Interrupting Routine: An Ethic of Empathy

Chair of Moral Values Lecture: Janet Blank-Libra

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This past fall, the CMV book group read *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal—Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations*. The book’s authors, Parker Palmer, an education activist—don’t you love that title?—and Arthur Zajonc, a physicist, promote a holistic approach to teaching, learning and living that values and respects the whole human being: spirit and heart, body and mind. They ground their perspective in the belief that the world is to be understood through relational ontology. Ian Barbour, a physicist interested in the relationship between science and religion, puts it this way:

> Nature is understood now to be relational, ecological, and interdependent. Reality is constituted by events and relationships rather than separate substances or separate particles. We are now compelled to see nature as “a historical community of interdependent beings.”

Palmer and Zajonc describe the thinking that has infused itself over the years into my convictions about teaching in general, the profession of journalism, and my interest in life at Augustana. Our understanding of the way in which we create or reveal relationship will determine the degree to which we flourish as human beings and as communities.

The following quote from *The Heart of Higher Education* offers a question every educator—and I wish to expand the definition of educator to include any individual who works with or interacts with students—should strive to answer:
How can higher education become a more multidimensional enterprise, one that draws on the full range of human capacities for knowing, teaching and learning; that bridges the gaps between the disciplines; that forges stronger links between knowing the world and living creatively in it, in solitude and community?

Zajonc, in an interview with Krista Tippett of NPR’s “On Being,” said that after being handed a D in one of his first physics courses, he found a mentor who helped him reframe his work in a way that forged a path to meaning and purpose. He says, “So I had to situate this striving after a physical understanding of the world around us in a much larger ethical, moral, spiritual context that was part of the human enterprise and no longer just an isolated bit but something integrated into all of our human concerns. And that was of huge, you know, kind of revolutionary significance for me personally, and it’s something I still hold onto that I think we often decontextualize” (“On Being,” Nov. 10, 2011).

I resonate with Zajonc’s frustration. I took a few classes in statistics as a doctoral student. Surprisingly, I found myself completely enthralled by the work. I confess—I had previously been rather indifferent to any sort of math-related activity. Now, I wanted to take the course material in deeply. I asked my professor to explain to me the meaning behind the equations. From where had those equations come? He told me—more than once, because I asked more than once—that I was simply to use the equations to solve the problems. That was their purpose. That was all I needed to know. This was incredibly contrary to my way of being. The
equations and I weren’t to have any real sort of relationship. Was there no context? Had these equations materialized out of thin air?

Palmer and Zajonc argue that education at its best should acknowledge the importance—at the very least—of the following:

1. Education in all disciplines should guide students deliberately toward the kind of purpose and meaning that comes with deep knowing. The interior life of an individual cannot be left to chance.

2. Those human capacities that we have tended to consider peripheral to the process of inquiry—imagination, empathy, compassion, instinct—must be respected and given room to create and transform. Often, they are the bridge to meaning.

3. Colleges must invest not only in more interdisciplinary, team-taught coursework but also in the contextualizing of course material. They urge the members of the various disciplines to treat each other collegially, setting aside the tendency to retreat to silos—our divisions—to work in divisive isolation. The degree to which divisions exist as disconnected silos will define the health of the institution. To what degree does Augustana reflect the holistic, connected nature of the liberal arts?

There are days when I think that Augustana is practically perfect in every way. But I also know that whenever something is really good, it is a “something” on the cusp—poised between what we have been, what we are, and what we might be—for better or for worse. We are not immune from the debilitating power of
complacency, the authority of ignorance or the inability to empathize with friends, colleagues and students. We get stuck in our ways; sometimes, we even think our ways are, well, better than anyone else's. For example, we might agree with the myriad studies that show lecture to be an ineffective route to learning but believe that we're different—somehow—our lectures are fine. Take me for example. In my ethics and law of the press course, I lecture—more than I should—despite my belief in methods that engage a whole person. In that class I too often live a divided life: my methods are at odds with my values. To reinvent that course to the degree that I need to I must give my imagination a workout. I have a ways to go. Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed this same issue nearly 175 years ago in a speech delivered at Cambridge: “Of course,” he said, “there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office, -- to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame” (56).

Attention given purpose and meaning, in all disciplines and in combination with a continuing commitment to the power of the mind to think, understand and render judgments logically, will better allow for the education of the whole person—mind and heart, body and spirit.

I am charged with bringing the community together to consider ethical issues. My talk, I hope, will allow us to meditate on that which is of value and importance to us: our teaching, our students, our ability to grow into the
possibilities of our own lives, our life here at Augustana as we sculpt it into being each day. To encourage conversation, I hope, I will talk about research I am doing on journalism and its relationship to empathy and compassion.

We live in a world that considers attention to this topic, these ideas (integrative education, the intelligence of the emotions) to be soft—hardly the stuff of rigorous research. We live in a world that applauds the ontological stance “I think therefore I am”—while leaving no room for “I feel therefore I am.” In the end, I believe we live in a world that needs nothing more desperately than it needs to look hard and long at the unbalanced, incomplete way in which we take ourselves into the process of inquiry. We’ve banished the vast majority of our human capacities as partners on the road to truth for long enough. Reason deserves a little help along the way. Such a way of being affects all aspects of our life here at Augustana. It was to these topics, among others, that the book group gave its attention.

Over the course of the fall semester, the group had good conversations. Important to discussion on more than one occasion was our collective recognition that some ways of knowing are less valued than others, some kinds of knowledge less valued than others. Some capacities—empathy, perhaps; the imagination, perhaps—are dismissed as lacking in rigor. As a result, some disciplines seem less imperative to a full education. This kind of thinking ripples outward: Students think some areas less valuable than others; those who work here make assumptions about what their colleagues do. Inequity develops amongst the divisions. Consider this: Across the country, and indeed globally, in the face of economic hardship, colleges and universities face the need to make cuts, and they are choosing to cut
the humanities. Here’s a headline from February 2010: “University of Iowa Lists 14 graduate programs at risk for cuts or elimination.” More than half of those were housed in the Humanities. Among those more easily dispensed with were German, American Studies, comparative literature and film studies. Education programs were next on the list. Hard times led SUNY Albany to eliminate several humanities programs in 2010. An NPR reporter noted that the cuts at SUNY were given attention because “of a fear that these disciplines are less career-oriented than business and technology, less valued in a world dominated by the bottom line.”

Closer to home, the University of Minnesota in fall 2010 found it necessary to turn away PhD applicants for financial assistance in the form of fellowships and teaching assistantships. Again, the humanities bore the disproportionate brunt of the assault: the university accepted more than 100 fewer students of literature, language and the arts. Closer yet to home: one of our students went to a gubernatorial campaign meeting a few years back. The candidate asked him this:

Why would anyone get a major in English?

We shouldn’t endure this without complaint, objection and resistance.

At Augustana, and at any school that comprehends the importance of the liberal arts, we know that an attack upon the Humanities is an attack upon the natural and social sciences, for we are together integral to the whole that we call the liberal arts. An attack upon the natural and social sciences, of course, becomes an attack upon the humanities. No matter which of these issues I examine, I return, in part at least, to the schism between reason and emotion, objectivity and subjectivity, detachment and connection. We are so often at odds with the nature of our humanity.
A few weeks ago, Michelle Bartel, whom many of you knew back when she was a member of our religion and philosophy department, posted on Facebook this quote from the poet R. M. Rilke’s Ninth Duino Elegy: “What, if not transformation, is your deepest purpose?” That’s a quote we ought to wear on our sleeves here at Augustana, which is to say on our hearts, which is to say we should make our emotions and our intentions transparent.

The book group tried to wear its sleeve on its heart. It was obvious when we were exploring difficult areas. More than once the book group circled around and entered into conversation about the place of awe and wonder in education—awe and wonder as ways of knowing that are perceived to be as essential as sound reasoning abilities, awe and wonder as catalysts for transformation. About wonder, many will wonder this—can it even be an approach to inquiry? Wonder, of course, is integral to the poetic experience—to deep encounter. Ours is a society so far removed from respecting the whole of our humanity that we cannot imagine wonder to be either legitimate or essential. It is one of those soft approaches to inquiry. Could it possibly influence in a productive way the rigorous nature of one’s work?

It’s not about—or shouldn’t be—the battle between one way of knowing and another, between reason and emotion, objectivity and compassion. Steve Thomas told the group that the visual arts gave objectivity the boot in the first half of the 20th century and by the 1950s objectivity’s absence nearly brought the visual arts to their knees. “So,” he said, “we attempted to rebuild some sense of the objective into programming.” Art, a discipline that knows the importance of the poetic experience, of the way of the artist, saw and sought balance. Steve, borrowing a phrase from M.
Scott Peck, called us to think about kindling a “fire of wonder” in our students. His belief is that inquiry today relies on objectification. His is not—and neither is mine—an attack on objectivity. As a journalist I honor its value. “I believe,” Steve said to me a few days ago, “the objectivization of education to be one of the most obvious threats to higher education today. Furthermore it appears to me to go hand-in-hand with intolerance—the great enemy of creativity, wonder and surprise!” Parker Palmer put it this way: “Objectivism portrays truth as something we can only achieve by disconnecting ourselves physically and emotionally from the thing we want to know” (1988, 51). Spanish professor Pilar Cabrera Fonte recognized the importance of integrative education and noted that to speak of the need for meaning and purpose is not to take “a stance against objectivity.” The goal is balance, respect, attentiveness to the whole.

The book group acknowledged that there are obstacles to the development of meaning and purpose. If you’re teaching conjugations in Spanish or French, said Pilar, what is the route to purpose and meaning? More than one person pointed out that to push toward meaning and purpose one had to give up control. It’s hard to replace a lecture. Paul Rohde expressed that we need to acknowledge that this work is messy. Ann Pederson expressed concern that “everything—what counts as scholarship, the way we educate our students, what our students expect—works against what we’re saying” we need to do. More than one person expressed concern that the expectations of integrative education aren’t realistic ones. How is one to create space within the classroom for the awakening of the interior life, for awe and wonder, for the integration of an ethic of empathy? A teacher can’t teach epiphanies.
We didn’t answer all our questions, but we were agreed, I think, that purpose and meaning must be pursued. Michael Rueter, modern foreign languages, put it this way: “It all starts internally.” Jenny Gubbels, biology, got to the crux of the matter when she said, “[Students] can learn superficially or they can learn deeply and well.”

This past fall, my daughter Abbie became a first-year student at Concordia College, Moorhead. As I have listened to my daughter talk about her English courses, I have been transported back in time to my undergraduate years, led into reflecting on my life as a learner and particularly as a student both of English and journalism. As a journalism major, I worked hard, honed my writing and critical thinking abilities, and learned how to approach my work objectively. The English major, perhaps because it lived alongside my journalism major and both complemented and stood in contrast to it, invited me to make meaning of my life. I deeply loved the work I did as an English major. My strengths and my desires, I am completely certain, were given direction, purpose and meaning in many of those classrooms. When I entered classrooms that did not do the same, I floundered.

Where did I find my interior life awakening in response to the shape of a particular classroom? I can tell you, because lo these many years later, those are the classes I can point to as having pushed me to make meaning and grapple with purpose: a course on short stories, which I took before I was supposed to, remains one of the highlights of my life because it confirmed for me that I was on the right path; the English Augustans, particularly Alexander Pope, awakened the young feminist in me; the Transcendentalists—Thoreau affirmed for me the necessity of solitude and reflection, important to me because I had been in many ways a solitary
child; the law of the press, which led me to build for myself, very deliberately, a philosophical foundation as a reporter and writer; political ideologies, which connected me to the nature of humanity in profound and unexpected ways; sociology, which taught me to be self-aware as it connected me to our collective nature and the responsibilities that ensue. And last, and very, very importantly, speech, i.e., communication 101, because I feared it deeply and took it one summer at 6:50 a.m., thinking I would be one of half a dozen students willing to go to class at that hour. I was wrong. One of a roomful of cowards, I learned from that communications professor how to trust and use my voice. That experience was for me one of the most important and profound of my education.

What I think I know is this: The awakening of the interior life—that part of oneself that serves as a harbor for hopes and dreams, that allows for the incubation of deep meaning that intersects with the world we live in—shouldn’t be left to chance.

**Journalism and Compassion**

Everything converges.

My discontent with the paradigm to which journalism attached itself well over a century ago led me into the research I have been doing, changes I have made in my teaching, and my choice of book for the book group last semester.

The nature of my research, I believe, led to my being named CMV. Perhaps you’ve noticed that that’s a rather weighty title: Chair of Moral Values. Sandra Looney was always happiest when we called her the chair of immoral values, and I understand why. I am always grateful when my only son, Meshri Abd El Koudouss,
laughs at my holding of that title. He learned fast. It seems rather presumptuous to just up and schedule oneself to speak. Thus, I thank you for the gift of your presence.

I had begun revising my relationship with journalism a few years before I read Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc’s book. I’d like to offer myself up as exhibit A in the case of the professor struggling to make room for the development of meaning and purpose in and through the classroom.

I want journalism to ask its students what it means for a journalist to flourish as a human being and for a human being to flourish as a journalist. What might follow from imagining other ways of doing the work? Through my work I have been imagining what it might look like if journalism deliberately institutionalized empathy and compassion as routes to truth, as it long ago institutionalized objectivity. I want my students to be given license to realize the depth of their humanity through accepting and engaging the full potential of their human capacities.

Not everyone is as taken with my ideas as I am. A publisher last spring told me it was hard to imagine that empathy might find a place in journalistic routine. A good friend and colleague of mine at another institution told me his students don’t want to think about empathy and compassion; they want to model themselves after the hard-nosed journalist who wears a cool hat, drinks too much, swears a lot and takes no prisoners. Well, who could blame them? But in the end I believe this: journalists who adhere solely or dominantly to an objective approach disserve their readers, their sources and themselves.
I have drafted the better part of a book that examines the relationship of journalism and empathy and compassion. I’ve created a model that integrates reflection, imagination, empathy, attentiveness, and compassion into journalistic work. My desire is to see journalism education expand its template. It’s not that journalists are not now compassionate. The best are—naturally so. But there’s a lot of confusion about the role of the journalist.

To better understand what good journalists do I have interviewed journalists and their sources. My goal: to let conversation—interviews—reveal the journalistic experience with empathy and compassion. I have been particularly interested in how journalists conduct themselves when doing stories that intersect with human suffering. For that reason, I have chosen to talk to journalists whose work has led them into conversations with people who are suffering or perhaps stereotyped.

Here in Sioux Falls, I have had good conversations with Steve Young, Argus Leader reporter, whose reportage on Indian Country is crucial to an understanding of a culture more of us need to understand better. Last fall, Young was awarded Harvard’s Nieman award for the series “Growing up Indian,” which many of you will have read in fall 2010. Young wrote about the lives of three Native Americans—a 3-year-old girl, a young woman headed to college, and a young mother—growing up in Indian Country. He ended the five-part series with this:

If Autumn White Eyes is the hope, MarQuita Walking Eagle the tragedy and Janessa Driving Hawk the struggle, then what of Janessa’s little 3-year-old daughter, Neleigh?
On the powwow grounds along the Missouri River, in her traditional Lakota jingle dress, Neleigh embodies all the beauty and strength of a culture whose spirituality and customs have sustained its people for centuries.

On the winding streets of her hometown, pushing a stroller or riding her bicycle, this is every little child in South Dakota who ever laughed and giggled and ran free in the innocence of youth.

At the kitchen table in Lower Brule, where mom is only 18, has dropped out of school, is pregnant again and living on welfare, a little girl waits at the intersection of three roads.

The dangerous traffic of reservation life is bearing down on her, veering wildly under the influences of alcohol, poverty, violence and despair. Which way will she go? And does anyone care? (Argus Leader, November 4, 2010)

The conclusion gave me considerable pause: Does anybody care?

How, I wondered, had Steve gotten away with asking that question? I had started my conversations with Steve a year or two prior to his reporting and writing “Growing up Indian.” When I asked him about the conclusion, he said the editorial board at the Argus talked long and hard: Could he end with this question?

Ultimately, the board agreed with the author: The question rested on a solid foundation and had earned a legitimate place in the story. It was a fair question and it was a question that asked readers to examine their hearts: Does anybody care? Do you care? Like all good journalists, Steve Young believes in objectivity. His choice to end the story in this way gave the two of us much to talk about.
I have spent time talking with Washington Post reporter, David Finkel, who in 2006 received a Pulitzer for explanatory reporting on Yemen’s efforts to establish democracy. Finkel in 2009 published The Good Soldiers, a book that chronicles the life of the 2-16, a battalion with which he was embedded for nearly eight months of its 15-month tour of duty in Iraq. I had actually heard David Finkel talk about the role of empathy in journalism while traveling in India with Sandra Looney and 15 students in January 2011, and I suspected we could have good conversations. Some of the soldiers of the 2-16 have said that when someone asks them what it was like to be in Iraq at that time, they tell that person to read The Good Soldiers. Finkel, they say, got it right.

At the Jaipur Literary Festival, Finkel, as a member of a panel talking about narrative journalism, told a rapt audience that he was obligated to be empathetic not only to the soldiers in Iraq but also to the policy makers in Washington, D.C., including then President George W. Bush. He noted that it would be more difficult to summon empathy for Bush than for the soldiers since he was with the soldiers on a day-to-day basis, saw their triumphs and their tragic losses. But, he said, it was just as important that he empathize with Bush. In saying this, he affirmed what I believe to be key to making sense of empathy: it must be comprehended as an attempt to understand the other.

I remember clearly when Finkel said this at the Festival, because I silently applauded his definition of empathy. When he and I talked a few months later, he recalled that the audience, for the most part, misunderstood and seemed unhappy with him, probably because they defined empathy singularly as the desire to care
about another rather than as the desire to understand the point of view and feelings of another. Empathy does not ask for agreement.

My desire to talk to someone who had reported on border issues led me to Claudine Lomonaco, whose name I received from Cari Skogberg Eastman, author of *Shaping the Immigration Debate: Contending Civil Societies on the US-Mexico Border* and a former Augie student and teacher. Claudine Lomonaco is a force. An award-winning reporter, Lomonaco has covered the U.S.-Mexico border as a documentary filmmaker, radio producer and daily journalist. She knows what it is like to be taken to task for the crime of getting too close to her work.

In addition to the journalists, I have talked to individuals who have served as sources for their stories, people whose stories have made plain to me the way in which they make themselves vulnerable most every time they say “yes” to a reporter’s request to talk. Among the sources I have interviewed are these:

1) Rodney Bordeaux: President of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota. Bordeaux has spoken with reporter Steve Young on multiple occasions.

2) Martin Brokenleg: Director of Native Ministries at Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia, Brokenleg served as a source for Steve Young three decades ago and helped me take a look at Steve’s early days as a reporter. As did many of you, I knew Martin as my colleague at Augustana College.

3) Lieutenant Colonel Brent Cummings: Colonel Cummings served in Iraq during the time of the surge in 2007-2008 and became a source for
Washington Post reporter David Finkel, who eventually became his good friend.

4) Ed Curry: A chili farmer in Arizona, Ed Curry was a source for Claudine Lomonaco and others interested in his perspective on hiring illegal immigrants.

5) Autumn White Eyes: Autumn became a primary source/character in the series “Growing Up Indian.” In fall 2011 she was enrolled as a sophomore at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

As I have talked to reporters and sources about their experiences I have identified common themes and issues important to thinking about the ethical implications of a relationship between journalism and compassion. That, in turn, has led to my describing the empathetic, compassionate, objective journalist—the truly balanced journalist. I have been able to crack open the relationship that exists between reporter and source. The direction of my work was only predetermined in that I wanted to talk about journalism and its relationship to the emotions, particularly empathy and compassion. That which was most important I trusted to emerge.

The institution of journalism has worried for more than a century that compassion might somehow provoke the profession’s downfall. And it might—but not because we have ever actually let loose its imagined power to wreak havoc. Quite the contrary. The profession has managed quite well to stifle its promise—the potential to strengthen the quest for truth. Compassion weds itself to justice, decency, trustworthiness, honesty, an authentic desire to do good work.
This cautious attitude toward compassion—one common to the culture, not just journalism—is grounded in a history that has promoted imbalance by lifting up reason as more important than compassion and the emotions in general. This imbalance has operated with impunity in the disciplines, professions, classrooms, and offices of higher education.

**Entering the Domain of the Emotions**

I define compassion, in brief, as an act intended to alleviate the pain of one who is suffering, whether that one is person, creature or planet. Oftentimes, compassion is preceded by empathy, that moment within which one allows him- or herself to see through the eyes of the other, an act that benefits from research and typically requires the assistance of the imagination. The journalist who provides someone, particularly a marginalized or suffering individual, a chance to be heard as an authentic human being will have acted compassionately.

Integral to the compassionate act is the moment of empathy. Is empathy an emotion? I asked that question and did some research and found that I am not alone in having asked that question. Rather than read through a stack of definitions, I will tell you instead the key ideas that they tend to repeat: Empathy activates the imagination and leads to the creation of a shared emotion and its attendant feelings. Empathy is both a process of connection and a complex emotion.

We become more conscious of and connected to our environment when we are emotionally, empathetically engaged. *When engaged, emotion is not transformed into reason but works with reason as information that guides us toward a more productive engagement.* When contemporary philosophers argue that emotions are
cognitive in structure, they describe them as “concerned with receiving and processing information” (Nussbaum 23). In other words, emotions are as integral to the research and thinking process as is reason.

If journalists practiced an ethic of empathy and compassion, they would not be forfeiting their objectivity. Paradoxically, they would be leaving themselves behind even as they took themselves closer in an effort to see through the eyes of the other. There’s really nothing wrong with a good, operational paradox. Such a relationship generally gives us something important to think about.

I can’t talk about the entirety of the model today, but I’d like to take a few minutes to talk further about empathy as a way of being and then provide one example from my work.

**Empathy: The Act of Developing Relationships**

Back in 1993 I met the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber in the pages of his book, *Thou and I*. Buber, one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of modern times, focused on the importance of an individual’s relationship with the world. He contrasted the I/Thou (Ich-Du) relationship, which fosters closeness and equality with the other, with the I/It (Ich-Es) relationship, which is impersonal, a relationship within which one individual controls (or perhaps wishes to) and/or uses another. The first calls for intimacy, the second detachment. I am not saying that journalists strive to control others. Buber’s philosophy, however, does largely describe the objective relationship of the reporter and source. If one’s goal is a story, the I-It relationship will suffice. If one wishes to foster a relationship with another human being or any sentient creature while simultaneously creating a better self
and a deeper story, the I-It will not suffice and will in fact inhibit progress, whether personal or professional in nature.

Martin Buber’s philosophy uprooted my sense of self as a writer.

If one is being in the least self-reflective, it’s impossible not to ask the question, whether from a teacher’s or a journalist’s perspective: Have I fostered I/Thou relationships or I/It relationships with my sources, my colleagues, my students? Do I sometimes do one and sometimes the other? Is one sometimes more important than the other? Does the institution call me to support I/It because it calls for an objective stance? What might happen to my work if I change my orientation?

Back when he was in his mid 20s, reporter Steve Young faced a moment that held within it the potential for discovery and transformation. His new beat in Indian Country wasn’t allowing him to grow comfortable as a creature of habit. He found himself developing relationships with a people whose lives he was only beginning to comprehend. When a person stands within one moment and on the edge of the next, the future waits apprehensively, for the stakes are high. Will the individual take a risk? Step into unknown consequences? When you take a risk, you say, “Okay, bring it on”—“it” being the possibility that there’s something to be learned, the possibility that connecting with the world in new ways just might be beneficial. We can jump out of the box or stay there.

“I’d gotten to the point where I felt fairly comfortable out on the reservations with the people I’d met, so I did a big series on the Black Hills claims issue,” Young remembers. Tim Giago, then editor of the Lakota Times, introduced Young to Pete Swift Bird, a heyoka, a word for sacred clown in Lakota. “The heyoka was supposed
to be a buffer or an intermediary between the spirits and the people. If there was a big thunderstorm coming—lots of lightning—then he went out to try to make the thunder gods laugh so they would quit that,” Young said.

When Young arrived at Swift Bird’s home, Pete had a visitor, an African American man from Chicago, and the two were just getting ready to sweat. Swift Bird said to Young, “Before we do this interview, we’re getting ready to sweat, and we’re going to say some prayers. We’d like you to pray with us.” He asked Young to start the prayers.

“And, you know, I’m a raised Methodist. I’m converted to Catholicism. I’d been married about 4 years, 5 years, at this point, and to be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure what he wanted me to do. He’s a Native American, he’s Lakota culture, he’s a very spiritual man. I’m a Catholic kid, who was at that time about 25 or 26 years old, and I sat there in silence for a long time.”

So, there he was: should he pray with this Lakota man? His hesitation reflected the stakes at hand: What was it he risked in that moment? With what did he gamble? Did he fear his actions would be ones untrue to himself, to the Catholic church to which he now belonged? Was he frustrated by the discomfort that came with crossing the border into an unfamiliar culture? Did he harbor stereotypes about Native American spirituality that made him ill-at-ease? Was it just that he, the journalist, thought praying was participating, and participating was not an objective thing to do? Would he get too close and compromise his ability to conduct a viable interview?
Swift Bird asked his friend to begin. Then Swift Bird prayed. “Then they
turned to me, and I kind of bowed my head and folded my hands,” Young said, “and I
asked that God bless this conversation and open our hearts to hearing each other,
and something along those lines. Pete nodded his head and said, ‘You know, that’s
good, that’s very good.’ And then we talked about the Black Hills claims, and to be
honest I don’t remember at this point in time whether he thought they should get
the land back or they should take the money. The experience really kind of
cemented in me this idea that when we go into all these different cultures, whether
it’s the Hutterite culture or the Native American culture or the African American
culture, whatever it is—on the reservations, in the tribal communities—we’re really
walking into their land, and we shouldn’t expect them to adhere to our way of doing
things. We should be willing to participate in their culture and be observant and be
respectful and not just come in as the hard-core journalist—“I’m asking the
questions, you answer”—type of thing. That was probably one of the most
impactful moments in my early journalism career—praying in his living room.”

There were things to be won and lost in Young’s moment of decision. He
chose to step out of the box in which his faith and the edicts of his profession took
up considerable room, said the prayer, and won the right to advance in his
understanding of and connection to humanity. When Young stepped out of routine
and into prayer, he participated in Lakota tribal religion. Did he, as he participated,
cease to be a reporter? Clearly, he was taking part in, not reporting on, the culture
for a brief time. This moment, it seems to me, was part of the journalistic process
necessary on this day. Routine was interrupted. Just as technology has influenced
This interruption in routine created a different dynamic for the dialogue that was to follow, one based on the creation of an open space into which empathy and perhaps compassion could enter. In the instant in which they prayed together, the three men became equal in their humanity. The distance between them became lesser, the prayer an expression of common ground and similarity between the three, despite the different cultures from which they came.

A relationship between equals can foster authentic engagement that can deliver intimate truths. Why authentic? When individuals know themselves to be perceived by another as lesser, they are unlikely to speak openly. When Young chose to pray, he made himself vulnerable and shaped the interview as an I/Thou dialogue.

Young’s experience occurred, in part, because he sat with a source who desired an authentic engagement. Pete Swift Eagle’s request set the tone and defined the interview as sacred space—as a space that should be inviolate or safe from harm--unbroken, undivided and thus of integrity. The participants became one through prayer and then they began their conversation.

Such relationships follow only from a vigilant heart, one faithful in all encounters to that which binds us: our humanity. If a person fears that he or she can never know any of these things absolutely, he or she will take no risks. No journey, no process of development can be without risk.
Dan Foster, a psychologist who lives and works on Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, has served as a source for many journalists over the years, more than once for Young. As a Native American man, a Lakota man, Foster has known reporters who worked against stereotypes, and he has known reporters whose work suffered from the absence of connection.

Foster described Young as a reporter who fosters a sacred journalistic relationship through his manner of interacting with the other. Young is one of few journalists the Native American man has trusted. Often, Foster said, when working as a source, he “learn[s] more about the journalist than the journalist learns” about him or Native culture.

What, I asked Foster, does Young do that has made him a reporter you trust? What must happen for a relationship grounded in connection to occur? One must be trustworthy, respectful, caring and attentive if empathy is to happen. These are attributes that empathy and compassion foster in a human being.

For many writers compassion is a natural part of the process, nothing that needs to be debated. We need to be connected to people at least as well as we are connected to the Internet in this brave new world we inhabit. We cannot care if we do not connect. It’s not that the journalist is mandated by some invisible entity to be detached and detached only. But the historical message has been clear: Objectivity produces truth.

Each of us here in this room possesses depth and breadth as a human being, and we can creatively put our abilities to work through the nurturing of our human capacities and our relationships with each other and with the biotic community.
There is so much yet to be known. Why would we limit our minds, hearts, bodies and spirits?