



INTERVIEW WITH PAT SNYDER

You've written a humor column for years. What moved you to compile them into a book?

It was one of those “retirement” inspirations. When I started writing the column, my family presented me with a big scrapbook for all my “clips.” And faithfully, every month when the column came out, I’d put a tear sheet in the scrapbook, which became two and then three big books. I never had time to look through them until I retired from practicing law a couple years ago and discovered, “Wow! My life has been a mess in about 12 categories.”

Reading them, I also discovered I’d learned a thing or two about avoiding chaos over the past 10 years, either from hard knocks or from advice my readers were always passing along. That discovery inspired me to combine the stories and the advice and offer some useful lessons in a book that would help people laugh at life gone wrong and also offer some practical ideas for making it better.

Looking back what were the largest lessons you’d learned?

Well, I have 74 tips that I stand by. But the two biggest overall lessons are to keep it simple and learn to look at the light side of what’s going on in our lives. Keeping it simple can help avoid catastrophe. It can keep you from becoming your own worst enemy. But there are still many things in life we can’t control: the economy, the job market, our own health and that of family members. Learning to find the humor in that sort of chaos is really important. I learned that from writing a humor column during a time in my own life that was filled with a lot of uncontrollable chaos.

What was going on?

Plenty. I was practicing law, and my husband had taken on a very busy job as president of a trade association. My dad had just died, my mom had moved into an independent living facility nearby, and our daughter was in that lovely pre-teen mode. Her older brothers were mostly grown, and popped up in the columns getting settled, getting married, and getting pets.

The columns later took us through the lovely teen-age years and adjustments we had to make when my late husband developed complications from diabetes, when his leg had to be

amputated, when we had to build a new house he could get around in, at the same time I was starting a new job. There was no lack of material.

And writing the column helped?

Absolutely. It forced me to look for the humor and write about it once a month. Having a deadline really inspired me to find something humorous.

Any other tricks for finding the light side?

I learned something magical early on from an essayist, Bill Allen, who took a look at some of my pieces. He said, “You’re too honest. You need to exaggerate more.” He was talking about the writing, but I found it’s a neat trick for looking at life. If the cake falls, it triggers an earthquake. If my grown kids call to find out if they ever had chicken pox, I swear they *never* call for wise counsel about their careers. If the car breaks down, it throws a steaming hissy fit and the repair bill could pay for a trip to China. Blowing the little stuff out of proportion makes me laugh and keeps me sane.

What about the big stuff? Your husband had some pretty serious medical problems while you were looking for the light side.

He did, but it helped that he also kept a sense of humor about them and a grand sense of drama. When he lost a leg to diabetes, he swore he would freeze it and use it as evidence in a lawsuit against the insurance company. He might have had a case. They had some pretty arbitrary rules about how much of a particular treatment regimen was allowed. But he got a lot of pleasure imagining the leg being carried into court and very dramatically unveiled, to the horror of insurance counsel. Eventually, he gave up the idea, to my relief, but imagining it gave him great pleasure.

Can the average reader relate to what you write about?

Oh, yes. My happiest realization has been that they can. Most of my family’s experience grows out of what everyone is facing these days – too much coming at us too fast. The digital world has produced a ton of material. Every new device that comes out seems to take twice as much time to learn as it saves in time, and yet we’re compelled to try – sometimes with disastrous results. We have so much information that it’s confusing. What’s really good for our health? What sort of car should be drive? And our parents are living longer. How do we take care of them when they’re failing and we’re on the run? And the automatic, ridiculous answer is something like: “Buy them a cell phone.”

Some of your local readers have referred to you as “our Erma.” Is that a fair comparison?

Well, it’s a flattering one. She was a giant in the field of humor writing – thousands of amazing columns produced almost daily over many years. Everyone loves Erma, but there will never be another like her. She was an amazing teacher, though. She was careful to laugh at herself

and not others, and unafraid to share real emotions with her readers. The bottom line was she made her readers feel safe and accepted when they laughed with her. What a gift!

You say your readers have been quick to give you advice. What sort?

They really pile on with ideas about the digital devices. Some say I should ditch them altogether. Others tell me I just need practice. Their mixed reactions are like my own mixed feelings. I wrote one column about how I'd never get a PDA, and a few months later had to eat my words. Digital devices get a lot of attention in the book. The first chapter is all about them.

What other areas got a lot of reader attention?

Another big one is how stressful it is to get so much self-help advice. Funny since I'm giving some in this book! But what readers related to was my harangue about these books that offer entire systems for making life pretty near perfect. They seemed happy someone else was struggling to follow the systems and throwing up their hands. They're too busy to reinvent their whole lives. They'd rather get - and give - some very specific fix-it tips.

Readers jumped in with suggestions when I had trouble cleaning the barbecue grill, when I let my grocery coupons expire, when the holidays became sobbingly overwhelming. They're a very practical lot, so the book offers some pretty practical advice.

Such as what?

Well, turns out that riding through the carwash is a perfect time to go through your store coupons to see what what's about to expire and what already has. Also, a wad of aluminum foil is pretty good for cleaning a grill. And men, properly approached, are the secret weapon in the war on holiday overload.

Of course, I pass on some important advice about shopping on eBay, avoiding cooking and certainly baking, and plenty of angst and a bit of advice on down-sizing parents and their stuff.

You call yourself a recovering lawyer. How long did you practice? And do you think you'll ever fully recover?

Twenty-eight years. I decided to get out a couple of years ago before I became one of those people who could answer "28 years, four months and 3 days by 5 p.m." I think if I laugh enough, I'll fully recover. It's my 12-step program.

What's next after the book ?

Well, as with all of us, my material is constantly evolving. My mother died in October after a very good run at the independent living center and my husband Bob died unexpectedly in May,

just a month before the book – for which he was a supreme cheerleader – was scheduled to come out.

I can truly say that his death was the ultimate example of the dog eating my planner. It reminds me every day that life is short and we need to do what we believe in – in my case, to spread the word through the book, through lectures and workshops that lightening up our overbooked lives can make them worth living. So I'll be very busy with that, with leading laughter sessions with the World Laughter Tour and also with my first grandchild, Taylor Joy, who was just born in July and is already on Facebook! Not that I would expect you to check out all 131 of her pictures.

And finally, do you really have a dog?

Ah, the inevitable question. I have two granddogs. One is a pug named Winston Tate, who lives in Phoenix with my older son Paul Ravenscraft and his wife Shelly, and truly does eat everything. The other's a St. Bernard named Brutus, who lives in Columbus with Taylor Joy's parents, Tracy and James Ravenscraft. And of course, there's Henry the Time Management Dog, whose owner won the Name That Dog contest for the cover of the book. But I'm evading the question. Right now, the only dogs who live here are the mythical ones, like my cell phone and too many papers to keep track of, that are constantly eating my planner. That, like everything else in life, could change. My daughter Sarah says a dog could be good company. Stay tuned.