



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Did you read about The Man Who Knew Too Little? Otherwise known as The Most Ignorant Man in America? Both titles were assigned to one Erik Hagerman by the *New York Times* in an article I ran across on Facebook last week.

And boy, were my Facebook friends mad at this guy.

[His story](#), in a nutshell: Mr. Hagerman was so shook up by the election of Donald Trump that he started an experiment – “part silent protest, part coping mechanism, part extreme self-care plan” – which involved swearing off serious news (entirely!) after November 8th, 2016.

According to the *Times*, Hagerman’s experiment was only supposed to last a few days.

“But he is now more than a year into knowing almost nothing about American politics,” writes reporter Sam Dolnick. “He has managed to become shockingly uninformed during one of the most eventful chapters in modern American history. He is as ignorant as a contemporary citizen could ever hope to be. James Comey. Russia. Robert Mueller. Las Vegas. The travel ban. ‘Alternative facts.’ Pussy hats. Scaramucci. Parkland. Big nuclear buttons. Roy Moore. He knows none of it.”

Hagerman tells the *Times* that he is emotionally healthier than he's ever been, and his experience now has him wondering about the value of that multi-headed monster we call "the media" . . . and questioning the wisdom of allowing ourselves to be force-fed information (and misinformation) day in and day out, 24/7.

"Why do we bother tracking faraway political developments and distant campaign speeches?," he asks in the article. "What good comes of it? Why do we read all these tweets, anyway? . . . I had been paying attention to the news for decades, and I never did anything with it."

Mr. Hagerman has named his experiment The Blockade, and he's asked those closest to him to honor his boundaries. No chitchat about politics in his presence, please. Sports talk is fine, though – encouraged, even – and the weather is always a congenial topic.

Hagerman lives on a pig farm in rural Ohio, and according to Sam Dolnick's article, he's very talkative and engaging – holding forth on a variety of topics from basketball to architecture to philosophy to pigs. Farm life is somewhat new to this former corporate executive for Nike, who has also held big-time digital jobs at Disney and Walmart. Three years ago – at age 50 – this unmarried man with no children decided he'd saved enough money to move to a farm, where along with raising pigs, he makes sculpture, while also chiseling away at a project he now sees as his life's work. He's purchased 45 acres on the site of a former strip mine – property unused for decades and completely reclaimed by nature – and there, beside a lake, he intends to build a giant barn.

"It will feel like a cathedral," says Hagerman. "The cloister will be here." He plans to restore this 45-acre property, protect it, live on it, and preserve it for the public after he's gone.

Sam Dolnick writes of Erik Hagerman: "He has come to believe that being a news consumer doesn't enhance society. He also believes that restoring a former coal mine and giving it to the future does."

There's a playful, barely-there snideness in Dolnick's writing that makes this piece a fun read, but it didn't sit that well with me. I found myself wondering if the earnest, cheerful Erik Hagerman hadn't been ill-used by the *New York Times*.

A little research on the reporter Sam Dolnick reveals that he's not only a newly-promoted editor, but also a 5th generation member of the powerful Ochs-Sulzberger family that controls the *New York Times*. Armed with that knowledge, it's easy to understand why his fascinating piece on Erik Hagerman – a man who refuses to consume news – has a delicate but undeniable undercurrent of mockery.

Harder to understand is why everybody on Facebook was disdainful of Hagerman, too. My progressive friends thought he was selfishly shirking his civic duty to be informed, and indulging his "privilege." My conservative friends thought him a "snowflake" for allowing the election of Donald Trump to send him over the edge . . . and a "poser" for drinking triple-shot lattes every morning and eschewing hard news in favor of art reviews in the *New Yorker*. Conservatives and progressives alike agreed that Hagerman was a "narcissist" for expecting his friends and family to respect the boundaries of his Blockade, and especially for announcing his experiment in the *New York Times*.

While reading this barrage of negative commentary, all I could think was: *When will that giant barn by the lake be finished . . . and how soon can I book a retreat?*

Sartre famously said that "hell is other people," possibly the most misunderstood statement ever to become a popular Facebook meme. In his play *No Escape*, one of Sartre's characters comes to the conclusion that "hell" is not fire or brimstone or eternal torture of the physical variety . . . but the ruthless, judging gaze of others.

Nowhere is that philosophical concept better illustrated than on social media – which often feels like hell – unless it's in the comment section of the *New York Times*. I'm just glad Erik Hagerman is currently boycotting both. People can't consign you to hell without your participation. I also hope Hagerman's boycott extended to the *Times* article about him. I think he might feel hurt and betrayed by Dolnick for the portrait painted there.

But nobody else seems to feel this way – or to feel anything but scorn for Hagerman. To most folks who read the article, he's a joke at best and a disgrace at worst. To me, he appears admirable – like a secular monk, or a modern-day Thoreau. But to see him that way, you have

to read between the lines of the article. You have to look beyond the writer's agenda-driven choices – not just his tone, but the information he chooses to share and withhold. (I know about writerly choices. I'm making them right now.) I tried to present that case on Facebook, but my FB friends – while they didn't exactly consign me to hell – were having none of it. They had their reasons for hating this Hagerman, and there was something satisfying about it, and no amount of persuasion on my part was going to change their minds.

I reminded the conservatives that he was a self-made man! Somebody who'd done so well in business that he was now master of his fate, living his dream! (Response: Not good enough. He's still a wuss.) For the progressives, I spoke of his commitment to environmental preservation. (Nope. He's still selfish and irresponsible.)

Why, you might ask, was I devoting my time, effort and emotional energy to defending a total stranger and his right to live on his own terms . . . without being condemned to Sartre's hell? Why was I so driven to drum up grace for this quirky man that I don't even know? Why, for that matter, am I doing it now, on this page?

If I knew the answer to that question, I'd probably stop writing altogether. Until then, I guess y'all are stuck with me.

So, you go Erik Hagerman! Do your thing. Raise your pigs and make your sculptures and build your giant cathedral-barn by the lake. Facebook and Twitter and even the *New York Times* will get along just fine without you.

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