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Part Two: Journalism as a Sharing of Stories

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Part Two: Journalism as a Sharing of Stories

Abstract

"Journalists are storytellers. And in the world God created, stories matter. Jesus spoke in parables more than sermons. He knew the best way to change behavior was through narrative not lecture."

Posting about a Christian perspective on journalism from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/part-two-journalism-as-a-sharing-of-stories/>

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in things

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Part Two: Journalism as a Sharing of Stories

Lee Pitts

In “Part One: Reforming Journalism,” I explained the connection between the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* to journalism writing. The focal point of Bruegel’s painting, as described in Part One, is the plowman and his horse. Tilling the land in the face of someone crashing into the sea is minute—perhaps as minute as focusing on who is dating whom in our celebrity culture.

Journalists should always strive to reframe the picture: putting what is important and impactful into the center of a community’s vision. They should fight for this no matter how many times they lose.

This does not mean focusing solely on the powerful and influential Icaruses while ignoring the powerless plowmen. Andy Crouch, in his book *Culture Making*, writes, “[W]hen God acts in culture, he uses both the powerful and the powerless alongside one another rather than using one against the other.”

So, to be culture chroniclers that build community, a journalist must notice people both high and low on the socio-economic ladder—giving voice to the voiceless as well as holding the powerful accountable. This way journalists can provide truly serviceable insight.

The craft of reporting has a Biblical foundation in Jesus’ ministry: reporters focus their notebooks, cameras, and microphones on the least of these, discovering what is going on at the ground floor of life.

In fact, the Bible as a whole shows God's persistent concern for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. According to Crouch, these groups together "form a kind of triptych of powerlessness."

Crouch explains that many cultures emphasize the "godlike heroes and founders and rulers." In contrast, the God of Israel remains "concerned with those who seem least culturally important, who have the least to recommend themselves as potential culture makers." Journalists should have this same preoccupation.

A recent student who came to Dordt through the World Journalism Institute understood this. She was born in Morocco to an uneducated family. Her parents died while she was young, forcing her to be shuttled from one household to another. She grew up isolated, feeling like a useless child. When she was eight-years-old an untreated infection left her blind in one eye. At 17, her uncle's wife threw a knife into her one good eye, totally blinding her.

"I was left in the hospital surrounded by loneliness, darkness, and fears of the unknown world I was about to face," she said. "No one helped me."

She started listening to news on the radio. She began to believe that "had a journalist made my story known, my life could have been different." In other words, like the painting, no one noticed her.

Rather than becoming stuck in self-pity, she felt that she could become a voice to other voiceless people and pursued the training for a career in journalism.

In addition to giving voice to the voiceless, journalists have an opportunity to focus on topics like forgiveness and justice and peace in a broken world. That is part of using the journalism profession to be what Quentin Schultze in *Communicating for Life* calls caretakers of creation. Life-giving stewards who can bring healing to individuals and culture. Reporters might not be the ones who directly bring the healing, but their stories can move individuals in a community to act.

That is how a journalist can do his or her part to transform culture. For journalism programs to grow and thrive in Christian colleges, it is imperative to get parents and prospective students to see that reporters can be such stewards. That journalism can be a worthy calling for Christians.

In fact, Micah 6:8 should be a life verse for any journalist who is a Christian. That verse implores us "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Acting justly and loving mercy means journalists ought to focus their notebooks and cameras and microphones on the least of these while holding the powerful accountable. They should report as Jesus would report, being gentle with the broken and the outsiders while being strong towards the powerful and the rich.

Being less self-absorbed and more attentive opens up a lot of reporting doors for both the powerful and the poor. Even the powerful yearn for someone to listen truly to them. That does not happen enough in a world where self-righteous arguments and put downs reign on places like Twitter.

Truly listening is a way reporters can show generosity to their subjects. Journalists can see the stories that they write as little prayers about their neighbors and their community.

Journalists should talk more about the importance of presence and personhood. Reporters need to get out into the field and be with their subjects. You cannot be a great journalist working from the newsroom. In fact, the newsroom is a misnomer—the last place you find news is in a newsroom. Journalists cannot forget the humanity of their subjects.

This became clear to me while covering the aftermath of firefights in Iraq. After seeing some of their friends killed in action, soldiers at the base I operated from often flinched when approached by reporters. They would refuse to talk whenever reporters thrust microphones and digital recorders in their faces. I always made sure to approach them human to human first, not bringing my recorder or notebook with me and offering condolences as a Christian for their loss.

In their own time, these surviving soldiers often granted me lengthy interviews about their experiences. I am convinced they felt comfortable talking to me because I recognized their humanity first. I treated them as persons created in God's image and not as mere subjects for my assignment.

Journalists are storytellers. And in the world God created, stories matter. Jesus spoke in parables more than sermons. He knew the best way to change behavior was through narrative not lecture.

The United States has seen a 25 percent increase in suicides since 1999, according to a June 2018 study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Journalists can play a role in cutting through current high levels of depression by fostering community connections through their stories: by placing humanity back into humans, by using reported pieces to build community, and by cutting through the anxieties of

disconnection. Today's social media superhighway can dump a lot of information on a reader, but does it provide wisdom? Does it stir empathy?

Telling stories can bring *shalom* to people striving to survive in a broken world. I saw that firsthand on many of the stories I covered: a family who watched a team of doctors fight to keep alive a baby born at just twenty weeks; a twenty-something soldier fighting to regain a normal life after losing both his legs in a landmine explosion in Afghanistan; a wife and a father putting the pieces of their own lives back together after a suicide; and World War II D-Day veterans still working, 70 years later, to make sure they lived lives worthy of being spared that day in early June.

In all of these stories and more, I witnessed how the reporting of them played a role in helping the subjects process and heal. Meanwhile, the writing of them helped hundreds—if not thousands of readers—who were going through similar challenges.

Stories matter. Stories can be a form of ministry. It is a journalist's way to help dress and keep the garden.

Ultimately, our stories as Christian journalists can help people to take notice of the plights of today's Icaruses, to take notice despite a world where the web has become a technology of distraction and forgetfulness. A challenge to be sure—but a worthy one for our nation's democracy and our faith's flourishing. Our own humanity may be at stake when it comes to developing our ability to take notice.

To those students who feel called to use their gifts to notice others I ask, what stories will you tell?