

Goodbye to a show that made predictability a virtue

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J. Trout Lowen *Submitted photo*

It's sometime after 4 a.m. and I've spent the last couple of hours staring into the dark, searching for sleep. I've been here before, so many times in fact that I no longer find insomnia frustrating, just deadly dull.

I slip out of bed and go barefoot to the living room, grab the well-worn down throw that used to belong to my sister, and curl up in a chair. I pick up the remote and flip on the TV, squinting into the screen, and search the cable guide. I know exactly what I'm looking for and it doesn't take long to find it.

That's one of the comforting things about "Law & Order" -- one of its 456 episodes is always showing somewhere on cable: at 4 in the morning or at 10, midafternoon or late at night. I'm pretty sure I've seen them all, several times, many times.

In the year after my sister died, I watched hundreds of episodes, sometimes one after another, as the bright days of summer slipped past, barely noticed inside the wreckage of my grief. "Law & Order" saved me that year. Every time I felt overcome by pain and loss, or broke down sobbing because of some familiar smell or sound, I knew I could curl up in front of an episode of "Law & Order" and escape for an hour, or for an afternoon.

It may be the middle of the show, but it hardly matters. I know exactly where we are and what's happening. Someone's been murdered in Manhattan. The homicide detectives are on the case. They've followed the clues to the wrong suspect, and then to the right one. The perp will

be interrogated and then arraigned. Jack McCoy will argue the case, or one of the tough-but-beautiful female ADAs. Their pithy and to-the-point 30-second summation (so unlike any real court case) will win the day. The D.A.'s staff will celebrate with a jigger of scotch, and then, pleased with their victory and themselves, amble off toward the elevator, headed home for a good night's sleep. The city is safe for another day.

That's another of the comforting things about "Law & Order": It's entirely predictable, from the hallmark [double-clang](#) that announces each shift in scene to the quarter-hour increments that divide the plot. With rare exception, each episode is a self-contained, hour-long morality play in which the good guys (almost) always win, and the bad guys (and gals) get what's coming to them.

Whenever my own life has been in turmoil I have found solace in that predictability -- during the last deep recession, when I couldn't find a job and I sat home terrified, wondering how to pay the mortgage; after one of my oldest friends was diagnosed with cancer and given just a couple of weeks to live; and after that stormy Sunday when I sat in a Manhattan hospital and held my 50-year-old sister's hand as she drew her last breath. For two decades, "Law & Order" has been an oasis of calm and, well, order that I could count on.

It's amazing to me, and a testament to the show's actors and writers, that after 20 years, "Law & Order" continues to be good television. That episodes stand up to repeated viewing, and rarely show their age. Maybe it's because viewers are never asked to get personally involved in the characters' lives. The victims are always dead before I know or care about them. Most of the violence occurs off screen. The stable of hard-working detectives and D.A.s come with little back story.

Sure, I might like Lennie Briscoe better than the Italian-suit wearing Joe Fontana, or find actor-turned [Senator Fred Thompson](#) more believable as the politically motivated D.A. Arthur Branch than Diane West's too-nice Nora Lewin. Viewers know that Jack McCoy slept with some of his leggy assistants, that Briscoe was a recovering alcoholic, and detective Ed Green had a gambling problem, but that was as deep as we're asked to delve. Unlike so many shows, "Law & Order" has built its success on story rather than personality, and on good ensemble acting.

I can't help but feel sad about the end of Law & Order, and about saying goodbye to those characters who have been as familiar and comforting to me as friends. Fortunately, I won't really have to say goodbye. I know where to find them most any day or night. Even at 4 a.m.

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