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INSIDE:

Page 2: Good reporting: Moving from suite-level to street-level
Page 3: Writer's Toolbox
Page 4: Discipling Journal

A Newsletter of The Amy Foundation



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To go from grand to gritty, a reporter needs to observe specific detail and then give readers a sense of those observations.

Good reporting: Moving from suite-level to street-level

Pavement-pounding journalism—watching, listening, observing, recording—provides readers with the specific details important to a story

By Marvin Olasky

Psalm 131 says, "I do not concern myself with great matters. ..." That should be the credo of a pavement-pounding Christian reporter: Maximize attention to street-level activities, and report suite-level talk and theory only as necessary to provide context.

Let me explain why by mentioning that one year I surveyed 1,000 University of Texas students in courses I was teaching mostly to sophomores, and found that 74 percent said yes to this proposition: "There is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define what's right in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct."

That sounds like three-quarters of students are lost to any absolute, trans-cultural statements concerning right and wrong. And yet, 88 percent said rape and child abuse are "wrong everywhere," 86 percent said female circumcision is wrong even in West Africa where some tribal traditions uphold it, and 80 percent said that slavery in the Sudan is wrong, even if it is traditional in some cultures there.

Here's the point: Specific detail of right and wrong moved them to state that there is universal right and wrong. After big talk of "rights"

had them identifying with secular left perspectives, specific detail had them affirming parts of what the Bible says. For example, 60 percent of the students agreed, "A woman should have a right to an abortion," but 75 percent said, "Unborn children should be protected."

Some theoreticians hate these tendencies to back away from grand statements when specific cases are examined—but reporters should love them. That's because stories that look one way at suite-level, from the vantage point of executives or theoreticians, often look very different when we ask questions and see what's happening on the street. The essence of journalism is watching and listening, observing and recording details that help to characterize a person, a meeting, a movement.

The importance of specific detail

Experienced hunters don't just shoot at a bear; they shoot at a particular part of the bear. Reporters need to be specific as well. They should not just tell us that a bear is big, but give us his height and weight, and show him charging. Similarly, we should not say that a particular politician is energetic; we should show him running to 30 meetings a day. (I once spent such a day with former Sen. Rick Santorum that taught me more about the folly of centralized power than had many speeches and interviews.)

Reporters should be always watching and listening—observing and recording details that help to characterize a person, a meeting, or a project. Telling readers that a school curriculum is messing up children is not as effective as

(Continued on Page 2)

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Good Reporting

(Continued from Page 1)

showing us a child frustrated at not being able to read, a girl putting a condom on a banana, a boy joking about God. Instead of telling us that a teenager has good manners, show us that he knew which of six forks to use, that he opened doors for elderly folks, that he wrote thank you notes before the sun went down.

How do you accumulate material? You pound the pavement and always carry a pen. You describe what they saw, not what you inferred from the situation. Example: If you have seen the front of a house, do not say, "The house is blue." Say, "The front of the house is blue." Only after substantial reporting can we sit at a desk and put into practice the advice of novelist/historian Shelby Foote, who once said, "When you have enough specific detail, grit it out."

To go from grand to gritty, a reporter needs to observe specific detail and then give readers a sense of those observations. David Halberstam, a celebrated journalist who visited my college four decades ago and convinced me to go into journalism, won awards for his street-level reporting in Vietnam and at home. (In 2007 he died in an auto accident at age 73 while visiting a college to talk with students about journalism.) In a terrific book published in 2007, *Telling True Stories*, Mark Kramer and Wendy Call quote Halberstam saying, "The more reporting—the more anecdotes, perceptions, and windows on a subject—the better. The more views of any subject that you get, the better."

Telling True Stories and one other book, Robert Boynton's *The New New Journalism* (2005), contain great advice on how to report and interview. Other veteran journalists told Kramer and Call that they did not take words too seriously, since deeds speak louder. Katherine Boo recommends that if an interviewee says, "Now I've got to go and pick up my kids from day care and go to the grocery store," the reporter should seize the opportunity to go along and see not just how a subject talks but how she lives. Lane DeGregory asks interviewees, "Can I go along for a ride or take a walk or be at a meeting, a trial, or a funeral? Can I be a fly on the wall at an already scheduled event? If my subject has a regular routine, I go along." The reporter's goal at that point is to learn not what a subject says about himself or his views, but how he relates to others and puts his beliefs into practice. Following around a person allows a street-level

look at life. (We have to keep in mind that the presence of an observer may cause some to put on manners they normally don't wear, so follow-up reporting is important.)

The Washington Post once sent journalist Walt Harrington to—from a *Post* perspective—the wilds of Alabama to do a story about what a fundamentalist Christian family was like. Harrington recalled, "I didn't know how to begin my interview, so I asked for a tour of their house. Mrs. Webster, a sweet woman, walked me through the house, full of tacky teddy bears and knickknacks. 'Boy, these people have bad taste, I thought.'"

Prejudices sustained. Reporting over, right? Wrong: Harrington continued, "Then she made comments like, 'This really ugly teddy bear was a gift from the thirteen-year-old girl who moved in with us after her mother kicked her out when she was two months pregnant. She stayed with us, and we took care of her through the pregnancy. And this silly little knickknack is from the eighty-four-year-old woman who my husband takes to the pool twice a week. He carries her out of her wheelchair and into the swimming pool so she can have some exercise.'" Harrington had the honesty to change his perspective when he found that these were not just words from Mrs. Webster but a true reflection of deeds.

Sometimes reporters need to do what others consider yucky. In Boynton's *The New New Journalism*, magazine writer Richard Preston describes how he interviewed a chemist and asked, "'What does DNA really look like? How do you handle it?' He took out a vial of human DNA ... and pulled out a little mucus-like strand with a toothpick for me to look at. I wanted to know everything about DNA: how it tasted, what it smelled like. So I ordered some calf DNA from a lab supply company. It arrived in powder form and I put it on my tongue. It was faintly salty, and a bit sweet. I used that detail in the article, and I think it helped make the whole idea of DNA more concrete for readers."

The willingness to taste DNA

If you want to be a reporter, you should be willing to taste DNA and go even further than that: Preston explains that he once "had to learn what it felt like for a doctor to cut open a cadaver. A doctor one Saturday morning called to say that there was an autopsy scheduled in thirty minutes. I rushed over to the hospital and watched the whole thing: the assistant cutting and opening the

(Continued on Page 3)

Exercises in Street-level Reporting

By Marvin Olasky

1. Mark Kramer writes, "You call a surgeon and say, 'I hear you're doing a new kind of neck surgery, and I'd like to find out more about it.' He says, 'Fine. I have time for a cup of coffee Thursday afternoon at two o'clock.' You need to say, 'I don't want an interview. I want to watch you living your normal day. What about Wednesday when you're too busy to see me? I won't be a bother. I'll just follow you around.'" Richard Preston similarly says, "I want to see the person in the lab, out in the field doing research. That way I get to tag along and be introduced to everyone in that person's world."

Tag along with a friend or relative for an hour or two as that person is engaged in his regular activities. Then write several paragraphs of description, quoting the person rarely or not at all, but showing his interactions with others.

2. Many young journalists interview someone and then turn in stories filled with quotations. But veteran journalist Gay Talese says, "I like to do interviews someplace where I can see the person interact with others. I don't care too much who it is: your wife, your girlfriend, or a belly dancer you're involved with. I think of it in terms of the camera: what works visually."

Interview a friend or a relative where you can see his interaction. Then write several paragraphs about the person without including any quotations. Think visually.

Good Reporting (Continued from Page 2)

organ samples. When the pathologist cut the skull and lifted the brain out, she handed it to me. It was a soft, gelatinous blob. And the smell during the autopsy was profound. The contents of the large intestine stink, and the freshly cut human flesh smelled, I must say, a little like raw pork."

Journalists are the eyes, ears, and noses of readers, providing vicarious experience and going places that readers have not visited and could not visit. That's why it's vital to dump vagueness, be specific, and show rather than tell. Use factual rather than judgmental descriptors: Instead of "Eric Liddell ran a brave race, astounding observers by brilliantly recovering from an early disaster," try "Eric Liddell, knocked down by another runner, got up and saw that he trailed by 30 yards, but sprinted in pursuit. Gasping for breath, he somehow accelerated to the tape, won the race, then collapsed."

In Mark Twain's words, "Don't say the old lady screamed—bring her on and let her scream." Good reporting helps us to see how the other half screams. We can help an executive to see how the poor have materially hard lives. We can help the poor see how the executive in a fine house still has to bear up against what can often be a crushing load of responsibility. We can help to break down ethnic and racial prejudices.

Suite-level vs. street-level: The difference was clear in a story I wrote about the housing crisis in February 2010, following President Barack Obama's pledge in his State of the Union address to "step up refinancing so that homeowners can move into more affordable mortgages." To get at the street-level understanding I decided not to write a general essay but to focus on one microcosm, the Fort Myers, Fla., metropolitan area.

It was useful to drive around the city with a housing counselor who could show me (and readers) what hard hit areas were like: "That house is empty ... that house is empty ... that house was robbed ... someone set that house on fire." We drove by blocks with abandoned

homes purchased several years ago for \$250,000-\$300,000, three times what they were now selling for in 2010, if they sold at all. We saw how those homes had become magnets for criminals who steal refrigerators, ovens, air conditioning systems, and copper pipes.

The housing counselor said Obama was making things worse rather than better: People were calling him and saying "Obama promised" this or that. The counselor said, "He can't come through without wrecking the whole system. Seems to me, if you can't produce, don't give people false hopes. People who want to refinance need some equity, but most of the people in need have no equity in their homes. Should the banks just hand out money?"

He showed me a high-rise condo near downtown Fort Myers: Five units occupied, and the other 95 of them might as well have "welcome, thieves" doormats. He said more people are just walking away from their investments, breaking their contract and ruining their credit rating but saving money that they can then use for rent: "That's tough, but it wouldn't help for the federal government to force the lenders to write off every debt. The banks would be bankrupt. Besides, you'd have a lot of people taking advantage. Next time there'd be even more recklessness."

After showing the streets, I could then go discuss with greater credibility the view from the suites: "The Obama administration keeps fine-tuning its requirements for lenders. Since last April the administration has released new requirements nine times and made 90 clarifications, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association. On Jan. 27, as Fort Myers residents were lining up for help, the MBA pleaded with the administration to refrain from 'endless incremental program changes,' since every change 'forced mortgage companies to implement new procedures and retrain employees, taking away time that could be spent helping borrowers.'"

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Writing Help on the Web

- ▶ **The New York Times Opinion Page's "Draft" series** features essays by grammarians, historians, linguists, journalists, novelists, and others on the art of writing — from the comma to the tweet to the novel — and why a well-crafted sentence matters more than ever in the digital age.
- ▶ English guru **Constance Hale** blogs insightfully about scene-writing and narrative journalism at <http://sinand-syntax.com/bio/>
- ▶ **The Washington Post's Sunday Outlook editor Carlos Lozada** recently published an updated and amusing list, "150 Journalism Clichés—and Counting."
- ▶ **The Columbia Journalism Review** publishes "Must Reads of the week" featuring staff recommendations for the best pieces of journalism (and other miscellany) on the Internet.

Robert Case currently compiles "Singing in the Shower," a radio segment on the Great American Songbook that airs on Fridays on WORLD's radio program, *The World & Everything in It*. He is the former director of the WORLD Journalism Institute (WJI) and also taught philosophy at Central Washington University. Case has written numerous book reviews and articles for *Christianity Today*, *Presbyterian Journal*, *Presbyterian*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, and other publications. He has also written several monographs and blog posts for WJI.

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Writing in a Post-Christian Culture

By Robert Case

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham. . . When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many. . . Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults." Isaiah 51: 1-2, 7

There is much in this brief passage that is intended to encourage Christians in the midst of an unbelieving and hostile culture or occupation. This passage is for those who "pursue righteousness," "know what is right," and have God's "law" in their hearts.

There are three points that I want to note from this passage. First, Christians are cut from rock. Second, they are a minority, but will be numerous enough to accomplish God's will. Third, as a minority, they will face hostility, but they must remember their heritage.

First, let's look at the "rock" formation of Christian life. The "rock" imagery is explained in part in verse 2 as being descendants from Abraham, the rock of our faith. However, it must be more than that because there are clearer ways of expressing family heritage. While we are sons and daughters of the great Abraham and should therefore take courage and comfort in our family heritage, the "rock" imagery connotes all the characteristics of "hewn rock": hard, tough, impermeable, grounded, foundational. Indeed, a complaint against the liars in Jeremiah 5:3 is that "their faces are harder than stone and they refused to repent." Righteousness must be as stubborn as sin. It is our family heritage to be immovably faithful to the God of Abraham. Peter calls Christians "living stones" (1 Peter 2:4-8), and he

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should know since Jesus called him the "rock" foundation for the New Testament Church. Most wonderfully, Jesus is called a "stone" (Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Eph. 2:20). This stone-like heritage of the Christian calls for cultural formation and stability.

Second, while God's people are a minority, they should not despair because God will increase their numbers to accomplish His will. Abraham was all alone and old when God promised Abram to increase his number, something that was hard for he and his wife Sarai to believe. But He fulfilled this promise, and a great nation was created. So it may be with Christians in today's post-Christian culture. While we don't have the clear promise of a believing population explosion, we do have the promise from God that we will not be alone in His world.

Third, Christians will face "reproach" and "insults" in society and in the workplace, but they must not be terrified by these verbal attacks. These verbal attacks are not probable but guaranteed. That is the language of the prophet Isaiah, but it also makes perfect sense. The Bible is clear that those who have rejected God will consider those who follow Him as evil. Furthermore, Peter tells us that unbelievers will abuse Christians as strangers if they don't follow them into the "flood of dissipation" which characterizes their lives (1 Peter 4:4). So Isaiah is telling Christians to "man up" and deal with society's hostility because they are going to get it whether they like it or not.

In summary, Christian journalists should prepare themselves not only professionally but also spiritually for the fight of their lives as they enter the fray of reporting and writing for a post-Christian culture. They must be equipped as competent professionals knowing how to do the job, but also armed to be the rock of offense to a watching newsroom and society.

This post is reprinted with permission from Mr. Case's blog, Case In Point: robertcaseinpoint.com

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