

Puzzles

I've always liked doing puzzles. Jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles, word scrambles, riddles, cryptograms, cryptoquotes, Sudokus, Kakuros. My favorites are undoubtedly the New York Times Sunday crosswords. They exact of the solver a sense of humor, a facility to play with word roots and sounds, and a certain amount of erudition that hovers between the arcane and mundane. I'm usually able to solve these ambitious challenges in short spurts over a period of three or four days. I prefer not trying to complete them in one sitting: there is always greater reward to deferred gratification.

I know exactly now I got this love of puzzles. It's from my grandmother, the matriarch I named Aunt Bea for her resemblance to the character on the Andy Griffith Show. She had a hankering for the puzzles in the Philadelphia Daily News. From time to time she would try those in the Philadelphia Bulletin, but these were often larger and more demanding. The puzzles in the Philadelphia Inquirer were the hardest for her to solve, and I guess that was one reason she never subscribed to that paper. I don't think Mom and Dad started getting the Inquirer until after I had given up my Bulletin paper route and had begun college. Why the shift in allegiance? I never asked, and Mom and Dad never explained.

I have fairly clear memories of my grandmother sitting on the couch in her house on McMahon Avenue, and at the kitchen table in our house in Cherry Hill, pencil in hand, scratching away at the grid of small squares before her. She worked on crossword puzzles until she started to decline mentally in her mid-70s. When I was 10 I followed her lead by working on the puzzles in the Daily News: she coached me through the solutions, pointing out that a "tern" and an "ern" are synonyms for a "seagull" and helping me figure out first and last names of famous actors and personalities. Within a few months I was taking on the large Sunday puzzles in the Bulletin, and then buying Dell magazines full of puzzles of varying levels of difficulty.

For whatever reason, Mom had not the slightest interest in doing crosswords or any other kind of puzzle, for that matter. She never commented on, complained about, or criticized our penchant for solving puzzles. It's fair to say she was thoroughly indifferent to the hobby. Dad, however, thought puzzles, especially crossword puzzles, were a complete waste of time. He wasn't particularly vocal about the matter, but there were several instances where he made his displeasure known.

I think the same holds true for jigsaw puzzles. I remember putting these together with the help of Bob, Neil, or Aunt Bea, but I do not have any recollection of Mom or Dad ever sitting down with us to solve the puzzle. I can't even recall a single moment where either of them even offered to help.

For reasons I cannot fathom, about the time I went to college to stopped doing crosswords. They were very hard to come by during my Fulbright year in Germany, and I was too destitute as a graduate student to afford puzzle books once I returned to the USA. The passion for crosswords was rekindled until after our three children were born. I have records showing that I started doing the Sunday New York Times puzzles in 1995, and I've been doing them weekly, religiously since that time. I have added to my repertoire crosswords, jumbles, and cryptoquotes from online sources. The most challenging ones have been crossword puzzles that prohibit the use of vowels and those that require a deep knowledge of English literature, particularly arcane lines from Shakespeare. Why are there never any clues relating to German authors?

My compulsion for solving puzzles may be attributable directly to my mother's bout with Alzheimers. At the turn of the century her mental decline became painfully obvious. In an effort to keep my mind at its sharpest I began playing the piano with more concentration, reprising the old Hanon fingering exercises and Clementi sonatinas. While in Germany 2006 I took along three different volumes of crossword puzzles. I didn't complete them all, but in those six weeks I was able to solve nearly 40 puzzles. Not that I spent all of my time or free time doing puzzles! It just became a rewarding way to pass time on nights when I couldn't sleep or evenings when I just needed to relax.

What I like most about crossword puzzles is the moment of epiphany. I can anguish over a particular clue for quite some time, almost to the point of exasperation, when out of nowhere a word presents itself to me that fits exactly into the space provided. As soon as I enter this word into the puzzle many of the other horizontal and vertical clues that had been giving me trouble suddenly announce their solution. In a matter of minutes a quarter to a third of the puzzle is solved and I feel a rush of satisfaction and excitement that justifies my exertion.

Right now my life does not seem complete unless I work on at least one puzzle a day. The Macon Telegraph and Atlantic crosswords resemble those in the Daily News: mildly challenging, certainly solvable within ten minutes. I can usually solve word jumbles in less than five minutes; more often than not I can figure out the bad pun before I decipher the four words to be unscrambled. And cryptoquotes? It's rare that I spend more than twenty minutes solving one of these.

Since 2015 I've gained greater facility in solving Sudokus and Kakuros—a puzzle format I had avoided for quite some time because I feared there was some sort of mathematical talent that was required. Once I realized that it was a matter of logical reasoning and process of elimination, I solved four in a row. These are still quite more challenging for me than crosswords and demand quite a bit of time. It usually takes me 20-30 minutes to either solve the puzzle or to push it to one side for future consideration. And I now have a growing archive of partially solved Sudokus and Kakuros that I'll need to either solve or throw out someday soon.