

**Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation**

Ethics and Journalism

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18 Feb 2008**

A rough draft —i.e., this is a work in progress. ---JBL

The Inaugural Moment: The Lost Poetry of Compassion

Introduction

On August 6, 1945, a hot day in Japan by all accounts, the United States dropped onto Hiroshima a bomb so powerful it killed 100,000 people, baked the yams and potatoes growing beneath the soil of family gardens, stopped the flight of countless of birds and defined the futures of those who came to be known as the hibakusha, explosion affected persons.

A year later, writing for *The New Yorker*, John Hersey told the story of six hibakusha. As he told *their* story, the book he wrote told *his*: Here was a man who understood that compassionate listening honors the human heart and makes possible understanding of depth and breadth. Hersey's book, listed by New York University as the most important journalistic work of the 20th century, was said to be startling in its clarity, a straight-forward, unbiased account of what happened to six people in the moment of and in the aftermath of the bomb. An example of great journalism, done by a writer

who adhered to the principle of objectivity, Hiroshima moved hearts and minds. One writer, working for a Roman Catholic journal, wrote that Hiroshima, more so than any of the “miles of print” and “endless reels of photographs” documenting the event, had “most shudderingly [brought] home to the reader the utter horror of the atom bomb” (“New Yorker and the Soul,” *America*, 14, September 1946, p. 569). To understand the effects of the bomb, Hersey chose to become connected to the lives of six people who would show to the world the human face of suffering. Of Hersey’s work, which became the whole of the August 31, 1946, issue of *The New Yorker*, historian John Toland said: “Riveted by the ghastly details, those of us who had hated the Japanese for five years realized that Mr. Hersey’s six protagonists were fellow human beings” (Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*, p. 111). Hersey’s book reminds us of the absolute importance of connection.

If there has been an event in the past century that has called for the compassionate response of all humanity, it was the unleashing of the power of the atomic bomb. What could John Hersey do for Mrs. Nakamura? For the Reverend Tanimoto? For any of the six? For the people of Hiroshima and the people of Nagasaki, bombed three days later? He could listen and give to those who had suffered, who were suffering, who suffer yet, a way to

forge a relationship with the world, a way to foster understanding. He could give to the reader the same. That the journalist can do this—put a human face on the events of the day—is not a news flash. It is, however, a fact that the traditional journalistic approach directs the journalist to remain detached in order to function objectively, i.e., without bias. My goal in this presentation, which will fall woefully short of fully explaining itself, is to introduce compassion as a deliberate journalistic method. The profession's various codes of ethics must address more clearly the importance of compassion.

Compassion defines one's willingness to feel and act on concern for the suffering and misfortune of humans and all life. It is enabled by empathy, the basic human ability to connect with another. Transported by the imagination into the other's reality, the compassionate person sees through that individual's eyes, not through his or her own worldview, created and integrated over a lifetime of experience. The reporter who approaches a source compassionately will therefore leave the self and its biases behind. A relationship realized in compassion does not have to lead to one's agreeing or disagreeing with the other. It should lead, instead, to attentiveness. In the end, to deliberately engage a compassionate stance allows one to face reality with the full intellect engaged—heart and mind—

balanced. The empathetic journalist will find a way to alleviate the other's pain by creating a place for that individual's pain to be heard. Many believe this way of being—the way of compassion—rests at the core of who and what we are to be as human beings.

The Dalai Lama says we have become a species too easily bound to indifference. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and co-founder of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, says we are a people made numb by a violent world, capable of turning away from the face of pain. Humanity's greatest sin, he has said, is to “remain silent and indifferent.” Indifference, he says, reduces the other to an abstraction. Matthew Fox, Episcopalian priest, says that only through compassion will we create a just society. Martha Nussbaum, contemporary philosopher, says the emotions, particularly compassion, can point humanity toward that which is most important. Too often, these individuals say, we fail to connect, and the world within which we live pays the price of our inhumanity. Their thinking is not new, for many have believed compassion to be the lynchpin that connects us to our best selves. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer saw his way to arguing that all morality is based in compassion, which, he said, all people possess the capacity to practice.

What would any of these individuals say about the average journalistic code of ethics? How *does* the institution describe good conduct for the journalist? According to the Society of Professional Journalists, one ought to conduct him- or herself according to the following principles: First (and as one might expect), the journalist must seek truth and report it. In doing this he or she must be “honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information” (SPJ Code of Ethics: <http://www.spj.org/pdf/ethicscode.pdf>). Second, one must “minimize harm” and will likely do so if he or she treats sources, subjects and colleagues as “human beings deserving of respect.” Third, the journalist should act independently. Toward that end, the reporter should avoid conflicts of interest, i.e., should not buy presents for sources. Last, the journalist must be accountable, taking full responsibility for the clarity, accuracy and depth of his or her work.

The word compassion does appear in SPJ’s code. Under the principle “minimize harm,” the Code says this: “Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources. Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.” The code further says, under “seek truth and report it,” that the writer should

“[a]void stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.” These statements reveal a profession committed to treating others with care.

That said, we must get one thing straight: In writing about the need for compassion in the professional lives of journalists, I am not saying that journalists are morally impoverished. I am saying that they deserve more. Many journalists are unsure of what their relationship with compassion ought to be, to some extent because too much remains unsaid—that stuff between the lines of the various codes—and also because objectivity is and has been the profession’s dominant approach to the work of gathering information for well over a century.

Thus, things are complicated for the journalist. Journalists are to be objective, to stay detached so that they can see clearly. Since the early 20th century, journalists have been trained to approach the reporting and writing of news from an objective orientation, an approach that necessitates steering clear of emotion and feelings. Objectivity invites not a close relationship but detachment. And it does this in an effort to ensure that journalists reach the truth and offer to readers an unbiased, uncontaminated account of the day. This approach possesses great merit. By emulating the scientific method,

chiefly through employing objectivity and verifying facts throughout the process, the journalist can make stronger claims to truth. Historically, journalism in this way fostered for itself at least some of the sort of respect that the sciences had come to know. Nonetheless, the journalist who plays by the rules necessarily limits the way in which he or she interacts with the world.

The fact is this: Journalism has asked its reporters to refrain from connecting deeply with humanity, a way of being that is good neither for the individual as a writer nor the individual as a human being. Some in the field, both professionals and academics, maintain that objectivity must be maintained as the primary orientation of the working reporter; others believe it must be dethroned. The idea of introducing compassion as a journalistic method faces many obstacles, among them these: First, there is the fear that compassion will compromise objectivity and professionalism and lead to biased reportage; second, the fear that to expect compassion—not simply to let it arise naturally (if that's what it does)—would be to compromise the emotion's sincerity and thus its effectiveness. Sarah Richmond (2004) asks a question that harbors direct implications for journalists: Can empathy be a reliable source of information?

One real-world example can provide insight into the journalist's world and into the confusion that exists about the relationship between objectivity and compassion. Few issues are so difficult to cover as those related to poverty and so likely to arouse compassion in the heart of the writer.

Annette Fuentes (1988), in an article aptly titled "Distance and charity on the poverty beat," wrote about the difficulties faced by journalists covering poverty. Carol McCabe of the Providence *Journal-Bulletin* described a time when she and photographer Steve Haines worked on a series called "Hungry in America." McCabe noted that though sources had not asked for money, she felt compelled to assist them by buying groceries for some families and contributing to groups raising money for people living in poverty. *Columbia Journalism Review* subsequently criticized her for her journalistic laxity, an admonishment that did not sway her from her initial response: "I felt it was no different in a moral sense, no more checkbook journalism, than taking a source to lunch and paying a big tab," she says. "I knew it did not compromise my story; it would be the same story Our humanity contributes to what we are as journalists. If I had to give up being a caring person in this world, I think I'd give up journalism first."

If I am a journalist, should I ignore my heart's call to action? David A. Sylvester says he did so until he retired from his job as a reporter. Shortly

thereafter he followed his heart and joined a protest against the U.S. presence in Central America. He was arrested and spent time in jail. Though Sylvester believed many journalists would accuse him of having lost his objectivity, he felt relief. Reacting to the label “partial,” he said, “I do wonder how those who would want to [label me] deal with the kind of shame I’ve felt for so many years after reading the impartial news accounts of assassinations, disappearances and torture” (Sylvester, 2006, p. 2). He continued:

In my opinion, truth-seeking on behalf of those who are victimized is the courage that is missing in journalism. But today no one seems to care about the victims who populate so many of our news stories, especially when they live beyond our borders. Imagine how the Abu Ghraib scandal would have been reported had its victims been Americans treated in this way by Saddam Hussein’s secret police. To this day, most reporters covering Iraq seem entirely unaware of the toll that the U.S.-imposed sanctions had during the decade of the 1990s, when an estimated 350,000 children under the age of five died from the lack of basic medicines and postwar conditions. What is absent in journalism is not courage but consciousness and compassion. (p. 3)

Many believe his concerns to be legitimate. The proponents of compassion, who are represented across the disciplines, are making good arguments for compassion in the workplace.

In her book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Martha Nussbaum (2001), contemporary philosopher, presents a compelling argument for considering emotions not simply as catalysts for higher thinking activities but as cognitive in and of themselves. She suggests that society cultivate a culture of critical compassion. Nussbaum's "critical compassion" ultimately calls for respectful participation in dialogue and deliberation. Nussbaum describes compassion not as an emotion that can lead one to thoughtful analysis and consideration but as a component of such deliberation, integral to its success (p. 307). In the end, she says, compassion "bridges the gap" (320) between self and others and is conducive to a civil atmosphere.

Elisabeth Porter (2006), head of the School of International Studies at the University of South Australia, argues that compassion's role in decision-making should be given greater status and emphasizes that "opening ourselves to others' situations" is integral to beginning dialogue (p. 100). Porter, whose goal is to see compassion become integrated into the political realm, writes that compassion is integral to moral reasoning. The individual

must suspend his or her point of view and become open to the possibility that “the other” might have valid points to make.

Alisa Carse, associate professor of philosophy and a teaching affiliate of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University, concurs: When one becomes open to the perspectives of others, he or she does so with “a sense of moral purpose” (Carse, 2005, p. 190). Carse says that morality demands empathic connection and argues for “morally appropriate boundaries” (p. 173), ones that will ensure that the compassionate person will not become “emotionally infected” and unable to function professionally. In short, people need not lose sight of their senses. “The ability,” she says, “to get inside or grasp the experience of the other can be crucial to our understanding of her situation, to our motivational orientation in responding to her and to our emotional response as it is conveyed” (p. 173).

I have taught English and journalism at Augustana College for many years, and in those years I have known students who have earned degrees in journalism but who will not work in the field because, they say, it does not offer them a way to serve humanity. Of course, I talk with them about the way in which journalists do serve, story-by-story, engaging the world, enlightening U.S. citizens, who in turn ensure the perpetuation of democracy

through their actions or their votes. Journalists expose graft and corruption, ensure that diverse ideas find their way to the multitudes, and not infrequently jumpstart, through a story, an important change. Our students know this. They believe in what the journalist does. But many have said they want and need something more. Eyes open to the suffering in the world, they are compelled to respond. Their plight saddens me. They should not have to find a new profession within which to pursue—deliberately—a life of compassion.

It is time the profession of journalism yielded to other ways of knowing. If compassion is basic to our nature and we seek, for professional reasons, to stymie it, how have we influenced our relationships with others and with the world? Have we compromised not objectivity but our very ability to reach the truth?

We are called as human beings to act empathetically as we seek to report the truth. Certainly, it would not be difficult to identify those stories that might benefit from a compassionate approach. For starters: anything to do with poverty, the environment, gay and lesbian issues, abortion, war. If the profession were to call on journalists to practice an ethic of compassion, it would not be asking them to forfeit their objectivity. It would be asking them to leave behind the self, to choose to see through the eyes of the other.

This moment, the moment of empathetic connection, is the inaugural moment, capable of leading both writers and readers to greater truths.

Works Cited

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TRAVEL TO NORWAY OR ITALY WITH AUGUSTANA COLLEGE

Augustana College is offering two exciting travel opportunities this summer for alumni and friends. Join Dr. Gary and Rosaaen Olson, June 10 - 21, 2008 for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience Norway in its fullest. The Olsons are veteran tour guides, having led four successful alumni tours to Norway for the College. You will experience the breath-taking natural beauty of this country and learn about the people and culture so central to the heritage of Augustana College. If you have never had the opportunity to visit Italy, you may wish to join veteran traveler and tour manager Brad Heegel and alumni director Mary Toso May 31 - June 11, 2008 as they introduce you to the magnificent cities of Venice, Florence, Tuscany, Sorrento and the Eternal City of Rome. To bring this tour to a most memorable conclusion, you will experience The Augustana Choirs final concert performance in St. Peters Basilica. For more information on either of these tours, please contact the Alumni Office at Augustana soon at alumni@augie.edu .

CHAPEL CALENDAR

Tues. (19 th)	Seminary Reps., 10 am
Wed. (20 th)	Holy Communion - 10 am - Pr. Paul
Fri. (22 nd)	Worship, 10 am - Brandon Elsasser, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (24 th)	Dist. Scholars Worship, 9 am Worship, 11 am - Kari and Pr. Roger Lenander
Mon. (25 th)	Worship, 10 am - Debbie Hanson: Ethics and Folklore