

## Hermiston Herald

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**JESSICA KELLER**  
EDITOR  
jkeller@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4533



**MAEGAN MURRAY**  
REPORTER  
mmurray@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4532



**SEAN HART**  
REPORTER  
smhart@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4534



**SAM BARBEE**  
SPORTS REPORTER  
sbarbee@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4542



**JEANNE JEWETT**  
MULTI-MEDIA CONSULTANT  
jjewett@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4531



**KIM LA PLANT**  
OFFICE MANAGER  
klaplant@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4530



**STEPHANIE BURKENBINE**  
MULTI-MEDIA CONSULTANT  
sburkenbine@hermistonherald.com  
541-564-4538

To contact the Hermiston Herald for news, advertising or subscription information:

- call 541-567-6457
- e-mail info@hermistonherald.com
- stop by our offices at 333 E. Main St.
- visit us online at: www.hermistonherald.com

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## Are you dying to write your own obituary?

Are you an unsung hero? Do those you encounter not appreciate the “real” you? Must you always have the last word?

Then you might be interested in the new trend spotted by USA Today: self-penned obituaries, also known as “selfie obits” or “autobiographies.”

As someone who has been chronicling some semblance of his ups and downs and opinions over the past 16 years, I probably shouldn’t begrudge anyone else the opportunity to write their own final testament, but I feel obligated to point out the pitfalls.

For one thing, the earlier in life you start the obituary, the more it’s just one more nagging thing to keep updated. Otherwise an octogenarian will pass away with the remembrance “Just you wait until the SECOND half of kindergarten, Maggie O’Day — you’ll be my girlfriend sure.”

Perhaps someone will start a public service campaign to remind people to update their obituaries on New Year’s Eve, when they replace their smoke alarm batteries. Of course priorities might get messed up. (“My greatest accomplishment so far? Photocopying my bottom just now — without throwing up more than once.”)

Standard newspaper obituaries can be boring, but at least they’re professional. Unless someone does some judicious editing of the selfie obits, we will be subjected to things such as “Those stoopid teacherz awl thawt eye needed there lessins, butt I kan xpress the S-ints of hu eye am juss fine.”

While selfie obits remain a novelty, you can get away with an “eat your heart out” or “don’t you wish you had paid more attention to me while I was alive?” attitude. When EVERYBODY is trying to be creative and brutally frank, readers faced with a sea of purple prose may just think, “Hey, I wonder what Garfield is up to today?”

There is the danger of coming across as too whiney or needy. As



**DANNY TYREE**  
TYRADES!  
Cagle columnist

Winston Churchill stated, “History is written by the victors.” People may get the impression that it should be “History is written by the losers who have too much time on their hands.”

Get ready for hoary obituary cliches to get a “too much information” rework, as in “He always saw the best in people — especially the internal organs. Mmmmm.”

With no one to ensure the accuracy of the obits, fantasies, outright lies and self-serving appraisals (grassy knoll revelations, never-revealed ascendancy to the papacy, etc.) will abound. Legions of lawyers will be called in to determine whether a selfie obit is really the final word, or whether others mentioned in it have a right to add comments.

For instance, the long-suffering deceased might finally open up with, “Roscoe Noodleman busted his hump for that company for 30 years without even a gold watch.” And the former employers might want to add, “Our posthumous thanks to Mr. Noodleman for bringing a safety hazard to our attention. Our monthly safety courses now include the warning that leaning on a broom for 30 years while discussing Lakers games can lead to busted humps.”

Those who fill their obituaries with raw emotion and confessions may suffer the consequences. (“I guess my biggest regret is having that secret affair with my son’s wife. That, or telling my daughter I needed that \$10,000 for an operation instead of to pay off my gambling debts. I’ll bet you’re going to give me the CHEAP funeral now. Oh, man!”)

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email: Kirk@theblade.com

KIRK

## Good for everybody

Umatilla and Port of Umatilla officials deserve a great deal of credit for hammering out an agreement to resolve the zoning dispute over a piece of land currently owned by the port.

The Port of Umatilla board approved the agreement last week, and the City Council gave the OK Tuesday, putting an end to the disagreement, which at times had become fairly acrimonious.

The dispute stemmed from denial of the port’s plans to develop the property on Bud Draper Road because city officials maintained the land was never zoned industrial despite a map designation to the contrary. Port officials, on the other hand, argued, regardless of whether a consultant made the designation in error, the city had to abide by its own maps.

For a time, the dispute



**JESSICA KELLER**  
HERMISTON HERALD  
Editor

seemed destined to be decided by the Land Use Board of Appeals. That was never an ideal outcome because any ruling would have resulted in disappointment for at least one of the parties involved, which would have done nothing to improve the relationship between the city and the port.

Right or wrong, the whole issue had devolved into one of principle and ego, and a lot was at risk. A good relationship between the city of Umatilla and the Port of Umatilla is necessary for the health of Umatilla and the region. Industrial development helps sustain the tax base, but Umatilla has a vested interest in making the city a place in which people want to live. A breakdown in the

relationship between the two parties could have jeopardized future projects or, at the very least, made future development more of a challenge.

Good things happen when level heads prevail, however. City and port officials met in a series of meetings with a mediator to see if some resolution that was agreeable to both sides could be reached.

This was a very reasonable approach, and everyone involved should be congratulated for setting aside differences and working together for the good of everyone involved.

Both governing boards have now signed off on the agreement. The city will buy approximately 16 acres of land, including the disputed property that belongs to the port, and decide what to do with it at a later time. The port will be able to wash its hands

of the property and the headache and dispute surrounding it and receive compensation to the tune of \$176,000. According to General Manager Kim Puzey, the port has other land that would suit the project initially planned, a distribution warehouse, and will hopefully retain the \$1.5 million grant it received from the state for its construction. No doubt, \$176,000 will also come in handy for other projects.

Mostly, however, the agreement is a big step in getting the city and port’s relationship back on track, especially since they now know, if they ever run into problems again, it is possible for them to work together to find a resolution. That is something that should reassure everyone, and area residents, as well.

— Jessica Keller is the editor of the Hermiston Herald. She can be reached at jkeller@

## Misinterpreting Brian Williams’ misremembering

So, NBC’s Brian Williams is off his anchor desk for six months — wanna bet it’ll be a LOT longer than that? — and has gone from being a respected anchor to a godsend to comedy writers, internet ridicule, and Jerry Seinfeld punch lines.

Up until this month, Williams seemed to be a 21st century anchorman descendent of David Brinkley and Walter Cronkite. His anchor stint and credibility were cut short when he admitted he “misremembered” being shot down in a helicopter in Iraq in 2003. NBC put him on unpaid leave, amid reports that there may be more instances of (ahem) memory flaw.

Williams wasn’t merely the brand name for NBC News. His narrative was what the network was aggressively selling.

He was someone who had “been there.” A recent NBC ad in The Week showed a front shot of Williams smiling with his hand on the shoulders of a serviceman and declared: “Some battle scars are worn on the inside. And for anyone who’s been there, there’s a secret. It doesn’t harden you, it makes you more human. He’s been there. He’ll be there. NBC Nightly News: 10-Years with Brian Williams.”

The Internet is now exploding fake photos of Williams “there.” Williams in the death car with JFK in Dallas ... on the moon ... at Yalta with World War II allied leaders ... with Lincoln and his generals. Soon we’ll likely see Williams “there” with Clark Gable on the set of Gone with the Wind after the shoot — or with John Wilkes Booth after the shoot. You Tube has a Hitler “Downfall” parody with the murderous Nazi raging upon learning that Williams is gone. Many analysts blame Williams’



**JOE GANDELMAN**  
INDEPENDENT’S EYE  
Cagle columnist

progressively transforming himself from the NBC Peacock into Pinocchio on his slipping into the entertainer mode, appearing on talk shows and even lobbying to replace Jay Leno. But that doesn’t explain it.

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd said NBC knew Williams was a “ticking” time bomb with his “pathological ... Hemingwayesque” embellishments but no one pulled him in.

On his blog, NYU Journalism Professor Jay Rosen notes that signs suggest NBC was complicit as far back as 2003 in knowing Williams’ account wasn’t entirely accurate.

The r-e-a-l reason Williams became what he has become is that he’s the latest example of someone whose career advanced because of solid journalistic or pundit qualities, which were changed by his weakness and our 21st century media culture.

To advance and market his brand (his personality) he jettisoned the same qualities that allowed him to advance to that level. He won fame and fortune but left other virtues behind. We’ve seen this before.

Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly was a solid, award-winning local journalist who advanced to ABC News. When he left ABC for the syndicated Inside Edition show biz news show, he slowly began shedding his former persona, which you can see in his infamous “WE’LL DO IT LIVE!!” off-the-air-rant on You Tube. Today, he’s Fox News’ biggest bombastic money maker, and the solid journalist of

old shines through in some serious interviews.

Chris Matthews was once a superb print political columnist. Once he got on MSNBC, he turned into the interrupting, cartoonish caricature who shamelessly nags and hypes viewers to buy his latest book.

Also on MSNBC: one-time listenable liberal talker Rachel Maddow is often unwatchable, opening her show with a loooooong lead (you scream, “Get to the point!!!”) and repeating concepts several times, while formerly serious liberal writer Chris Hayes now smugly states beliefs rather than attempts to seriously make a case.

Once Williams and others break into the top ranks, our media culture becomes like a massive Cuisinart. And many don’t have strong enough ingredients called “principles” and “professional standards” not to lose their original, more serious qualities.

You might be tempted to paraphrase Shakespeare and say, “The fault, dear Brian, is not in our stars but in ourselves.” But I’d amend that to add: “... and in being absorbed, re-shaped, changed and homogenized by our media/entertainment culture.”

The real lesson here is in another quote from The Bard: “To thine own self be true.”

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