a good friend, a small-town radio announcer, did I feel a pang of something akin to regret. It would have been nice to have written Bob Sanders's obituary.

Why did I not continue in the traces, in a comfort zone that most days felt a lot like breathing? Why? Because, all of a sudden, I felt tired. I feared repeating myself. I spent more time trying to understand the technology involved with writing than the writing itself. I was sure someone younger was waiting in the wings, ready to deflate the pompous and celebrate the forgotten.

Now, the less I do, the longer it takes. I do not live in the past or tell lots of war stories about newspapers and interesting newsroom characters. I'm too busy trying to meet new characters and to go different places. I might write about them; I might not. No deadline hangs above my head to influence that decision.

I have better vision now standing on the high hill of my regrets. I have

learned from them, which makes them almost worthwhile. I try to be kinder, at least to friends and animals, a little more measured and calm than I was in my hell-bent youth. I tend my own garden, or I would if I gardened. Who has the time?

No longer does writing get in the way of reading, or some editor's ill-conceived assignment dictate my travel plans. I write what I want; I go where I want. I spend my proverbial fixed retirement income on food and whatever else I please.

With retirement there is a dizzying and freestyle freedom; yes, the stuff that regrets are made of.



RHETA GRIMSLEY JOHNSON

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Dog Years. She lives in rural Mississippi.