

SHARED LEADERSHIP

STORIES FROM WHICH TO LEARN

GOD AND THE NEWS EDITORS

MICHAEL MARLOWE

GOD AND THE NEWS EDITORS

MICHAEL MARLOWE

God and the News Editors

Opening –

God: I'd like to have a meeting with people who create the news, the leaders of the newspapers, magazines, television shows.

Intermediary: They are going to want to know why?

God: I'm curious. Tell them I'm curious.

Intermediary: I spoke with them. They are very suspicious. They get the sense they've done something wrong or that something is wrong.

God: Smiling, we get that a lot, don't we; every time I initiate a meeting. It's different when they ask for me to show up.

Intermediary: They'd like an agenda or a list of questions you plan to ask so they could prepare ahead of time.

God: A list of questions! Tell them, tell them I want to know 'how they create the news?'

Intermediary: Just one question?

God: Yes that's enough to get us going. — Best to keep it simple.

The Meeting

Tom: How should we address you?

God Well, let's try Bob if you like the masculine or Sas if you like the feminine.

Tom: Well then Bob, aren't you all knowing, and if so, why do you want to ask us questions you already have the answers to?

Bob: Well Tom, that's a good question. Yes, I am all knowing and I could/do know the answers to my own questions. It's a big place out there, there's a lot to know. I've found that being all knowing doesn't work as well as listening and hearing it first hand. Your in the news business Tom, you like first hand accounts, eye-witnesses, reporters on the scene.

Martha: Sas, who are you exactly? How do we know your God?

Sas: Another good question. I don't think you can know if I am God. You could learn over time about a me and my nature and then come to some conclusions.

Martha: So, are you saying you're not God?

Sas: Tricky question. I can see you were a good reporter. Let me give you a tricky answer. Suppose I not only said I was God, I also demonstrated it. And suppose what I demonstrated that I was/am Zeus, the Greek God, not the Christians god or the Muslims god or the Jewish god or the Hindu god and so on. What would your reactions be? So, for the moment let's say I'm Zeus. The Greeks were pretty smart and they got it right.

Martha: So, who are those other "gods" then? Are you not them and one in the same, reflections of the same being?

Bob: (Nodding) Good question. Simple answer, yes and no. Yes most of them, not all. Some I never met. I can say whatever I want here to you all. One thing I've learned is keep it simple. People want to over interpret everything, so I've learned to not say a lot. Somehow it doesn't always get reported accurately (joke).

Stephen: So, what are we doing here? What are you doing here?

Bob: Well, as the invitation stated, I'm here to learn, to ask some questions, and understand from you how the news business works.

Sas: Mind if I read your mind a bit? I think there is another question. You really wondering if I'm here for some kind of judgment?

Stephen: Well.. (Stuttering a bit) are you?

Sas: Absolutely not! I have a secret to tell you, not many people know this about me I don't judge.. There is no Judgment Day. That's actually something you made up. The reason I know this is because I do not judge. That's an invention you came up with along the way. It's a habit you seem very attracted to, though I cannot quite figure out why. Mostly it seems to get you in a lot of trouble. It is quite burdensome to go around judging people all the time. Besides, you know that.. as reporters you value objectivity not judging/evaluating what you are reporting. It just is not in my nature to judge

Dave: Well we've talked among ourselves and I think I can say for most of us (as Spokesperson) with a few exceptions, that we do not create the news, we just report it. People create the news, they take the actions and we cover the actions. We try to be objective and some of us do have a slant more liberal, more conservative, but, for the most part, it's good objective journalism.

Bob: So, you're saying you don't create the news?
That is your answer to my question, you
don't create the news?

Dave: Well, yes.

Bob: Well, I guess we are done here.
(Murmur through the audience)

Violet: Sas -- excuse me, what you mean we are
done here?

Sas:: Well, I came to talk to and learn from the
people who create the news, your telling me
you are not those people, that seems very
straight forward. So I made a mistake and I
need to go talk to the people who create the
news. So, if you'll excuse me... (God gets up
to leave).

Susan: Wait. What did you mean by your question,
create the news?

Sas: Well, what did you think I meant Susan? You
all spoke together, or most of you did, so you
must have known what the question means?
You gave me an answer.

Susan:: Well, we don't make the wars or the
catastrophes of nature, or the suicide
bombers, or the scandals, or the political
stories, or accidents; we just report the
stories, the news-worthy stories.

- Mark: Uh, Bob, Mark here. I agree with Dave, we don't create the news. Some of us do investigative reporting; we make discoveries of things that have already happened that are being kept secret. People have already committed the acts.
- Bob: It seems as if most of the news is about bad people who have done bad things, bad things that happen to good people, people breaking laws, people hurting one another, wars, conflict, violence. So, who decides to put on these stories? Oh, sex, and stories about wealthy people. They seem to be picked a lot too. So who decides?
- Kevin: This is what people want to see and hear about.
- Mark: Everything is about ratings so we pay close attention to what people watch. We do extensive market research; we listen to our viewers. That's the way to have the best ratings.
- Bob: So the people that watch your TV shows and read your newspapers tell you that they want to know about war, murder, rape, stealing?
- Mark: Basically, yes.
- Bob: So, how did this happen? When did everyone get so interested in people doing harm

to themselves, to each other, and in harm happening to people?

Susan: Well, we all run human interest stories of people who are doing positive things.

Dave: Yes, we do that all the time or we turn the spotlight on something that needs saving or try to reverse someone being treated unfairly.

Susan: Besides, there are many specials on good people doing good things – helping one another. We just don't put these stories on the evening news.

Sas: So I guess there are many positive, uplifting, inspirational stories that are just not “news worthy”?

Dave: We put on the air what people want to see on the news.

Carey: Well, to be more precise, we put what the people who watch the news want to see, said a woman from the back of the room.

Dave: Excuse me –

Carey: I said we put what the people who watch the news want to see. Statistically, we are not very good at attracting new watchers so we are very concerned about losing people, so we give them what they want.

- Lena: I disagree, we put the important news on, whether the story is popular or not, we do not run our news by opinion polls.
- Dave: Well, your advertising department might disagree. The larger the numbers the better the ratings the more you can charge for ads. After all, we are all running a business, not providing a public service free of charge, completely independent.
- Lena: The accounting department does not dictate what we place on the news, it might at your station.
- Ed: If that's true, why have you replaced one-third of your news team in the last years including the anchor person?
- Lena: The only thing your station is interested in is sensationalism. Half the stories you run are twisted facts designed to pull people in, your not better than the garbage reading at the checkout stands in the supermarket.
- Ed: Well, at least I'm honest, I know who we are, what we do, and why we do it. You are just pretending to be something you are not.
- Bob: I enjoy diversity of opinion. It's good to hear more voices in the conversation. Typically, conversations work better and are much more interesting when there is listening

and the intent to learn. Most arguments, someone wants to win.

Bob: So, I'm curious Edward, what are your questions?

Ed: Excuse me, I'm sorry, I don't think I understand what you are asking.

Bob: I'm asking you, what are your questions?

Ed: You mean to make decisions? Decide what I put on the news?

Bob: Yes, that would be a good place to start.

Tim: His biggest question is, Am I going to get fired? (laughter; Ed glares)

Ed: I'm running a business. So my question is, will this make us more money. Not so much with the main news item, with the discretionary stories or what we give more time too, more money, more viewers, better advertising.

Bob: And who is the "us"?

Ed: The "us?" I'm not sure I understand.

Bob: Well, you said your question is "will this make us more money". I understand who the "us" is.

Ed: The station, the business I guess. The company that owns us.

- Bob: And who benefits by making more money?
Who benefits?
- Ed: Well, we all do. The station does well, we get a bigger budget. Bigger budget mean more opportunity to do the stories we want, invest in better equipment, more advertising about our shows and the stories, more people to watch. It's a whole system. Have a war chest for when we need it.
- Bob: So then, do the people who own the company make more money when the company makes more money?
- Ed: I suppose so, sure, in theory. The station does better we all get our bonuses, there's more money. What's left pays bills, gets reinvested; makes up for the parts of the business that aren't doing so well. If all the parts do well enough or if one is a shining star, then the people on Wall Street like us.—the analysts, the bankers. We get a better rating and the banks let us borrow money cheaper. I'm not sure what your fishing for, you see something wrong here? If you do, just say it.
- Bob: No, I'm not fishing, and as I mentioned before, I know it's hard to believe since the practice is so common, I'm not judging you.

Ed: Good, because I'm telling the truth. I don't know how to say this any simpler; everybody want to be a winner.

Bob: Simple is good.

Ed: Everybody wants to be a winner. This is a fickle business; one day you're a darling, you can do no wrong. The next day (if your not producing) you are nothing; no one's job is protected.

Bob: Including you?

Ed: Yes, especially me.

Tim: Golden Parachute:

Ed: Yes I have one and so does everyone else in this room! So, to some degree I am protected. Look, you only get to fail once or twice and then words get out about you are your finished in the business.

Bob: So, when you say "us" it includes you?

Ed: Yes, of course. It also includes others.

Bob: So, another of your questions might be, "How does this benefit me and some others?"

Ed: Sure, absolutely. If people are honest that's probably one question everyone has, will it help me or hurt me.

Lena: My question is, “Does it wake them up?” I am always looking for the story that wakes people up. The story that grabs them and afterwards they want to do something different. You see, I have this theory that most of the people are asleep. Some are awake as far as their immediate family and even then they frequently miss the warning signs. The many stories we do run about teenagers these days – drugs, murder, going ballistic at school have a lot in common. The story is the same when we interview people, maybe in hindsight a few recognize the warning signals; most did not see it coming at all. And that’s not because the kids was good at hiding. It’s all there, just below the surface. So, I want the story that wakes them up; gets them to think, wow that could be me.

Sas: So, you are on a mission? The wake them up mission?

Lena: Yes, I guess. I never thought about it as a mission.

Sas: Sounds like a mission to me.

Lena: My parents are both, I guess would call them activists. My mother is never without one. She is always reading, always doing. Every

time I talk with her she has a new cause. Last week it was an endangered species of turtle. This week the importance of colonoscopy. For last year over-chlorinating water, and animal shelter euthanasia, overcrowded prisons... you get the picture.

Sas: Any your father Lena?

Lena: Well, Dad is retired. He says my mother has enough social change energy for both of them. My father was involved for many years in international affairs; worked for a think tank, consulted on global economy and then he worked for the United Nations for ten years before he retired. He said he liked "lost causes." What most people really didn't realize about my father was that he was a magician. He was fascinated with magic and was always performing and practicing new tricks. He said it helped him with his work; allowed it to distract just enough to build some trust. I guess I took my question from him. He was always challenging me to understand the magic, how the trick was done and how the audience was confounded by the magic. "See both Lena, the trick and the movement" he would say, "most people are asleep, that's why magic is so easy."

Sas: So he liked to use that people are sleep to

do his magic and you like to wake them up with your news stories.

And what do you hope will happen if you are successful, if you wake them up?

Lena: I hope they will do the right thing.

Sas: Right thing?

Lena: Get involved, ask questions, volunteer, become outraged, demand change or focus on issues by the leaders, be a player rather than an observer. Mostly I want them to think beyond their own little world that they've made and connect to many people, rather than act as if they are alone, self-sufficient in their own world. They don't see connections.

David: Brava Lena, brava, great speech, I'm moved. True journalism with a bit of soap box mixed in. The days of wake them up journalism are dead in the news business. Ethics are in, but journalism, getting people to think, let alone be motivated to act is out. What's in, what's in... is entertainment and byte size junks — less speaking, more video. The sexier the video, the more graphic the footage, that's what people want. They want a movie star personality or a few want Walter Cronkite reincarnated. The problem is we don't

broadcast in black and white anymore and Walter would have looked dreadful in high definition.

You know what people want, what they like? Sensational stories, sex, murder, revenge, robbery, they are bored with war. They love the ticker tape at the bottom of the screen for basic info; that is, non-sensational stories.

So, my question is, how do I keep them entertained and tuned in? If they are entertained, then I believe they will stay tuned in.

Bob: So, you are in the entertainment business?

David: Yes, make them smile, make them weep, keep them guessing, waiting for part 2. The four letter word for me is “bore” with a “d”. Ask my people, I say all the time, ‘this is boring, boring with a capital B.”

Mallory: Yes, I’m Tom Mallory, though everyone calls me Mallory. I’ve been thinking and feeling a bit different than the others. Maybe because I’m one of the few people that saw Walter Cronkite do the news. My question is, are we being honest?

Bob: What does honest mean to you Thomas?

Mallory: Honest means are we objective, no spin, no

guiding and directing. This doesn't mean neutral, bland, no feeling. There is room for a reporter to state his or her feelings as they are reporting, After all it's part of the story. Your opinions are for the editorials. Keep your opinion out of the story, keep your feelings about what you are seeing and hearing in, just don't try to get people to feel the way you do.

Honesty is two or three sources agreeing on an investigative piece.

It means all sides of the story reported as they told it be us.

Bob: And this is what people want?

Mallory: Yes, I think so — deep down. We believe people want to make their own opinions, come to their own conclusions, not be spoon fed or directed or worse — manipulated.

Bob: You are passionate about this?

Mallory: Yes, I'm not saying everyone should think the way I do, I just happen to believe I'm right, nah, just kidding. (Mallory sits down).

Bob: Thomas, another question if you don't mind.

Mallory: Yes?

Bob: How are your ratings?

Mallory: Well, we are middle of the pack, third or fourth. I believe that we have the highest loyalty rating, meaning our viewers always watch us, never switch networks for the news.

I don't think you can keep/hold on to an audience; you craft an invitation, stay consistent with it and people will come and then remain with you.

Bob: And where do you think your questions come from Thomas?

Mallory: Well, I'm old school, old age, not like these younger executives here. A couple of professors really drilled "objectivity" in news reporting into me. There was one old reporter when I first started in the business, Jack Burkner. He used to say to me, "Tommy, make 'em learn, give them the facts, maybe an unanswered question or two, if they are learning then you got them hooked. They'll come back the next day and the day after, and if you help them learn enough, they'll be forgiving when you make a mistake." He used to say, 'People are the happiest when they are learning.'

Bob: Thank you. Are there any more other questions? Maybe something different?

Susan: Well, my questions are a bit simpler and more concrete than some of the ones I've heard so far, I wrote a few of them down. Do we have the right mix? Did we check the facts? How are we delivering the story?

Sas: What does mix mean Susan?

Susan: I thought you might ask that, it actually means quite a few things. Mostly it focuses on diversity and flexibility. Do we have the right mix of stories? The right balance for the good, bad, lights, dark, fun, and sexy. The mood of your audience changes so you need to switch the mix and pay attention to the seasons, adjust. We are not driven by the audience, we try to stay one step ahead. It means the personality of the people delivering the news, behind the desk and out in the field. Again, balance, the right mix, older, younger, pretty, beautiful, average, handsome, forceful, find the girl next door, race, sex, age... the right mix. Sometimes the who and how can make or break a piece.

Sas: Can you continue Susan, how, tell us about "how."

Susan: Well, (looking around) how is how you deliver your story, what tone you set – do you hit it hard and preachy? The best stories

tell themselves. There is a good guy, bad buy, some actions, and some consequences and reactions. Other stories need help being told. They're all not so neat and tidy.

Sas: Are you talking about purpose, the purpose of the story?

Susan: Well, that wouldn't be my word, I'd say intention. I keep asking my people, 'Folks what are we doing here' with a story or mix of stories. You have to know what you're doing or how you tell it, who tells it. What we are trying to get across in words and in pictures. I guess I should add that to my list. "What we are doing here?"

Sas: I think intention is a much better word for you than purpose. Do you know where this question comes from now you got it?

Susan: No, it came easy to me about what my questions were, except for the new one, and that was a pretty big one for me and I missed it at first. I have not idea where they came from. I guess the combined ideas of a lot of people that I've summarized for myself.

I did not want to say that I agree with Mallory's question, it's similar to mine of, "did we check the facts.' I'm just less of

a purest about how it's delivered. I have known Mal for a long time and have the utmost respect for him.

Sas: So, what makes you less of a purist than Thomas?

Susan: (Pause) It's a pretty high standard. Mal sets the bar impossibly high. I think you can get the job done...

Sas: Without so much work

Susan: Well, no, I couldn't say it that way... Well, maybe. It's important to check the facts, I double-check everything. Mal triple checks it. I think when the facts are obvious there is a clear bad guy, you tell it like it is. It's just obvious what to conclude so why pretend your not concluding it? Mal will go after the story behind the story, so it's believed. This can be popular at times, and, 'no disrespect Mal', unnecessary. You have to check the facts, get those straight, and you're on safe ground.

Mallory: Except if the facts tell one story and more facts tell another story. So the bad guys or good guys are not as clear or the facts could tell several stories, then how do you choose Susan?

Susan: Mal, you make it all too complicated. We've had this conversation before. You've missed

stories that we all broke because you were triple-checking or getting the other story.

Mallory: And there's a few times I remember Susan that you and a lot of others were wrong.

Susan: (Pause..she looks at Mallory) I am, nobody is criticizing you, I admit occasionally there is an error or new facts come out so you apologize or reveal the new facts and report the story a changing.

Sas: Complicated. All these different questions backed by different views of the world. Well, I think that's enough for one day. Thank you all for coming.

(Murmurs, hands going up)

Dave: Aren't you going to tell us who has the best questions? The right ones?

Lena: What are your questions?

Tom: What happens next?

Mallory: Are you coming back to finish?

Bob: (Raising hand for a bit of quiet). Well, thank you for your interest, I mean that sincerely. A few things about me:

I don't do best or right or wrong. Remember, at the beginning I said 'I don't judge, it's not my nature; best/right/wrong those are your creations, not mine.

Ponder what you have heard today. What are your questions? Where did they come from? How do they serve you?

QOS — Questions, origin, service for short.
Maybe we can chat again.

Sas / Bob walks out the door. People scramble to follow out the door. No one is there.) Susan notices a small piece of paper on the desk with some doodles and some writing. A few people gather around, others come back in the room.

Mallory: What does it say Susan?

Susan: It's a bit hard to read, God has lousy handwriting. It says: "If they don't create the news I wonder who decides what is on?"

And on the back side (Susan turns it over) – and there are five simple words:



Partial Summary (Question to Date)

David: How do I keep them entertained and tuned in?

Lena: Does it “wake them up”?

Ed: Will this make us more money?
Will this make me a winner or
Will this hurt me?

Mallory: Are we being honest?

Susan: What is the mix?
Did we check the facts?
What are we doing here?