Can a Christian Be a Journalist?

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January 1998: I was in my office, minding my own business, when Ernie Mancini called. Ernie, who runs the alumni office at Concordia, wanted me to travel with other faculty to Minneapolis to teach one-day courses for alumni.

As will come as no surprise to those who know him, Ernie was enthusiastic—so enthusiastic that I forgot my vow to practice saying the N word. “What would I talk about, Ernie?” I asked.

“I’ve already got that figured out, Cathy,” he said. “Here’s the title: ‘Can a Christian Be a Journalist?’”

“Cath, you still there?”

Ultimately I did say no—due to scheduling conflicts, not the question. But for a long time after Ernie’s call I asked myself:

What on earth kind of question was that? It sounded to me as absurd as “Can a French professor be a Christian?” or “Can a Christian be an auto mechanic?” Why did he pose the question? I wondered. Of course, he posed the question because Ernie, a passionate advocate for journalism, knew how I would answer it. But at the time I was pretty defensive, as journalists tend to be. Has my beloved discipline and profession truly descended to the point where people assume no one of faith could possibly become a journalist? Are we, as Jim Lehrer fears, “down there with the lawyers, the Congress and the child pornographers in the public’s respect and esteem” (65)?

I have continued to think about Ernie’s question for several years now, for several reasons: I thought about it as we developed a print journalism major at Concordia and were compelled to try articulate how journalism might be taught at a liberal arts college of the church. I thought about it during the last two or three years of an editorial in Christianity Today called an “epidemic of journalistic felonies” (“When Lies Become News” 42). I think about it every day I teach journalism class and struggle to show my students that journalism is worth their best efforts and my insistence on excellence because it is noble work, blessed work, and as essential to our republic as the voting booth.

Sometimes this is a tough sell. Watergate and the Pentagon Papers called journalists of my generation to the profession and showed us that we really could change the world. To my students, these landmark stories are ancient history. They grew up in the era of the sound bite, in a time when a frightening number of Americans get their news not just from TV, but from late-night comics. They grew up in a post-modern age wherein all institutions are distrusted, including the one whose job it has long been to serve as watchdog on the others. And as anyone who cares about journalism knows, it’s been a rough couple of years. The year 1998—when we were in the middle of planning our program—was for journalists annus horribilus:

In June 1998, The Cincinnati Enquirer ran a front-page apology to Chiquita Brands because one of its reporters had stolen thousands of messages from the company’s voice-mail system.

Also in June, CNN and Time admitted they didn’t have proof for their story alleging that the US military had used nerve gas to kill American defectors in Laos during the Vietnam War. Correspondent Peter Arnett got his hands slapped; two producers got fired.

The Boston Globe fired a gifted columnist, Patricia Smith, for making up quotations and people in her columns. A few months later, it fired its most popular columnist, Mike Barnicle, for the same offense.

The New Republic fired young hotshot reporter, Stephen Glass, for a long list of lies. He made up quotations. He made up sources. He made up statistics and other “facts.”

And then, of course, came the situation that writer Jon Katz calls “a media recipe from hell”:

Take the Washington press corps. Add the leaky, backstabbing Washington political and legal communities. Fold in round-the-clock cable news channels with endless hours to fill. Blend with gabby, vain lawyers and reporters eager to appear on TV. Top with a sexually enthusiastic president. Flavor with a needy, opportunistic young White House intern. Then toss in Matt Drudge and the World Wide Web. It’s a mixture guaranteed to make us all lose our appetites. (28)
Those of us who were then planning the print journalism program were still hungry, but for more substantial fare. So we asked variations on Ernie’s question: Does such a proposed program fit the mission of the college? What is the relationship between Christian faith and journalism? What is, for me, the relationship between my love of God and my love of journalism? What tenets of my faith are also tenets of my profession? How can I—as a Christian, a journalist, a teacher—instill in my students a passion for journalism not tempered by, but driven by, Christian faith?

Those are the questions I’ve been thinking about for the last few years. The answers to some of these questions might seem obvious; others are far more complex and will never—perhaps should never—be answered definitively. But I know now what I would tell those Twin City Cobbers should Ernie re-issue his invitation: I would tell them about David Nimmer, a journalism professor at the University of St. Thomas who begins his classes by asking, “Are you ready to do God’s work?” I would tell them that most of the journalists I know consider themselves to be people of faith, and that many are active in their churches. I would tell them that despite the huge salaries paid the talking heads on morning TV, most journalists are obscenely underpaid men and women who cover the school board, the city council, the Concordia basketball game—and that they see no conflict whatever between faith and profession. I would tell them that most journalists are not drawn to the newsroom by glamour, prestige or fat paychecks—and those who are suffer rude awakenings. Most journalists still hold with the old newsroom adage that the purpose of journalism is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I would tell them that many journalists are called by their well-honed senses of moral outrage at injustice and cruelty, and by their unshakable faith in the healing power of words and the liberating illumination of truth. They are called by their desire to help people honor their obligations to care for one another. Most journalists begin their careers driven by, but

I have come to believe that I could not have become a journalist if I did not believe in a God who loves and nurtures us, who does not play us like puppets but has given us brains, talent and heart to create a world that could work if we accepted our responsibilities to Him and to one another. Nor could I have become a journalist if I believed that being a Christian means being always pleasant and nice; sometimes faith requires us to yell and holler, to upset the moneychangers’ tables.

Philosopher Tom Christenson said it perfectly:

God help us when the word “Christian” has come to mean “inoffensive,” “sanitized,” “sexual,” or when Christian writers can only write about nice folks in nice towns doing nice things for nice reasons, in nice language. The freedom of the Christian is, among other things, freedom from the suffocating and nauseating law of niceness. (7)

In the New Union Prayer Book is a prayer Reform Jews pray at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement: “God, You do not ask me, ‘Why haven’t you been as great as Moses?’ You do ask me, ‘Why have you not been yourself? Why have you not been true to the best in you?’” (325).

I believe we can only be true to the best in ourselves when we live not in the darkness of fear and ignorance but in the light of truth. We can be ourselves when we use the reason God gave us. Or, as Luther said: “How dare you not know what you can know?” (qtd. in Benne “Integrity” 7). I am tempted to hang my journalistic creed on John 8:32: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” I believe that with all my heart and want to claim it as journalism’s great commission. Yet I know that if I commit the journalistic sin of taking Jesus’ words out of context, I risk the greater journalistic sin of arrogance. As a wise writer has warned:

Don’t snatch at more than your share of biblical sanction for your calling ... Jesus was talking about the truth that came from commitment to Him and the revelation of God’s truth that was incarnate in him. He was really not talking about the truth that you grub around and find by yourself... If the truth will make you free, the freedom you are talking about is pretty much summed up in the ideal of free people in a free society, namely, democratic government. (Baker 27-28)

Point taken—but a freedom worthy of our efforts!

Intersections/Spring 2001
-20-
I believe that God desires that we live in community, and that community is impossible unless we know about one another’s fears and joys, tragedies and triumphs. I believe, too, that Christ’s death and resurrection free us to ask any question, seek any information. As Ernie Simmons writes in his wonderful book about Lutheran higher education, “The freedom of the gospel of God’s justifying grace empowers faith for free inquiry. We are not saved by our intellectual or ideological constrictions so that we are free to pursue analysis of the world and search for truth wherever it may lead” (23-24).

I believe in the sanctity of words, in what E.B. White called “the truth and worth of the scrawl.” In his book The Christian as a Journalist, Richard Baker asks a provocative question: “Why did John take the prologue space to his Gospel to write a poem about the Logos, the Word? What was he trying to say, to affirm? What religious truth was he announcing?” (15)

Baker says John “intended to back up his chronicle to its original beginnings in creation: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Baker continues:

_The passage has strong hints within it that turn the pages back to the first passages in the book of Genesis. And, turning there, we find another strange apostrophe to the Word. A simple line introduces each of the acts of creation: ‘AND GOD SAID ... The act of verbalizing obviously had some strong religious meaning to these writers. Perhaps a fascination with the gift of language. Perhaps some insight into the inseparability of personality and verbalization (15-16)."

Baker points out “the Bible began in the beginning with God and his utterance.” He continues:

_Utterance is the business of journalism, and utterance is originally divine. Not everything that journalism utters is divinely inspired by God. There are other bylines in the newspapers and other commentators on the air. But the fact that the mind shall conceive and bear fruit in utterance is a fact that has original religious significance. It is in this sense that the journalist, as he engages in his craft, partakes of certain holy elements, endowed with blessedness from the moment of creation. You do believe in the Word, or you are no journalist. (16)"

These beliefs, then, nurtured by my continuing education about faith and learning and honed by consideration of what is right and wrong with contemporary journalism, led to what I believe about the place of journalism at Concordia College: First, I believe that the liberal arts truly educate journalists rather than merely train reporters. Second, I believe that because we are a college of the church we have the freedom—as well as the responsibility—to provide leadership in journalism ethics and, in the process, to help journalism reclaim its role as a public service. Third, and most important, I believe that journalism is more than a satisfying career and an essential public service; I believe it is a calling, a true vocation, and that its careful and thoughtful practice is a way of serving humankind and God.

Clearly, journalism is an inherently liberal arts profession; clearly, a liberal education best suits journalists. Journalists need to think critically, to know how to formulate a hypothesis, how to support claims with rigorous research, and how to present facts in their historical, social and ethical contexts. They need to know that the way to get close to the truth about anything is to approach it not from one point of view or discipline, but from many.

A liberal arts college of the church has much to offer journalism. For better or worse, journalists certainly do influence the affairs of the world. Journalism can only improve if such influence is wielded by thoughtful and informed men and women dedicated to the Christian life. Not only does journalism fit our mission; our mission fits journalism.

Before we consider that fit, let us look at a journalism program that would not, could not happen at Concordia: the so-called “Christian journalism” program at Pat Robertson’s Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Sheila Dom, a Regent student who served as editor of the campus news magazine, The Christian, describes the program as “a Bible-based approach to news, looking at contemporary issues from eternal perspectives” (qtd. in Fisher par. 4).

Robertson said the program’s goals is “to rebuild the wall of righteousness around America... despite the ridicule, despite the plans to assuage and cut off our message” and to “advance the kingdom of God in all areas of journalism” (qtd. in Fisher par. 26).

The problems inherent in such an approach are myriad. But one big problem has emerged that caught Regent University by surprise: The program seems unable to reach the goal of “advancing the kingdom of the Lord in all areas of journalism.” That’s because the vast majority of Regent’s
journalism students conclude that journalism is inherently immoral, that "journalism is simply no place for a Christian" (Fisher par. 6). As a result, most Regent journalism graduates either abandon the profession or gravitate toward "Christian" media.

How Regent's notion of "Christian journalism" translates into news stories was seen in a 1998 cover story in The Christian. It's worth a close look, for it shows us that the story focuses on vampire and Satanic cults in Tidewater Virginia. It quotes detectives, clergy and religion professors about what the story's headline calls "the evil that lurks in the darkness" (qtd. in Fisher par. 5). If a mainstream news reporter had turned in such a story, an editor worth her salt would likely say: "Great. You've got half a story. Now. Do some more reporting. Balance it. Let's hear from a witch, a vampire, a Satanist, a former Satanist. Honor the intelligence of the readers by giving them the information they need to form their own opinions." A Lutheran editor might say: "How dare you not find out what you can find out?" But The Christian's reporter didn't attempt to speak to those sources. Dorn said interviewing such people would have been unchristian because they are evil and that Christian journalists should not give them a platform from which to spew Satan's lies.

Another editor of The Christian says he does not read newspapers or news magazines or watch TV news. He explained: "The media will always be the viewpoint of the world, not of God ... You have to be aware of Satan's schemes." (qtd. in Fisher par. 14). He thinks good journalists should never portray Christians in a negative light, because to do so would defy the will of God. Further, many Regent students regard as unchristian any story that causes hurt feelings, shame, embarrassment or anger. In essence, they tend to believe—to the dismay of some of their professors—that their calling to promote their beliefs overrides all other considerations in reporting and writing new stories.

If we take that thinking to its logical conclusion, it would be acceptable—preferable—to commit the very kinds of journalistic felonies that most bother the public—to lie by omission, distort facts, fix quotes, and interview only those sources whose points of view mirror one’s own.

The Regent program reminds me of an analogy drawn by Robert Benne, Jordan/Trexler Professor of Religion at Roanoke College. He was talking about the need for colleges of the church to be academically rigorous and he said: "A Christian cobbler makes good shoes, not poor shoes with little crosses on them" ("Integrity" 7).

Good journalism is ethically sound journalism; many of the offenses that anger the public and erode their trust in the press are the result not of journalism but of lousy journalism. Mel Mencher, a Lou Grant-type editor who now teaches in the graduate journalism program at Columbia University, is famous for his curmudgeonly sayings. My favorite: "It is immoral not to be excellent in your craft" (28).

That means that teaching journalism ethics is inseparable from teaching the craft of journalism; yes, we need to educate students in ethical decision-making, but the first ethical rule is this: Make good shoes. Good journalistic stories are well written, well attributed. Good journalism is balanced journalism; good reporters know not only to present the views of both sides, but that most stories have four or six or eight sides. Good journalism is accurate journalism—accurate in fact, spelling, grammar, quotation, attributions and context. Good journalism sometimes enragers people; good journalism does not have to be offensive, but a news story that offends no one is not necessarily good journalism. Unbalanced, slanted news stories are badly reported news stories; sometimes, what their writers need is not so much a remedial course in ethics but a refresher of Journalism 101.

What, exactly, does a college of the church have to offer journalism in terms of leadership in ethical decision-making? And what about "Christian ethics" would make for better journalism? For that matter, what are "Christian ethics" anyway, and how do they look different from other ethics? And is there such a thing as a Lutheran ethic?

For those of us who are not theologians, trying to define Christian ethics feels like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. So although I will attempt no explication, let me frame the rest of the discussion with some thoughts on Christian ethics by the authors Harmon Smith and Louis Hodges.

The define ethics as "the search for some kind of rational coherence in the regulation of conduct; it is the human actor ‘getting wise to himself’" (13). The write that "ethics as a systematic discipline is born when we being to reflect rationally and systematically upon characteristic ways of deciding moral questions" (13).

The study of Christian ethics, then, is "the study of the implications for human conduct of the reality embodied in
Jesus, the reality of God’s love for man. To study Christian ethics is to ask what are the consequences for human behavior of the fact of God’s love for man” (30).

These authors point out that very often the actions of Christians do not look different from others. Indeed, they tell us that “when the emperor Constantine adopted Christianity and found military success fighting under the sign of the Christian cross he had all his troops baptized, but with their sword-yielding arm held out of the water!” (13).

Still, they identify four characteristics of the Christian ethic. First, it is an “acknowledging ethic,” a “responsive ethic” (16). That is, humans acknowledge the will of God and respond to it. We try to discover what God wills and then we consider that to be our duty. As Christians we claim that the nature of humankind and of humankind’s duty—i.e., the nature of God’s will for humanity—is seen through the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, who embodied God’s will and thus shows humanity the content of that will. “It is precisely to that content,” they write, “that the Christian is to respond morally” (17).

The Christian ethic is also a “corporate ethic” (Smith 19), a community ethic. Smith says “to talk about the Christian ethic … is not to talk primarily of some list of new rules or of divinely given discursive truths. It is rather to participate in a new way of life, to become part of a new reality, the church… [The] result of God’s activity is not new rules but new people living in new community” (20).

Third, the Christian ethic is “a deciding ethic,” meaning that the characteristic that distinguishes humans is our ability to think, “I ought.” … Humans then may choose to be either moral (righteous) or immoral (unrighteous) but can never choose to be amoral. To assert that human are moral beings living in a moral environment is to claim “that man is to be understood primarily in terms of his relationships to God” (22-25).

Finally, the authors identify a fourth element of the Christian ethic as love, agape—the love of someone not because of who he is, nor because of what he is, but simply that he is; the love demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ” (25). In sum, Harmon and Smith write, “Christian love is none other than the very giving of the self in service to the neighbor.” The distinctive character of Christian love lies not so much in what it demands that one do as in the reasons for making those demands” (26).

And here is what especially resonated with me, for it points out the inseparability of journalism ethics and journalistic calling: The authors write that “Christian ethics is not a study of codes of ethics but of ways Christians go about deciding. The unique ingredient in the acts of Christians does not inhere in the nature of the thing done, but rather in the reason for doing that thing” (16).

And yes, indeed, there is a Lutheran ethic, here articulated by Benne in discussing four orders to which the Christian is called: marriage and family, work, public life and church:

Lutheran ethics maintains that these are the places in which all humans are given the obligations to live responsible lives. Christians, moreover, are to see them as divinely given callings in which to exercise their particular gifts for the sake of the neighbor … They are the places in which we discern our special mission in life, our callings. (15)

Benne’s words are helpful in considering journalism as a Christian calling, a Lutheran calling. Smith and Hodge’s discussion is helpful when considering the nature of journalism—the nature of news itself. Every journalist will tell you about being accused of being part of a vast conspiracy to “sell newspapers by printing bad news.” I know an editor from Iowa who has a running argument with a friend. When they meet for lunch once a month, the friend begins the conversation by ragging on the editor for all the “bad news” in the newspaper. Finally, one day, the editor’s friend surprised him: “Great paper, today,” he said, “Finally—some good news in the newspaper!” He was referring to a front-page story about some teenager heroes. It seems a nun was walking in a parking ramp when she was mugged. The teenagers saw the mugging and rushed to the nun’s aid. They held the muggers until police arrived and were now being lauded as heroes. “Good news?” the editor replied. “Maybe. But remember—first the nun had to get mugged.”

Richard Baker puts it another way:

The journalist is obsessed by matters of moral significance. Sometimes the ethical responsibility of journalism is seen by reversing lenses. You read in your journal that a mother has abandoned her baby. “I had to do it,” she is quoted. “The baby is better dead than looking forward to the kind of life I could provide.” How does it happen that the story got into the newspaper? Why is it news? In a negative way, the moral truth is affirmed that infanticide is wrong. Suppose you belonged to a culture that found no moral offense in infanticide and a kind of prudent virtue in the explanation that the mother gave. The story would never
have made the newspapers. It would have had no moral meaning. All the time, journalism tips it hand in moral matters and reveals what it considers just and good by what it presents as wrong. (34-35)

Articulating the "moral nature of news" is one of the ways in which teach future journalists about ethics. This is certainly possible at secular institutions, but at Concordia—here’s another Lutheran paradox—our freedom to speak about morality openly and loudly makes focusing on ethics imperative. We do this by studying ethical issues in journalism and analyzing the cause and effect of journalistic decisions. We do this not only by requiring a class in journalism ethics—something only half of all American journalism programs demand—but also by placing ethical discussions front and center in each and every journalism class we teach.

We do this by working on case studies, and by providing formal training in ethics theory. But that’s not enough. We have to provide moral leadership. A surprisingly large number of studies indicate that though most news organizations have well-reasoned codes of ethics, too often they are either not followed in crisis situations or are undermined by lack of personal morality. As Robert Bugeja says in a recent article in Quill magazine:

Case studies don't work because students with underdeveloped value systems and little if any professional experience are being asked to evaluate professionals in crisis situations. Ethics are about motive rather than sequence, circumstance or setting (15).

"Ethics are about motive." That’s precisely where calling comes in, where journalism becomes vocation.

"Ethics are about motive." That’s what Richard Baker is getting at when he talks about the "seemingly secular" profession of journalism:

You will not find the temples of journalistic activity exactly reeking with the incenses of sanctity. There will be no morning devotions as reporters, editors and broadcasters march out to serve the Lord in their daily lives and work. References to the Deity will be heard frequently, but not in the context of worship and praise. Journalism places its functionaries so close to the raw edges of current history that you will tend to find yourself steeped in the attitudes of doubt and unbelief. Yours is a secular world, often sordid and profane.

Trailing a narcotics peddler through the playground, taking notes that turn your stomach at the trial of a rapist-killer—are these the ways to serve your God and fellow man? Is there any religious meaning in the life of a journalist, any ethical meaning? Does God call anybody to this kind of vocation? The answer to all these questions has to be yes. The man who stands on the communications bridge, seeing, observing, telling man the story of himself, is one of God’s most prized servants. Perhaps it’s an ugly story; perhaps the journalist’s world appears possessed by evil. Nevertheless, the journalist’s work is a vocation, a response to a divine call, a coming to attention before commands that are for him absolute and ultimate. (13-14)

"Ethics are about motive." When the only motive for engaging in journalism is increasing the profits for stockholders, we are in trouble. No longer, then are journalism’s commands absolute and ultimate. They’re on the auction block. As in any profession, journalism has in its ranks practitioners who are careless, incompetent, dishonest, and unable to view the world without their own distorting filters. But to blame most reporters and editors for the profession’s lapses is like blaming foot soldiers for having lousy generals. The college of the church has another ethical responsibility: To remind the industry of their responsibility as public servants.

That’s the thesis of a book by Jeremy Iggers, Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest:

The fundamental question of journalism ethics—How do we best realize the goal of enabling citizens to participate more fully in democratic life?—has been replaced by the market-driven question, ‘How do we meet what our reader and marketer-customers say are their information and entertainment needs?’ (78)

The main problem afflicting much of the media is an unholy blend of new technologies and increased competition driven by profit-greedy, mega-media corporate owners—a problem not easily solved by journalism curricula or codes of ethics. The Presidential scandal story serves as an example. It was the first major news story broken by an Internet gossip mongerer, Matt Drudge, whose half-truths and wild claims were then discussed on 24-hour cable news channels as though they were substantiated facts. Soon, reputable news organizations repeated the gossip. In the early weeks of the story, both airwaves and news columns were lousy with rumor, innuendo, and unattributed quotes from vague sources. Network TV reporters spewed seamy details and “eyewitness accounts” as if they were sworn courtroom
testimony instead of error-riddled leaks. Newspapers, which had a glorious opportunity to remedy TV’s careless immediacy with careful, thorough reporting, joined the rumor orgy. Even such respected newspapers as The New York Times and the Washington Post repeated allegations prefaced with “if true”—allegations that later had to be retracted. Steve Coz, editor of The National Enquirer, said he did not know how his publication would handle the story. “It’s pretty hard to out-tabloid the mainstream press on this one,” he said. Writes Hamill: “We had some turning point in American journalism: The president of the United States was being examined with the tools usually reserved for the likes of Joey Buttafuoco” (13).

As soon as the dust settled, journalists began flagellating themselves with whips of remorse. “Where Did We Go Wrong?” asked the Columbia Journalism Review. We went wrong when we forgot the things we learned in Journalism 101: Attribute all information, especially that of a controversial nature. Double-check. Then check again. Avoid anonymous sources, but if you must use them, know which axe they hope to grind and verify the facts with at least two other sources. Remember that you are reporters, not judge and jury. There is no honor in being first and wrong, but much in being late and right. We went wrong when we began to think of journalism ethics as unaffordable luxuries to be tossed aside in the heat of competition, when we started telling ourselves the word “alleged” gave us license to make any charge, repeat any accusation. We went wrong when, despite a multitude of readership surveys to the contrary, cost-cutting publishers decided the public doesn’t really want in-depth reporting, but distraction and titillation.

But the press didn’t suddenly “go wrong” in the White House story. Public opinion polls over the last twenty years have reflected a steady decline in the public’s trust of journalists—TV journalists especially, but also their print counterparts. It is not coincidental that the public trust began to wane about the same time that newspapers, television stations and networks began to fall into the hands of fewer and larger owners, including many multi-media conglomerates, whose demand for higher returns on investment slashed newsroom budgets across the country. Former Chicago Tribune editor James Squires calls newspapers “the most profitable legal business in America” (qtd. in Hamilton and Krimsky 24); among publicly owned and group owned media companies, profit margins of 20 percent are common, and margins of less than the 1992 average of 16 percent are considered unacceptable (24).

Thorough and insightful reporting is an expensive proposition. Why send a team of reporters to Rwanda when syndicates will sell you canned features for a fraction of the cost? Why bother with pricey and pesky documentaries if the public will watch Barbara Walters dance La Vida Loca with Ricky Martin?

News editors, fearful of ratings and declining subscriptions and under the gun from corporate headquarters to increase profits, tend to overreact to the vagaries of readership surveys and focus groups. They might well heed the words of journalist Eric Blair—better known to the world as George Orwell: “Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

A few years ago David Remnick—now editor of The New Yorker—wrote about what happens to news coverage when journalists fear telling people what they do not want to hear: He told about an e-mail sent by the executive editor of the Miami Herald to his staff. Here’s what he asked them: “If anyone has an idea on what to do with the Bosnia story, I welcome it. I am embarrassed to say I long ago stopped reading this story of enormous human tragedy and significant global consequence.” The editor said reporters had failed to make the news relevant to the readers, had failed to answer readers’ questions of “What does this have to do with me?” (42).

Trying to answer such questions only trivializes coverage, Remnick says: “Once an editor starts responding to every cry of “What about my needs?” the front page will read like a community shopper and the news from Sarajevo will come in the form of AP briefs back near the want ads. Like it or not, part of the job of a great editor is to listen to public desires—and then, if necessary, act against them” (42).

Much is at stake. In his memoir, A Reporter’s Life, Walter Cronkite writes that modern journalism, especially television, has become so corrupted by the kind of “infotainment” owners think the public wants—by the “profitable bad…driving out the unprofitable or marginally profitable good,” that our democracy is in grave danger (376). Cronkite writes that “a free unintimidated and unregulated press is democracy’s early-warning system against both the dangers of democracy’s own excesses and the approach of tyranny,” and he charges that contemporary journalism too often fails to do its job. Cronkite is especially hard on television journalism: “The nation whose population depends on the explosively compressed headline service of television news can expect to be exploited by the demagogues and dictators who prey upon the semi-informed” (380).
Therefore, Cronkite claims, citizens must be educated not to rely on television for their news, but to read good newspapers, weekly newsmagazines and journals. But if Pete Hamill is right, the print media are not doing their jobs, either. Hamill is as hard on the medium he loves as Cronkite is on his:

With the usual honorable exceptions, newspapers are getting dumber. They are increasingly filled with sensation, rumor, press-agent flackery, and bloated trivialities at the expense of significant facts ... Newspapers emphasize drama and conflict at the expense of analysis. They cover celebrities as if reporters were a bunch of waifs with their noses pressed enviously to the windows of the rich and famous. (30)

Cronkite and Hamill agree that education is the only way to improve the quality of journalism. The public, they write, need to be educated to become discriminating readers and viewers. Student journalists need to spend more time becoming competent in the basics of journalism: Writing, reporting, ethics. And perhaps most importantly, they write, media owners need to accept their responsibilities as holders of the public trust—which is not to say they should operate their businesses as charities. Cronkite writes: “I want them to make huge profits in the entertainment area—because I want them to pour a sizable share of those profits back into news and public affairs” (382).

The problem is not that reporters want to commit lousy journalism. Pete Hamill says that too many publishers think of reporters and editors as hopeless romantics, committed to the myth of the fearless journalist” (99). “They are actually right,” Hamill writes. “But they should trust that myth. Upon that myth they can build great newspapers that will also be healthy businesses. Newspapers need men and women with fire in the belly, not a collection of bloodless bureaucrats, content to clerk the news” (99).

Never before have we had a greater need for good journalism—and for the owners of media conglomerates to reclaim journalism’s historic role as an early-warning system. In this age of special interest publications and the Internet, our society is in dire need of a medium that serves not only to reflect a community, but also to build, perhaps preserve, Community.

Cronkite points out that our society’s historic belief in the marketplace of ideas will be moot if there is no viable marketplace:

Today the person seeking only the football scores of the couch potato looking for entertainment-world chitchat is usually exposed to some general news headlines while thumbing through the paper or waiting out the evening news broadcast/ But when there are cable and other high-tech channels to which they can go directly for their sport or entertainment news, even that limited exposure will end. (380)

Cures for what ails journalism are neither quick nor easy, and as complex as are the solutions for most social problems. Still, there are things we can do—as news consumers, as educators, as journalists—to improve the function, value and quality of the press:

Consumers, rather than mumbling their complaints to themselves, can yell and holler when the news media act irresponsibly. They can direct their disapproval at the new organization and its advertisers; they might be surprised to learn how quickly media and their advertisers respond to pressure from their customers—and how relatively few customers they need to hear from before they do so. An editorial in Christianity Today urges readers to criticize, to hold the press accountable, but to do so in an accountable manner: “For Christians, neither reactionary condemnation of the news media nor withdrawal from media interaction are adequate responses” (42).

We in the academy can emphasize, in our journalism programs, the core values of journalism education—reporting, writing, ethics—based on a solid foundation of liberal arts. We in church-related colleges can do some passionate preaching about calling—we can evangelize, if you will, the gospel of vocation. At Concordia, we can make use of our academic freedom not just to teach ethics, but also to demonstrate morality. We can prick the consciences of the mega-media conglomerates that demand high profit margins from their news divisions at the expense of quality. We can develop what Winds of Change, a study of journalism education commissioned by the Freedom Forum, calls “a journalism culture,” where journalism’s role and possibilities are respected and revered (Medsger 120). We do this by regarding journalism not as a trade but a complex and interdisciplinary subject worth studying, and as a profession worthy of our best and brightest students. And we make a point of celebrating models of journalistic excellence and holding them up to students and the public:

We could start by telling holding up the story of Dennis Williams, Verneal Jimerson and William Rainge. They are
three black men who spent twenty years on Death Row after having being convicted of the 1978 rape and murder of a young white woman and her fiancé. On July 2, 1996, they walked out of prison, free, exonerated of the crimes by the investigative journalism of three Northwestern University students. Their compelling, solid story forced police and prosecutors to admit they had botched the case because of their eagerness to make arrests. Four men have since been arrested and convicted on overwhelming DNA evidence.

In fact, the Northwestern students’ story prompted—some say shamed—the Chicago Tribune to launch its own investigative series on injustices in Illinois’ death penalty system. So well documented and outrageous were those exposed injustices that the Illinois governor has called for a moratorium on all executions in the state and the President has urged other governors to do the same. Among the other truths that these stories reveal is that no other institution in our society—not the government, not the academy, not the church—is willing or able to do such work. If not journalists, then who? When the students’ professor, David Protess, was interviewed by the Des Moines Register about his students’ feat, he said this: “I personally think it’s appalling that a college professor and his students should be the last line of defense for a prisoner before execution” (qtd. in Niederpruem 4).

We celebrate journalism by telling about some of the stories for which newspapers have won Pulitzer Prizes in public service and investigative journalism, and perhaps we read from the Pulitzer citations themselves to illustrate journalism as vocation:

To Katherine Boo of The Washington Post, for work that disclosed wretched neglect and abuse in the city’s group homes for the mentally retarded, which forced officials to acknowledge the conditions and begin reforms.

To Eric Newhouse of the Great Falls, Montana, Tribune, for his vivid examination of alcohol abuse and the problems in creates in the community.

To George Dohrman of the St. Paul Pioneer Press, for his determined reporting, despite negative reader reaction, that revealed academic fraud in the men’s basketball program at the University of Minnesota.

To Mark Schoofs of the Village Voice, for his provocative and enlightening series on the AIDS crisis in Africa.

The list, thank God, goes on and on, back to 1917. The hope is that it continues.

We can make sure they know—students, the general public—why journalists around the world die in the line of duty. Pete Hamill reminds us of the hundreds of journalists who’ve been killed covering wars in the last 50 years, including 65 who died covering Vietnam:

They knew that only part of the truth could be discovered in the safe offices of Washington, D.C.; they had to witness the darker truths by getting down in the mud with the grunts. Reporters and photographers did not stop dying when Vietnam was over. They have been killed in Lebanon and Nicaragua, in Bosnia and Peru, and in a lot of other places where hard rain falls.

I can’t believe these good men and women died for nothing. I know they didn’t. They died because they were the people chosen by the tribe to carry the torch to the back of the cave and tell the others what is there in the darkness. They died because they were serious about the craft they practiced. They died because they believed in the fundamental social need for what they did with a pen, a notebook, a typewriter, a camera. They didn’t die to increase profits for the stockholders. They didn’t die to obtain an invitation to some White House dinner for a social-climbing publisher. They died for us.

As readers or journalists, we honor them when we remember that their dying was not part of a plan to make the world cheaper, baser or dumber. They died to bring us the truth (21-22).

Can an auto mechanic be a Christian? Undoubtedly. Can a Christian be a French professor? Oui. And Christian cobbler make some fine shoes, too, unadorned with little crosses but solid and long lasting and good to the feet. Can a Christian be a journalist? Yes, Ernie, indeed they can. Some of them do God’s work.

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