Still Trying Things

STEVE MAYS

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Before finals

In December 1970, the draft stopped calling men for that year at lottery number 195. I remember mine as 210. Until then, attending law school at the University of Missouri–Kansas City had kept me deferred from military service. The following week, just before finals, I quit law school.

Law school had been Dad's suggestion. I had graduated from college that spring and spent the summer goofing off. By fall, continuing my education had a practical attraction quite apart from becoming a lawyer.

Four years earlier, when I started college, getting and keeping a deferment was already very much on my mind. I began in Business and switched to Theater. There was a small scholarship, a part in The Taming of the Shrew, and people I liked being around. Staying in school mattered. The lottery later gave that concern a number; it did not immediately make it go away.

I had grown up in Kennett, Missouri, with a radio announcer for a father and a mother who worked for the welfare department. Born in Poplar Bluff in 1948, I was just the right age to spend part of my childhood two feet from a Motorola television, waiting for the Indian-head test pattern to turn into afternoon programming. There were bicycles, hide-and-seek until nine, and a grandmother a block away. I've called it a near-perfect childhood. The Beatles became a very big deal when I was a high-school sophomore. We weren't paying much attention to Vietnam yet.

By the spring of 1971, I was out of school and training to be a postal inspector. After three months in Washington, D.C., I was sent to Pendleton, Oregon. I audited small post offices in Oregon and Washington, counting stamps and money orders. Occasionally there was an exploded rural mailbox to investigate. Blowing one up was a federal crime.

I hated the job. After about a year, I quit.

Back in the Midwest in early 1972, I spent a few months in Memphis. I slept on a mattress in the attic of a shared house on East Moreland. My friend RP and I built a rooftop shower, running a hose out the bathroom window. We climbed through the hall window to reach it. I remember scrubbing up while watching the traffic on Union Avenue a block away.

By early summer I was back in Kennett. In July I took the overnight shift at KBOA, where Dad had worked. I was pretty much a legacy hire. After law school and the postal service, I had found a job I actually wanted to do.

Kennett

Charlie Earls owned the station. He gave me the first job I really loved. Looking back fifty years later, I called it the best job I ever had.

He had been good to Dad, too. When Mom's health went bad, Charlie let him take time off for trips to the hospital in Memphis and made his life easier in other ways. That was part of what I knew about the man I worked for.

I spun records, worked in the studios, and eventually became program director. When I took a problem to Charlie, he would listen. He was willing to tell me what to do, but there was a condition: if I asked for his advice, I had to take it. Did I still want it? He thought I should make the decision, even if I got it wrong.

The work also included emceeing the Little Miss Christmas Belle Pageant and occasionally appearing as Captain Banana. Mom made the costume: thermal underwear, Day-Glo cowboy boots, a plastic motorcycle helmet. I wore it to a charity bike-a-thon and nearly overheated. It was an outfit better suited to standing still somewhere cold.

In March 1973, I met Barb Miltenberger at Tommy's North-End Cafe, next to the livestock sale barn. There was a pool table, pinball, and a bowling machine with real balls about the size of grapefruits. I courted her at the bowling machine. I don't remember much about the place that qualified it as a cafe.

Tommy's bedroom opened directly onto the bar. Sometimes he lay on the bed with the door open, jingling a large ring of keys. Barb says she only went there once.

We married on October 28, 1978, in her parents' living room, just before kickoff of the Missouri Tiger game. Immediate family only; probably fewer than a dozen of us. Reverend Paul Harlan came on his bicycle because it was such a beautiful fall day. The ceremony took no more than fifteen minutes.

On the patio afterward, there were Igloo coolers full of beer. Late in the afternoon, everyone went home to change into Halloween costumes for the party. I had

persuaded Barb that engraved invitations were a cheesy plea for presents, so our Halloween party invitation had done double duty.

Twenty-five years later, I wrote that it had been a great wedding and a great party, and that every day with Barb since had been great. I had more enthusiasm for the marriage than for the stationery.

When she turned fifty, she wore a rhinestone tiara for two days. It was wonderful to be in a room with someone so loved.

After roughly ten years in radio, I burned out. Barb and I moved to Albuquerque, where I struggled to find work. Eventually I returned to KBOA. Loving the job hadn't prevented me from getting tired of it, and leaving hadn't supplied a better one.

In June 1984, we moved to Jefferson City. I went to work for Learfield Communications, looking after the stations that carried its radio networks. My first desk was on a tiny sunporch attached to the old house where the company had its offices. Later, Jim Lipsey and I each got a corner of a big room. Eventually we moved into a proper building, and I had an office a couple of doors from the CEO. Our carpet was a different color from everyone else's. We were important enough to need that pointed out.



Barb and Steve, 1981. From Steve's photograph collection at smays.com.

Getting online

I knew radio networks. I did not know how to build a website. I would spend much of the next few years leading Learfield's effort to find a place on the Internet.

In April 1995, some people from the University of Missouri demonstrated the World Wide Web at our offices. I was impressed enough to call journalism professor Mike McKean and ask whether he knew a student who could help us. He introduced me to Dan Arnall, a journalism senior. Dan brought Allen Hammock, who was studying computer science. They had gone to high school together in Springfield.

They were smart and confident. By the time we had held a few meetings, they had formed a company, Echo Communications. Learfield contracted with them to create a home page and help us work out what else we might do online. They hand-coded the pages. We had news, farm, and sports programming, advertisers,

and radio stations all over the place. We were less certain how those things became an Internet business.

Clyde Lear was willing to find out. Our Internet effort became a separate company, Straylight, with Learfield holding the controlling interest. Some employees invested. By the summer of 1997, Dan and Allen had moved to Seattle to be nearer other Internet start-ups, people they could hire, and ideas they could use.

One of the attractions was college sports. We could put a game online for someone who lived nowhere near a station carrying it. The plans grew beyond audio to statistics, fan pages, chat rooms, and advertising. But a chat room needed more than a place to type. Getting talent into it, or making it part of a coaches' show, took time and staff. A statistics service costing $5,000 a month was beyond the budget.

Dan was making sales calls. In two months he approached sixty-three prospective advertisers, preparing individual pitches. Some objected to the audience numbers. Allen was working on the technology while trying to help grow that audience.

Most listeners still had dial-up connections. We were asking sports fans accustomed to carrying a radio around to listen at a computer. By July 1998, Dan and Allen had stopped working on the sports product and were concentrating on an interactive advertising banner. A visitor could respond to an ad, ask for information, or indicate that they didn't want to see it again. Advertisers weren't ready for that range of options. By the end of the year, Straylight had closed.

The Internet work at Learfield continued. We had more useful results when we applied it to something our people already had to do. Radio affiliates, for example, needed copies of commercials. Someone at the station had to record them from a satellite feed. Scott Brandon, who ran operations and production for our news division, worked out the features for a website where stations could find and download what they needed. Andy Waschick built it. We used it for news sound bites as well, and it became our main tool for communicating with affiliates.

Andy had come to us after Phil Atkinson spent months pointing out that we needed database-driven websites instead of pages we changed one at a time. Andy designed beautiful sites and could build the custom systems we kept dreaming up. He was also one person with other clients. We could ask for another feature much faster than he could supply it.

Our advertisers began asking for help with their own websites. Building one made more sense as part of a substantial radio advertising campaign than as another attempt to create a business from scratch. The salespeople liked having something extra to offer. We had found work the company could use.

After a management reshuffle in 2000, I was put in charge of the Internet effort. I voluntarily took a salary reduction to better reflect the work I was doing. I never regretted it. Learfield had allowed me to spend years exploring something that interested me, in a position many companies wouldn't have created.

Things that happened yesterday

At home, I had my own place online. I registered the domain in 1997 and usually date the blog to February 2002. It held photographs, books, jokes, arguments, and things I thought I might want to find again.

That May, I wondered what it would be like to start blogging at twenty-two and keep doing it for thirty or forty years. Thousands of entries. Plenty of them wouldn't seem worth the keystrokes when they were written.

Mom had kept journals in the latter part of her life. I could picture her at the kitchen table, writing in her tiny, perfect longhand. When we asked about it, she said she was writing about things that had happened yesterday, things she was thinking about. I thought she would have been up for a blog.

Dad died in March 2002. Radio was a passion we had shared. Hearing from people who had known him for fifty years let me see him through their eyes. Before he died, Alzheimer's could leave him lost on the way home from morning coffee. Barb's father suffered from it, too. Years later, when I was looking at what an iPhone could do, I wondered about an app with familiar voices, photographs, directions, and an easy way to call for help. I would have liked Dad to have had that.

I kept putting things on the blog. By the move to WordPress in 2009, there were more than four thousand posts. Not all of them stayed. Dead links needed weeding out; some posts could go. It wasn't a complete record, but it was a place I could put things and find them later.

In 2006 I was still saying I wanted to work until I died. By 2012 I was ready to retire. The nice office with the special carpet had begun to feel like a small prison cell, though it had a big window. With a smartphone and a MacBook, I wondered why we needed all those little rooms. There remained the problem of where to keep my stapler.

I retired on December 31, 2012. I didn't want an RV, cruises, or a consulting business. I liked discovering how slowly time could pass when I stopped trying to put so much into it.

Then I spent months copying old appointments into Google Calendar.

I had saved my Day-Timers from 1984 through 1999. Going through them brought back more unpleasantness than I expected: bad news, tension in my stomach and neck, things omitted from my recollection of having had a very good time. I had worked for a great company with wonderful people. I had also been less happy at work than I remembered.

In November 2014, when the copying was finished, I burned the books in a wash tub. Their entries remained in Google Calendar under the original dates.

Outside

There was brush to clear in the woods. I left the trees standing and uncovered interesting rock beneath the mess. A chainsaw eventually runs out of fuel, which gives you a break without requiring you to decide to take one.

I took up the ukulele, wrote a song, and recorded two takes of "The Rose" on my phone. I wasn't sure practice would make me much better. I could also spend eight or ten hours reading. At Coffee Zone, Taisir Yanis's shop, I could read and see people. In 2019, Clyde was stopping by to chat once or twice a week. By then my old boss was a friend who came for coffee.

Meditation had been part of my life since around 2008. In 2014, I started tracking it in a spreadsheet. Pneumonia cost me a day in 2015; my fiftieth high-school reunion cost me another in 2016. By July 2024, I had managed 2,288 consecutive days.

Then I got busy and forgot. I woke in the night realizing I had broken the streak. I was a little disappointed, a little nostalgic, and relieved. I wondered whether I had been sitting each day to make the spreadsheet entry.

I stopped counting consecutive days and retired the spreadsheet. I began logging my sessions in Calendar on my MacBook.

I'm still interested in new tools, including AI. I've also written that I don't want it writing my blog, even if it could do a better job.

On my seventy-fourth birthday, back in 2022, I noticed that when I thought about the future, I thought in years rather than decades. I had expected to be wiser by then.

There's a photograph from October of that year: our dog Riley and me outside, with trees, flowers, and pumpkins around us. Our place doesn't get many grand sunrises or sunsets, but sometimes the late-afternoon light gets through. I'm sitting behind Riley with my hands around her.

My friend John said it looked as though someone had used an "Old Man" filter.

I wrote that I was much happier than I looked.

Ditto for Riley.



Steve and Riley, October 2022. "Perfect October Day," smays.com.

Sources & photographs

This first-person portrait was shaped from Steve Mays's public writing. Narrative arrangement and connecting prose are creative interpretation. This is a selective portrait, not a manuscript written or approved by Steve. His remembered draft number is 210; the official 1970 lottery table lists 213 for his March 8 birthday. The induction ceiling was 195. His recollection is preserved; the discrepancy remains unresolved.

Restored episodes

Charlie Earls

Wedding

Blogging life

74

Memphis

Early life & radio

About Steve

Captain Banana

College theater days

College Theater

Grandmother's House

Barb & the road to Learfield

Tommy's North End Cafe

Forks in the road

30th Wedding Anniversary

Barb turns fifty

Work & reinvention

The house that Clyde built

My offices

Learfield and the Internet, 1995–2005 (2017 recollection)

Retirement: relic of the industrial age

Walking slooowly toward the door

Forcing my life into slow motion

15 years of Day-Timers

Projects & company

Is the chainsaw the perfect tool?

Rocks revisited

It’s hard to sing the blues

The Rose

Coffee Zone fan boy

Clyde Lear

Memory & attention

John Mays died last week

Already missing Tim Russert—and my dad

Alzheimer’s Disease iPhone app

Forgot to meditate

Deleted ChatGPT

Photographs

Barb and Steve (1981)

Perfect October Day (Steve and Riley, 2022)

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