Chapter 8

View from the Desk

The Reporter as Participant-Observer

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For two decades, it has been my regular challenge and joy to produce sound-rich, human-interest radio features that explore religious and spiritual experience within complex cultures. Reporting has taken me to South Africa, the United Kingdom and Ireland, the Middle East, South Asia, and into other foreign cultures. More often, the religion beat meant covering the spiritual experience within American borders — from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, for example, to the southern Appalachian Mountains, South Central Los Angeles, and New York City, where I live.

More than a pervasive social force, religion and spirituality are the expression of seemingly hardwired inner needs and, as such, affect practically every facet of human existence. They can provide guidelines for seemingly pedestrian matters such as daily diet and provoke the most exalted cultural and ethical achievements; they are used to inspire and justify almost every kind of human behavior. As a result, religion reporting offers an endlessly deep trove for a curious reporter.

Conducting research and interviews where inner experience is the primary subject matter requires a deeper level of empathy and responsiveness on the reporter's part than is usually necessary with stories where objective "facts" drive the story. Also, writing stories about people and ideas within spiritual and cultural traditions that differ markedly from one's own requires a

willingness to "cross over" to other perspectives in order, first, to understand them, and then to put them in context for the reader or listener, who, hopefully can connect those perspectives and insights to their own worlds. In that sense, a good religion reporter must be both participant and observer. Even more, he must be willing to have his worldview altered, suspended, or even changed by encountering other viewpoints.

Religion reporting differs both in subject matter and approach from most mainstream religion reporting in several ways. Most religion reporting is news, and as such, it is primarily concerned with events, especially their "who, what, where, when" aspects. Features reporting should focus particularly on the "how and why." And questions of how and why, of course, are also fundamental to the religious and spiritual life.

Event-based mainstream religious reporting is often a subcategory of political reporting that tends to focus on certain kinds of stories: Ideological and doctrinal conflicts among or within religious or faith-based groups; political or cultural developments that affect the way religions are practiced or suppressed; the fallout when the ideals of a religion or tradition have been violated by its caretakers or leaders; economic and territorial stories where religious people are the primary actors or where religion is linked to a specific ethnic group in conflict.

Mainstream religion reporting tends to cover such stories from a news perspective. It describes how the pieces on the board originally looked, and how they are being, and may yet be, "shifted around." This kind of religion reporting is less interesting to me than the experience of religion and spiritual matters and the underlying drives they embody and express.

The broad issues that religions raise and attempt to explain are equally fascinating: issues of meaning, purpose, and connection, of ethical and moral coherence. It is my personal belief that these concerns and goals are as basic to human nature as the drive for power, status, and

material goods, and that the quest for them helps to determine the shape of a culture. Because the need for these sorts of meaning are hard-wired, they are as important to my listeners as they are to me (even if, like me, they are essentially secular in their day-to-day lives). This is true regardless of the cultural context.

For example, in the early 1990s, I spent about six weeks traveling down back roads in the West of Ireland, where Gaelic is still an everyday language, in search of remnants of the old pre-Christian fairy beliefs and folkways. I spoke with old people and children, often in cottages without electricity, who said they had either seen leprechauns or fairies, or heard the wail of the "ban shee" (a female death spirit) or knew someone who had. Now, most people are familiar with similar ideas from childhood bedtime stories, and the imaginative worlds of play. That's how they can have experience relating to these stories. Most dismiss them as fantasy when they grow up.

However, sophisticated and distinctly "spiritual" attitudes had developed from continued belief in the "Other Side" among some adults in the West of Ireland, including a conviction that every thing in nature has its own spirit, purpose, and personality, which can interact with and affect the fortunes of humans for better or worse — depending on how it is treated. From this develops an ethic of respect and stewardship for the land and its power to bless or curse, and a sense of continuity between nature and the human world. By highlighting these values, a reporter can help make a bridge between the values of a folk religion and the values of a more modern ecologically based perspective.

In Ireland, evidence of belief in what some rural people call the "Other Side" is hardly ever as overt and obvious as, say, belief in Catholicism, which is apparent in every village from the many churches. Some people are even embarrassed to admit a faith in the old stories, or

remember a time when they were punished or ostracized for practicing the old folkways. So to find my interview subjects, I'd simply take long walks, or hang out in small country pubs, and get the conversation around to the old ways, then gently inquire as to who in the area might still know or remember them. For these stories (and many others), I always sought out the old and wise members of the community. When I'd get to their homes, I would be straightforward about my ignorance, and express my questions in an open and honest way; my sincerity, curiosity and respect would come through to them. I was not afraid to be emotional. Once people had a sense that my "heart was in the right place," they would usually open up and I gathered some of the best interviews (and experiences) of my life. This is very different from political reporting, in which the people being interviewed are often accustomed to speaking about their views and eager to put them forth publicly.

Religion and the stories that are the expression of religious belief often translate themselves into political passions, even violence. For example, reporters often refer to the conflict between Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews as a "religious" one, and leave it at that. Typically, they then proceed to report body counts and reprisals, domestic politics, negotiations and the "peace process." When I lived in Jerusalem, I was determined to take the religious dimension of the conflict seriously in its own right. Using the violence at the Al Aqsa Mosque / Temple Mount as my point of departure, I set out to ask religious scholars from each tradition to cite, and then to explain, the actual scriptural sources (for the Muslims within the Koran and for the Jews within the Torah) underlying their group's assertion that they alone were the inheritor's of God's promise to give the land of Israel / Palestine to their group.

How the teachings in sacred texts are transmitted to ordinary citizens who support and wage their conflicts based on literal scriptural interpretations is a fascinating cultural study in

itself. However, it is a fact that religious Jews and Muslims agree that both peoples claim common descent from Abraham (traditionally considered the first monotheist), yet vehemently disagree as to which of his sons, Isaac (from whom Jews claim direct descent) or Ishmael (from whom Arab Muslims claim descent) received Abraham's divine inheritance to the land. I believe that, without this background, anyone wishing to understand the present day conflict — either its apparent intractability or its potential for "internecine" reconciliation — is at a crippling loss.

As a responsible journalist, I try to take an evenhanded approach that will make my role as an observer authentic and meaningful. But, like any journalist — especially a features journalist — I am a storyteller, and attempt to bring a measure of wit and artfulness to my work in ways that will engage not just the mind, but the imagination, of my listeners. The religion reporter is at a special advantage on this score exactly because the essence of a religion is almost always conveyed to believers in the form of stories and myths.

Indeed, because religious narratives are constructed to talk about origins, distant history, and the future, and purport to explain the unseen world, or relate transcendent truths, there must be a "once-upon-a-time" quality to the way faiths frame their imagination of their identity. A religion reporter can make excellent use of such religious narrative, while remaining completely faithful to the sense of the religion's self-expressed purpose. Because everyone has the ability to suspend disbelief and listen to a story and be absorbed "as if" a story were true (even jokes make constant use of and depend on this faculty), stories from even the most exotic worldviews can resonate with listeners who have very different religious or spiritual paths, or who have no spiritual path, or who are simply curious about how others understand the world – which is, after all, fundamentally the same world that they inhabit, too.

A religion reporter who casts himself in the ethnographic mode, in a dual role of participant and observer, is different from a reporter who is trying to investigate possible wrongdoing within a faith tradition, or even a philosopher or theologian who wants to arrive at some ultimate "answer," or to be skeptical or critical regarding the credibility of a religious worldview or set of claims. The primary raw material for my sort of journalism is the lived faith experience itself.

This can be a complex balancing act. On the one hand, the features journalist is somewhat relieved of the burden of "objectivity." There must be a willingness on the part of the journalist – and by extension, the listener – to "go along" with the storyteller because the focus in religious and mythic stories is inner experience or social realities based on inner needs, not objective facts. This is not exactly the same as suspending one's disbelief. On the other hand, it is inappropriate for the journalist to advocate any religious position, and the conscientious reporter works hard to avoid even the appearance of proselytizing, or reading into the story for purposes other than the telling. Perhaps what I do is more akin to entering the world of art, or even fine entertainment, where the canvas is the human heart.

Sometimes, religious stories from other cultures can seem quite strange indeed, but they can be a vital part of the deep background a reporter must have in order to understand a story. For example, in 1996, I spent some time among the Zulus of South Africa, a highly traditional herding people whose ancient and richly differentiated cosmology includes a belief that the stars we see from below are actually scuff marks left by celestial cattle as they roam above the skies in a supernal light. Now, I wasn't doing a story on Zulu religion per se; I was the originator and lead producer of a Carnegie Corporation sponsored project that explored conflict resolution and the psychological roots of violence and peacemaking. My special interest in South Africa was

the post-Apartheid "truth and reconciliation" process that had been designed to incorporate, among other views, both white European-based concepts of justice and punishment and African-based traditions that hold that only by a full airing of grievances before one's entire community—and especially those one has wronged—can forgiveness and healing occur. These were deep issues. But it was impossible to get a feeling for the actual emotional and psychological context for the positions and attitudes of many parties and stakeholders, unless I became familiar with their spiritual beliefs and stories, and their bearing on South African politics at the time, and the overall nation-building process.

While relating people's sacred stories is a powerful tool in helping the listener to understand a culture "from the inside," so are sacred music and liturgical texts or chants. They allow a mood to be created for the listener in keeping with the non-rational dimension of the spiritual life. Hearing sacred music tells a listener a lot that words cannot say. Simply put: if the heart is open (by music or whatever means), the information will enter more easily.

I like the phrase "Nothing human is foreign to me" and try to remember it in the field. Without wishing to sound grandiose, I take it to mean that for <u>both</u> better and worse, I embody within myself the common heritage of all of humanity, and share equally in its potential to create both light and shadow. I integrate this knowledge into my approach to my work as a religion reporter. I must do so because, <u>nothing human is foreign to the listener either</u>, and I take it as given that what moves me and what is meaningful in the lives of one group of people, will probably, if sensitively and artfully presented – move others.

Identifying with others is a common theme in my stories, which are written for an extremely diverse international audience. The reports are constructed in ways that will invite the listeners to find common ground with others unlike themselves by identifying with the way the

same human longings and yearnings they are hearing about are felt and expressed within their own cultures. Indeed by enlarging their understanding of others, and by connecting human interests, listeners enrich their understanding of their own cultures and humanity, and may even broaden their sense of group identity to include the other, the erstwhile stranger.

One way I have done this is to link secular or civic holidays with an underlying spiritual impulse that finds expression in a variety of seemingly unconnected religions. Last year, when the annual call to reporters went out for Thanksgiving stories, and not wishing to do another soup kitchen or "Norman Rockwell style" Americana story, I took a moment to think somewhat "outside the box," and began to reflect on what gratitude and the giving of thanks (the ostensible reasons for the holiday) "really" are. It occurred to me that while the Puritan Pilgrims were Christian, every other religion and spiritual tradition also posits gratitude as a spiritual value, and says, in some way, that to give thanks for a good received is in turn good for you. So I spoke to articulate leaders from four major faiths (Jewish, Sufi Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist) and asked them to tell me what their respective traditions had to say about gratitude and thanks-giving and why.

An opposite tack in pursuing a religion story is sometimes the better approach. Instead of finding the unifying thread in several religions, I focus on a particular religious or spiritual tradition as a singular response to fairly disparate experiences (without, of course, advocating the truth or debating the actual merits of a specific path). For example, in a feature about a co-ed Zen Buddhist monastery for Americans in New York, I would not attempt to investigate the truth or falsehood of Buddhist doctrines concerning suffering, or the path to "liberation," or even the spiritual advisability of meditation in a life well-lived. Rather, I'd want to get a sense of the range of the experiences and conditions that have led many different sorts of Americans to take

an active interest in a Buddhist path. Such people might include a Wall Street lawyer who wants to escape his high stress lifestyle; a young person in a crisis of faith who seeks an alternative to the restrictive fundamentalist Christian beliefs in which she had been raised; or an Asian American raised as a Buddhist who desires an Americanized (non-ritualistic, non-hierarchical) version of the religion she was born to. Most importantly, personal interviews provide the core of the stories where religion is concerned.

The responsible religion reporter must also know when to stand back, to offer historical context and provide balance and perspective, even non-patronizing skepticism. Yet the interview itself is not the time for critical detachment. That comes later, in the writing and production process. The interviews themselves should be true dialogs, where it is easy (perhaps even advisable) to "forget" that one of you is a "journalist" and the other is a "source." That is, a reporter must be willing to "show up" as a human being and, even further, to be moved, or even changed, by the interview. This process is one of the most rewarding aspects of the work.

I am interested in wisdom, and love to ask people — anyone! — how they think and feel about the ultimate issues and values in their lives and the various challenges they encounter. Whether I am asking the Dalai Lama to explain the spiritual basis for his advocacy of non-violence as a strategy for dealing with the Chinese, or a suburban witch is telling me over tea how feminism, the reverence for nature, and the pull of the erotic join together in her spiritual beliefs and practices, I feel fascinated and, frankly, privileged to be there.

Now, just as there is a political dimension to almost any story that deals with organized religion, there is a potential spiritual dimension to most of the seemingly everyday stories one hears. For example, the love of sports can be viewed "under the skin" as a desire for transcendence, or fraternity, or connection to a greater whole. News of airplane crashes and

earthquakes touch the fear of death and the fundamental insecurity of health and life, and their transience. Politics itself — especially national and international politics — often touches the sphere that is the traditional province of religion through symbolism, civic ritual, and the leader and warrior "archetypes."

Our public life becomes a stage where we can see the constant creative tension between good and evil, order and change, the individual and the greater whole, played out. All this is the stuff of good drama. At its best, religion reporting can help expose the deeper themes inherent in these public dramas — the "wiring under the boards" as it were. Features reporting is sometimes dismissed as "soft" or "fluff" by hard news people, but to my mind a good case can be made that these murky yet powerful psychic tendencies are the real story. World War II, for example, was more than a series of battle reports and news reports. Fundamental forces were at work and such forces are what religion and religious discourse are about.

Some stories are so powerful that the spiritual and the political dimensions of a story seem to give rise to each other seamlessly. September 11th 2001 was such a story. As soon as the planes hit, I was ordered to leave Washington and head for New York, my old hometown, and report on the human dimension of the aftermath.

In the following days, this human dimension was the real story, it seemed to me – from the hush and grief that pervaded the city – the stunned and sacred sense that surrounded Ground Zero itself, to the compassion for the victims and their families and the heightened sense of value, mutual protectiveness and support everyday New Yorkers extended to each other – to the makeshift "people's altars" of flowers and candles, impromptu poetry, the photographs of the missing that seemed to exalt ordinary people to the level of near-sainthood – where their very ordinariness became something to be valued and cherished in itself – all this afforded me an

incredible wealth of stories to an observer who was seeking out the human truth underneath the headlines. But it was my role as a participant – an average New Yorker who suddenly experienced the woundedness of the city he was raised in and loved up close – that led me to the very people I needed to interview, and which provided the rapport which helped them open up to me and share their stories and travails. The ways that my own perspective and experiences became entangled with theirs was a near constant *leitmotif* in the stories I filed during the early aftermath of September 11th.

Now, because of the scale of that event, and even more so because of the scale of the reaction, the deep underlying connections between New Yorkers (and, in widening circles, between Americans and even world citizens) were writ large; ordinary time and routine were suspended (a significant universal component of all religious ritual), the cultural veneer was somewhat stripped away, and the ancient underlying universal processes of grief, anger, compassion, heroism, the externalization of a common enemy – were all inspired by the event. Precisely because it cut so deep and across so many separate lines of affiliation, the September 11th "story" entered realms which normally are the province of religion. So at least at first, before the sacred hush morphed (as it had to) into a political tangle – the nationalistic outrage and the calls for war, and later, the controversy over what to build on Ground Zero, and what sort of memorial there should be, etc. – we were dealing with a spiritual event and I reported it as such. Maybe it's no coincidence that the largest story in our nation's recent memory was also the one that linked spiritual ideas to the news because the fundamental, underlying story – the one that has endured, not just as a continuing human-interest saga but also a political one – was and is taking place in the lives of people, and not just in their outward economic and political

personas, but in their inner core as well. And for many, that inner core is also a place of the spirit.