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Letters to a Young Journalist

## Introduction

Thirty years ago, when I was a good deal like you, I drove off to start my first job as a newspaper reporter. By that evening in May 1975, I had already been writing for student newspapers for nearly half my life, starting in junior high school. This summer internship on the Courier-News, a 45,000-circulation daily in suburban New Jersey, marked the first time I would actually be paid a salary for doing the thing I loved. In all the years since, I have tried never to forget the exhilaration I felt on that first night.

I was a few months short of nineteen then, and I didn't even own a white shirt or navy blazer for the occasion. If memory serves, I borrowed a leisure suit, of all things, from my father, and because he was three inches shorter than me, it couldn't have fit very well. My hair spilled down to my shoulders in coarse heaps, and I had the scraggly whiskers of a first beard, which I'd begun a few months earlier on a backpacking trip in Oregon. I must have looked like a complete buffoon.

Still, I had what was most essential to my calling, a ballpoint pen and a stenographer's notebook, and that equipment mattered more than my incompetent attire. I reached the Courier-News parking lot just before my shift, six thirty at night until two thirty in the morning. There was no pretense of training or orientation. I'd been hired because my clips from the college paper had convinced the editors I was capable, so I was dropped instantly into the pool of reporters covering local government. Whenever someone went on vacation, I filled in on the vacant beat. I can still remember that first night being sent to cover the township council in a place called Branchburg. I made my deadline and even slipped in the verb "assuage" in my lead paragraph, earning a sort of admiring snort from the night editor.

After I filed the story, I had my first real chance to survey the scene around me. The Courier-News occupied a low-slung modern building of white bricks and smoked windows, one that could have been easily mistaken for the insurance offices or furniture stores nearby on Route 22. Inside the newsroom, fluorescent lights cast a permanent daytime over banks of fake-wood desks and manual typewriters. The editors sat in a row at the front of the room with pots of rubber

cement to glue together the pages of copy into a single, extended sheet for the back-shop. They also had a spike for the stories that were killed. Along the wall behind the editors clattered the wire-service machines. On the far side of two swinging doors lay the composing room and presses, which were manned by burly, ink-smearing printers who thought reporters were a bunch of wimps. Down a narrow hallway was our “cafeteria,” which consisted of six or seven vending machines. One of them had microwavable pancakes.

Even on my first night, I knew enough about journalism to know this wasn't the mythological world of *The Front Page*. We weren't in a city. Nobody was wearing a fedora or sneaking booze from a desk drawer or shouting things like, “Gimme rewrite, babe.” The *Courier-News* once had been such a place, a fixture in the downtown of Plainfield, New Jersey, a small city that made its modest way on paychecks from a Mack Truck factory. When the black section of town had burst into rioting in 1967, with a mob stomping to death a white cop, the *Courier-News* began plotting its departure for the suburbs.

The reporters whom I got to know over the coming weeks seemed drawn in equal parts from the past and the future. There was an old-timer named Forrest who liked to avoid being assigned obituaries by hiding under his desk. One of his contemporaries, Maggie, sometimes fell asleep at her desk, letting her wig slide off. Phil, one of the editors, chewed cigars. I couldn't dismiss the whole generation, though, because it also included Jack Gill, the streetwise skeptic who covered Plainfield, and Hollis Burke, an idealist who had done a midlife turn in the Peace Corps. They had about them not only experience but wisdom.

Naturally enough, I gravitated to the younger faction, the reporters and editors in their twenties, college-educated and ambitious. Ann Devroy, the city editor, would be smoking and eating patty-melt sandwiches as she pored over copy through her tinted aviator glasses. Sam Meddis, one of the investigative reporters, had talked his way into the paper with a bunch of poems he'd written as a Rutgers undergrad. Ultimately, Ann would become the White House correspondent for the *Washington Post*, Sam a feature writer for *USA Today*; others from that newsroom landed on the *Baltimore Sun*, *Newsday*, and *The New York Times*. That summer, though, such destinations felt impossibly distant.

It was sufficient, at least for me, to be making the lordly sum of \$130 a week. I sat through a score of municipal meetings—borough council, board of education, zoning commission—and I called a half-dozen police departments for our daily roundup of local crime. Because I befriended the paper's drama critic, he let me review a few summer-stock productions. I reveled in being part of

that community of reporters, sharing ziti dinners before we scattered to our various assignments, grabbing last call at the Ambers before we drove home. Those muggy Jersey nights never seemed more seductive.

Toward the end of the summer, I was subbing for the beat reporter in South Bound Brook, a blue-collar town that was uneventful even by our sleepy standards. Somebody called me with a tip, the only bona fide tip of my entire summer, that there was a suspicious pile of debris on a canal towpath that fell within the town boundary. I drove out there, probably in my leisure suit, and indeed found a pile of dirt about fifteen feet high. On closer inspection, I noticed the dirt was covering spongy, whitish material. That set off alarms for me. The asbestos manufacturer Johns Manville had its main factory a few miles away, and hundreds of its current or former employees had developed an otherwise rare cancer as a result of inhaling the dust. I wrote an initial story about my curious discovery on the towpath, which in turn brought out a scientist from the state environmental protection agency to test the pile's content. It was, sure enough, asbestos. That became my second scoop. The owner of the towpath property responded by hiring a college kid to guard the pile—by sitting on top of it in a chaise lounge. And that development, accompanied by a front-page photo, was scoop number three. Some nights, when I walked past Forrest in the newsroom, he would mutter at me, “Asbestos. You’re the one. Yes, you are. With that asbestos.” I was never sure whether he meant the nattering as a compliment or a condemnation. By the end of August, I’d learned it was safest to engage Forrest on the subject of Bob Marley, an improbable passion of his.

I cannot honestly say that I made up my mind to be a journalist when I wrote those asbestos articles, because I’d probably made it up as early as eighth grade, when I volunteered to be editor-in-chief of the school paper. But there was something so confirming in the experience. It made me feel that, trite as it sounds, my work could matter. It made me feel that I did belong with people like Jack Gill and Hollis Burke and Ann Devroy and Sam Meddis, that I wasn’t just a pretender, a wannabe, a hanger-on.

My last shift of the summer ended much as my first one had, with filing some municipal-government story and then waiting to be released. Charlie Nutt, the night editor, was probably only seven or eight years older than me, but he had the practiced scowl of a septuagenarian. No reporter could leave the newsroom before two thirty unless Charlie gave a “good night,” and it seemed to anguish him to do so, as if shaving a few minutes off our shift might lead to the sin of sloth, as if it might endanger our eternal souls. Whenever he said, “Good night,” I noticed, he said it in a stern

monotone and he said it without lifting his eyes from whatever story he was editing. We would scuttle out like cockroaches. When I got my last good night of the summer, though, I was sorry to hear it, sorry to have something magical end.

I tell you this story because it never hurts to start at the beginning, and I tell you it because you've asked me for advice, and you ought to know something about who is giving it. I cannot transfix you with war stories about dodging bullets and defying generals, because I have never covered a war. I cannot dazzle you with inside dope about the White House, because I have never been inside it except as a tourist. I have written investigative series on poverty, political corruption, and Medicaid fraud, but I cannot present myself as a career muckraker like Wayne Barrett or Lowell Bergman. Whether at article or book length, I have spent much of my career exploring subjects that are not considered the sexiest or the most prestigious—culture, religion, education, immigration. If you give me a choice, I will always prefer to write about someone obscure than someone famous. And, as much as I savor the company of fellow journalists at a party or in a newsroom, I feel like I've done something wrong if I bump into any of them reporting the same story as I am.

In my idiosyncratic way, though, I have had the kind of career that you may have, or at least the kind that is common in our profession. I've moved from a small paper (Courier-News) to a medium-sized one (Suburban Trib) to a major one (The New York Times), and I've gone on to write six books, counting this one. Over the past fifteen years, I have taught journalism at Columbia University as well, and my students have gone on to write books of their own and to report or produce for such news organizations as National Public Radio, The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, NBC, Rolling Stone, and Business Week.

By teaching, in addition to doing, I've been compelled to think about what it takes to be a journalist and what it means to be a journalist. In my classes, and now in these letters to you, I've had to put the precepts into words. When I first took an adjunct-instructor position at Columbia, I did it as an agnostic on the whole notion of whether journalism even can be taught. My undergraduate journalism courses at the University of Wisconsin had been, with one or two exceptions, an utter waste. The college paper, the Daily Cardinal, was my classroom, and experience was my teacher. The mentors I met along the way were editors and veteran reporters, not members of any faculty. Still, I told my first Columbia class that it had the power to change my mind, and it did. I came to understand the intense education that can happen in the "conversation" between a student's article and my editing. I was affirmed in my belief that intellectual curiosity and a relentless work ethic matter infinitely more than natural ability in achieving excellence.

I have also seen, over the years, some of what makes journalistic education fail, and that is when it settles for being a bunch of hero-worshipping students fawning over a star writer's war stories. I remember the weakest student in my first Columbia class asking if he could skip a session so that he could hear a speech by David Halberstam. "If you go to hear Halberstam," I told him, "you'll never be Halberstam." The real David Halberstam took his first reporting job on a paper in West Point, Mississippi, with a circulation of four thousand. Now in his seventies, he still prides himself on conducting two full-length interviews a day, every day, when he is doing research for a book. As for my long-ago student, who blew off class for the speech, I can't say that I've ever seen his byline.

In a book like this one, of course, I cannot be your line-editor, though I hope that some of what I write may help teach you how better to edit yourself. There are other things, too, this book does not mean to be. It is not meant to be a textbook, or a history, or a work of media criticism, though elements of all those forms may appear from time to time. Nothing in a book, mine or anyone else's, can provide the specific, situational guidance a young journalist receives from a gifted editor. I was fortunate enough to cross the path of several, and I wish you the same luck and opportunity.

What, then, can I do for you? I hope I can teach you the way a journalist encounters the world—as reporter, as writer, as citizen. I hope I can instill you with certain habits of mind and inspire you to develop both a work ethic and a moral ethos. I have spent virtually my entire career in print journalism, but the things I can tell you about craft, integrity, intellectual curiosity, and concern with the human condition are every bit as applicable to someone working in radio, television, or online. And if I speak to you about painting or music or drama, and I'm certain that I will, then I want to introduce you to art that will elevate your cultural literacy and, if I may be so bold, enhance your life. The greatest journalists never settled for only reading or watching or listening to journalism; they looked for their models and catalysts in literature, film, jazz, every great art.

I envision you as the high-school and college journalists I once was, as the graduate students I now teach, as the young reporters I worked alongside on my first jobs. I remember the yearning, the ambition, the impatience, the hunger to improve. I am interested in excellence and I am only interested in teaching those who aspire to excellence. As I sometimes tell my students in moments of exasperation, "I take your work seriously. The question is whether you take your work seriously." I promise to pay you the compliment of high standards. I see myself as your elder, not your superior. My credibility comes less from my successes than from my failures. I have erred in every

way I will warn you about. As a minister of my acquaintance once told his congregation, “Church isn’t a museum of saints. It’s a hospital for sinners.”

So I welcome your company. I am flattered by your attention. In the end, I want you to believe, as I believe, that you have chosen a profession of consequence and value, a profession that requires no apology, a profession that can make you happy.

### Radical Tradition

I had no way of realizing it back then in the summer of 1975, but the newspaper culture I was entering was soon to pass away. Typewriters, glue pots, wire-service tickers, linotype operators, morgues with envelopes of clippings, afternoon newspapers—all must seem as foreign to you, as antediluvian, as The Front Page era was to me. As I drove my family back from a Thanksgiving dinner a few years ago, my son was nagging me to buy him some cutting-edge (and obscenely expensive) computer product. When I refused, he hissed, “You’re so old, your expiration date has passed.” My daughter enjoys tugging on the sagging flesh that has begun to bunch around my elbows. I have gray hair and bifocals. But as I type, I see my hands, lean and sinewy and threaded with veins, as if the very act of writing has kept them in fighting trim, no matter what else in me has aged.

So don’t expect me to concern myself much with what is trendy in journalism at this moment in time. I’ve lived through eight-track tapes, Beta recorders, and laser discs; I’ve heard how infidelity can keep a marriage lively and cocaine isn’t an addictive drug. Trendiness is overrated when it isn’t outright wrong. My concern is with tradition. I am the product of two institutions steeped in tradition, The New York Times and Columbia Journalism School. I don’t mean tradition as a set of rote reflexes, as formulas repeated ad infinitum, as a fig leaf for laziness. I mean tradition the way you hear it in a song by Muddy Waters or Hank Williams, not necessarily something ancient, but something venerable, something tested, something durable and true.

The value system that I have in mind—that a journalist is an honest broker of information, which has been assiduously reported, verified for accuracy, and written without bias or partisanship—is a product only of the past century, as Michael Schudson made clear in his indispensable history *Discovering the News*. American journalism actually began as an overtly politicized, highly opinionated enterprise, a low-tech version of today’s blogs and talk shows. It was a radical step for journalists of the early 1900s to actually conceive of their work as a public service, untainted by personal belief, rather than an act of advocacy. It was a radical step for them to believe

they could transcend their predispositions and bend their judgments to accommodate what they learned in the act of reporting.

By the time I started out in journalism, these doctrines had gone unquestioned for decades and were ripe for being challenged. My colleagues and I spent our official working hours in newsrooms that subscribed to the ideal of objectivity, then went home to read the magazines that were inventing the passionate, personal, and dissident New Journalism—Rolling Stone, the Village Voice, New York in its Clay Felker heyday. Our efforts felt pallid in comparison; we subscribed to the rules of attribution, interviewed people on both sides of issues, and tried to remember to get their middle initials. Sometimes it seemed that we didn't trust our readers to know anything without our informing them. On the Suburban Trib, the copy editors had a convention of inserting definitions of any terms thought to be specialized or obscure. Hitler, lest anyone be unclear, was a "notorious World War II dictator." Islam was a "religion practiced by Muslims."

These days, though, I find the tradition almost revolutionary, if only in contrast to the cynicism and venality all around. As the author (and Columbia dean) Nicholas Lemann has pointed out, opinion journalism occupies an ever larger share of the media landscape. Between blogs, talk-radio, and the intensely niched worlds of the Internet and cable television, nobody need ever encounter a fact or analysis to contradict the beliefs he or she already holds. I've heard of viewers who watched Fox News Channel so unceasingly that the network's logo was eventually burned into their television screens. Instead of the marketplace of ideas, we have ideological echo chambers, Rush Limbaugh for one crowd and Air America for another. The very concept of a journalism that honestly sifts and sorts through a day's events is the subject of ridicule from Left and Right alike. They jointly spout the same pejorative acronym—MSM—for the mainstream media. With its slogan "fair and balanced," Fox has managed to transform the cardinal virtues of our profession into a sneering joke.

My own bitter joke is that I remember when the New York Post published nonfiction. By that I mean that I remember it before it was bought by Rupert Murdoch. I'm not generally a believer in the Great Man Theory of History, but in Murdoch's case, his despotic genius has been to infect contemporary American journalism with some of its most pernicious diseases. He transformed the Post from a spunky and serious paper to a gossip-and-sensationalism rag, created the tawdry genre of tabloid television with the show *A Current Affair*, and bankrolled Fox News Channel, a political movement masquerading as a news organization. No individual bears more responsibility for degrading the profession I practice and adore, and I would feel no differently if Murdoch had been a

demagogue of the Left rather than the Right. There are certainly enough conspiracy theorists and professional scolds from that side of the spectrum.

I'm counting on you to join the battle. I realize you're too young to remember journalism being any other way than it is in its present affliction. Let me give you just one example of how it was, and of how it possibly could be again, at least in your hands. Radio and television stations used to be subject to a federal regulation known as the "fairness doctrine." It basically said that in exchange for free use of the public airwaves, the government required them to make a good-faith effort at political balance in their programming. The stations also were required to commit some portion of their broadcast day to public-service programming. Some of the results were pedantic; a few, I have to admit, were downright laughable. When I was out promoting my first two books, I often wound up taping public-affairs shows for rock-and-roll stations, which would broadcast them in some black hole like six on Sunday morning.

Still, whatever its flaws, the fairness doctrine and a whole journalistic sensibility it typified was far superior to what has replaced it. Since the doctrine was repealed by the Federal Communications Commission in 1987, and as the public-service requirement has gone largely unenforced amid a climate of deregulation, a sizable part of commercial radio has turned into Republican Party mobilization and indoctrination, with no pretense of alternative voices except for the token liberal cohost who functions as the resident punching bag. (And I have little doubt that many Democrats wish they could figure out the same formula.)

There is something daring, then, in believing, as I believe, that journalism must do more than pander to prejudices. There is something daring in letting your own attitudes and orthodoxies rub up against inconvenient realities. There is something daring in taking on a burden of expertise, proving by your own example that being a journalist means more than putting up a Web site and saying you are.

We'll talk more about these issues later on, I'm sure, but for now I just want to suggest to you that the tradition is worth mastering. I don't mean that every journalist should work only in the mainstream. In my own career, after all, I've written dozens of opinion essays and infused my books with a subjectivity that would have been anathema to the news columns of a daily paper. But I do mean that the tradition is the irreplaceable foundation; the tradition is the place to start. I think there's more to learn by looking out the window than by looking in the mirror, more to learn by listening to others than by talking to yourself. As one of my former colleagues at Columbia, a



famously curmudgeonly editor with a bullwhip on his office wall and the appropriate name of Dick Blood, used to tell his students, “It’s called reporting. You ought to try it sometime.”

### The Shape We’re In

I wish I could tell you that you’re entering a world that welcomes, respects, even reveres you. I wish I could tell you journalists are regarded as heroes, the way they were when I started college in 1973. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, Tom Wolfe, Seymour Hersh—they made reporting look not only courageous but cool. In my dorm, my friends and I battled to be the first to get to read each fresh edition of *New Times*, a magazine that broke the Karen Silkwood story, among many others. I didn’t know a single classmate who was majoring in business.

The other morning, just before I began writing to you, I was flipping through the *Times* when I came to the headline “Survey on News Media Finds Wide Displeasure.” The article reported the latest in a series of despairing studies of public attitudes toward the media. This one, conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, found that the bitter red-state/blue-state divide on political issues was carrying over into views of journalism as well. More than 40 percent of Republicans in the Pew survey said news organizations were hurting democracy, while 54 percent of Democrats said the media were too soft on President Bush.

These findings came only months after an even direr report, *Trends 2005*, also based on Pew polling. It found that nearly half the respondents said they “believe little or nothing” in their daily newspaper—a position held by only 16 percent in 1985. Public confidence in the press, which registered at about 85 percent in 1973, has slumped below 60 percent for the past decade. A majority of respondents think the press can’t even get the facts straight and is politically biased, besides.

Having entered journalism during the Nixon era, when many journalists landed on the official White House enemies’ list, I am accustomed to an adversarial relationship between government and media. It’s nothing new, either, for administrations to try to shape news in their favor. Before anyone had ever applied the word “spin” to media manipulation, Franklin D. Roosevelt was accused of it. John F. Kennedy interceded with journalist friends to kill impending articles on the Bay of Pigs invasion. Never before the Bush administration, however, have I experienced efforts by the government to actively subvert journalism itself—by paying off pseudo-journalists like Armstrong Williams to promote Bush policies in his syndicated column; by credentialing an impostor named Jeff Gannon with the White House press corps so he could lob softball questions during presidential news conferences; by inserting overseers in the public-television system and trying to do the same with public radio. A federal grand jury’s investigation

into leaks about the CIA led to the jailing of a New York Times reporter, Judith Miller, for refusing to identify anonymous sources, and, even more disturbingly, the capitulation of Time magazine to the demand that its reporter Matt Cooper testify before the jury.

Ultimately, Miller did testify with the consent of her source, vice-presidential aide Lewis Libby. Now that Libby has been indicted on perjury and other charges, his trial could very well include the spectacle of reporters taking the stand in the prosecution of a government source, a complete abrogation of their promise of confidentiality. These events add up to something different than the normal, healthy tension, the clash of legitimate interests, between Washington and the Fourth Estate. Long after anyone but trivia buffs can remember the names of the players, the climate of suspicion will be making your job all the more challenging.

We journalists, let's face it, have supplied plenty of reason for such pessimism. The shape we're in is at least partly a result of the state we're in. Dan Rather retired in disgrace from CBS after one of his 60 Minutes episodes—on George W. Bush's spotty record in the National Guard during the Vietnam War—was found to be based on a forged document. Newsweek retracted a report that American interrogators at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp had flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet to humiliate Muslim internees. That error, seized upon by the Bush administration, undermined much accurate reporting on abuses by U.S. interrogators. The past few years alone have seen high-profile plagiarism and fabrication cases such as those involving Jayson Blair and Michael Finkel of The New York Times, Jack Kelley of USA Today, Ruth Shalit and Stephen Glass of the New Republic, Mike Barnicle and Patricia Williams of the Boston Globe, and the freelancer David Brock.

While the news organizations involved have plunged into soul-searching about what went wrong, the perpetrators themselves have made transgression a terrific career move. When Janet Cooke of the Washington Post had her Pulitzer Prize revoked twenty-five years ago because she had invented the award-winning story of an eight-year-old heroin addict, she at least had the good grace to vanish from public view, winding up as a saleswoman in a shopping mall. Many of the next generation of plagiarizers and fabricators got six-figure book contracts. Glass was the subject of a feature film. Brock became a darling of the Left by disavowing his own right-wing attacks on Anita Hill and Bill Clinton. Personally, I can see a valid case for just cutting off their hands.

The public has its own role, though, in this pattern of degradation. From the widespread criticism of the media in those Pew surveys, you'd think that viewers and readers were just craving first-rate journalism, longing for it. You might want to read an article by Michael Winerip from The

New York Times Magazine entitled “Looking for an 11 O’Clock Fix,” or rent a documentary film by David Van Taylor, *Local News*. From Orlando (in Winerip’s case) and Charlotte (in Van Taylor’s), they tell the same essential story. One television station in a very competitive market decides to abandon the popular emphasis on crime—“If it bleeds, it leads,” as the TV-news aphorism goes—and give the public the kind of serious, nuanced, issue-oriented program the public always claims to want. In both cities, the experiment drives the audience away.

We live in a time when expertise is denigrated, when professionalism is considered suspect. Hardly anyone remembers that the term “bureaucrat” entered our lexicon as a compliment, indicating a civil servant who had been hired on the basis of merit rather than political connections. In writing a weekly column on education for the Times for the past several years, I have noticed that one of the leading qualifications to be a big-city school principal or superintendent is the absence of any classroom experience. So it doesn’t surprise me, and it shouldn’t surprise you, that a trained, practiced, professional media is pilloried as a distant, arrogant elite. When we are distant and arrogant, we surely deserve the barbs. When we are excellent at our work, qualitatively superior to the amateur or hobbyist, then our excellence requires no apology.

I’m not trying to scare you off. I hope you find the challenges inspiring. When I was your age, the cachet of journalism attracted plenty of poseurs. One thing you can say about the present unpopularity of journalism is that it drives out all the uncommitted. If you’re a true believer, if this is meant to be your life’s work, then nothing and nobody can change your mind. Even in a bleak period for journalism, you can find signs of vitality—the astounding growth of NPR; the development of Salon and Slate on the Internet; the transformation of USA Today from an object of ridicule to a serious, successful national paper; the opening of twenty-four-hour cable news operations in local as well as metropolitan markets.

So don’t think journalism is going away. Delivery systems may change from paper to computer, and reporters may be renamed “content providers.” Revered and beloved publications may perish while reality-TV series thrive. But intellectual curiosity, vigorous research, acute analysis, and elegant prose will never go out of style. If anything, the shorter the supply, the more those traits will be valued.

Several years ago, while writing a book about American Jewry, I came upon a famous essay reproaching Jews for their perpetual fear of extinction; it was wryly titled “The Ever-Dying People.” During my years as a Times reporter, I covered Broadway, which for decades thought itself so close to demise that it was nicknamed “The Fabulous Invalid.” One of the hit shows while I was on the

beat, “A Chorus Line,” has a piquant moment you might appreciate. A dancer named Bebe has just been cast for a show, and naturally enough she feels like celebrating. Yet all around her the rest of the chorus members are complaining—“no security in dancing,” “no promotion and advancement,” “no work anymore.” To which Bebe shoots back, “I don’t wanna hear about how Broadway’s dying. Because I just got here.”