

**Remarks for the annual conference of the
National Society for Newspaper Columnists**

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by Fenton Johnson

Writing as an Act of Faith

Let me begin by couching this conversation in terms of faith. If that seems a bald ploy to promote my latest book, all I can say is that as a writer who insists on taking my sweet Southern circuitous narrative time in producing everything I write, my first thought on hearing of the existence of an organization called the National Society of Newspaper Columnists was that you all must really be people of the greatest faith, because to rely for your food on the table on the presumption that every other day you're going to be able to generate readable prose is as great an act of faith as I've ever encountered. Maybe more to the point, when you've given six years of your life as fuel to a fire of a book you come to see everything in the particular light it casts -- in this case, the light shed by the question I set out to address -- that is, what does it mean to a skeptic to have and keep faith.

Then I met and corresponded with the conference organizers, from whom I learned that the theme of the conference was to be the importance of diversity. I wasn't asked to address that in

my comments, but in writing remarks such as these, just as in when up against a column deadline, the vacuum cleaner of the mind sucks up every scrap of material that might possibly serve as inspiration. When I heard that diversity was the conference theme, I seized upon that as an excuse to talk about wisdom, for the following reason: The goal of diversity is to bring the wisdom of the outsider -- the powerless -- to the table of the insiders, those who have power.

In all our wisdom traditions, the outsider is the source of wisdom. Born a prince, the Buddha leaves his life of power because he understands that so long as he lives in luxury, he'll never find wisdom. In the Hebrew Bible, wisdom comes from the prophets -- and a more ragtag, unruly, and ill-behaved group of folks you'll not find this side of Bisbee. The Christian Gospels and their elaborations give us Jesus, a renegade anarchist proto-feminist communitarian bachelor radical Jew, however revisionists have always downplayed those aspects of his life. In his teachings he hangs out with and repeatedly directs those who seek wisdom to women, to the poor, to refugees, sinners, prostitutes, outcasts. All of these sources of wisdom are outsiders, and almost none, I cannot resist pointing out, have places of any significance in the current, avowedly Christian administration.

Why is diversity important? I could offer high-falutin reasons having to do with fairness and justice, but the first and most important reason is that it makes for a better product: A better column, a better newspaper, a better community, because those who have power always benefit by hearing from those who do not. If nothing else, we take our power a little less for granted, and that is possibly the most valuable of gifts we may be given.

So here's my first piece of advice for writing bang-up nonfiction prose: Always and every day seek the outsider, both without and within. Women, the poor, refugees, sinners, prostitutes,

outcasts -- we have the gift of outsidership thrust upon us. This is not to say that we're inherently wise -- being an outsider may be a necessary condition for wisdom, but it's not sufficient in and of itself. Wisdom requires that we cultivate our outsidership -- that is, that we seek and promote those aspects of our destiny and our choices that place us outside power.

Here's what I'm saying: That wisdom requires perspective, and the outsider has that as her or his gift, to work with or not as we are able to manage.

A good columnist or commentator is or ought to be someone who for her or his professional life has chosen to be an outsider. We're adept at cultivating an exterior that's respectable enough to get us past the security guards at city hall, even as underneath we guard and cultivate a radical otherness that enables us to be open to the ever-present occasions for writing about and disseminating wisdom. The phrase "popular columnist" ought to be an oxymoron, at least in the circles of power. Whether occasional or regular, columnists and commentators should strive to be the media equivalent of Shakespeare's fools, jesters who are paid to reside at court so that we can speak the ever-unpopular truth. We are the sidekicks whose job it is to be at odds with the system.

What has this to do with writing great columns? Let's face it: the limitations on our ambitions are the limitations on life itself, writ small: that is, time and space. In the middle of composing these remarks I happened to visit the Einstein exhibit at the Museum of Natural History in New York, and I found myself formulating a dumb joke: What does a writer have in common with Einstein? We both devote our lives to grappling with time and space.

And yet -- in the day-to-day labor of churning out readable prose, we lose ourselves in the middle of the struggle, and it's good every once in a while to stand back and be reminded of

where we are and what we do -- that is, the great responsibility and privilege of our vocation.

Writers are storytellers, and our daily task is to lose the self to find the self, as the Christian tradition has it, or to find our ways to the place of "no self," as the Buddhists would say. Our task is to locate and tell stories, often framing them with bits and pieces from our own stories. We are the voices of people who have no ways or means to tell their stories, and if our columns become tomorrow's fishwrap that makes not one iota of difference.

Some years back I was covering that capitalist tragedy called Eastern Kentucky for the *New York Times Magazine*. There I sought out the engineer whom every local source had identified as "the most environmentally conscious strip miner." This is not the place to report the outcome of that particular conversation, but I remember vividly a remark he made toward its beginning: "I tremble before your ability," he said, "to undo everything I've tried to accomplish with a single word." Like most non-writers he romanticized the profession; but still. He had a point, and in a very real way he understood the power of my profession better than I. I have tried not to lose sight of that power, to sink into the inertia and cynicism that the territory invites and instead to remember that life is mystery and gift.

My hardest job is every day to embrace anew the discipline required to listen to and tell the stories of those who for whatever reason cannot lift their voices and sing.

And now to proceed in exactly the reverse direction from that I recommend to my students -- that is, to go from the general to the specific: I'm going to read a commentary I wrote for National Public Radio a few years back, then say a few words about why I think it works. This comes in at about 1000 words, a veritable tome by today's standards -- and modesty would surely dictate that I choose instead another writer's work, but I like this piece and think it yields

satisfaction both at the first and later readings, which is tough for a piece that's so short.

A commentary for National Public Radio

by Fenton Johnson
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A year ago I moved from San Francisco to New York, because for a writer New York is the factory and I figured that after twenty years it was time for the worker to spend some time in the factory. Right now I'm subletting an East Village apartment above my Ukrainian landlady, Doctor Fedorko, who has smoked cigars since long before they were in fashion and who gives the appearance of having always been old, and whose main joy in life is, or was, a fat scruffy little terrier named Tippy.

Tippy looked like an oversized Brillo pad used way too often on too many blackened pots. He had almost as much gray hair as his owner, along with a raspy, grating bark that penetrated walls and ceilings and floors. After several months I came to resent his smoker's bark and scrabbling claws. A day came when over lunch I nursed imaginative ways of disposing, cleanly and painlessly, of the little beast.

But that was a few days ago and the next day was gloriously quiet and warm, the first day of summer after a reluctant spring. With no barking to divert me, I decided I had to go for a run, and on the way out I encountered a note: "Tippy

passed away today.” I felt a momentary twinge of guilt, but mostly I felt sorrow. I’m not a pet person but I’m many years an AIDS widower and I know what it is to be lonely. Dr. Fedorko will be lonely.

I run a lot these days, partly by way of fleeing loneliness -- while I run I’m a moving target. Today as I run I think about Tippy, and how I will miss his aggravation to disturb my quiet days, and what I liked about *Chasing Amy*, the movie I saw a few nights ago.

Chasing Amy is terrific in at least this one way: The people in it are in love, but unlike in Hollywood movies they’re sloppy about it and end up hurting each other without really meaning to, and they go their separate ways bruised and never understanding how they got that way. I know this place because I’m a single guy and often enough I get hit on by men and sometimes women who are coupled to other men or women and want somebody or something else, they don’t know whom or what, they only know the wanting and so they turn to me. It’s tough to say no and sometimes I haven’t and it has never, not once, ended well.

And I think about how this relates to Buddhism, in which I’ve been doing a lot of reading and a little bit of practice because I’m hoping that it will enable me to accept that life is about change and letting go and that it’s all right to be alone in mid-life. I think about a line of poetry I read by the Chinese Buddhist poet Seng Ts’an,

One in all / All in one

and how this is what we all are: Sentient bundles of energy moving through the

universe, how we are of it and it is of us, how the music that drives the spheres is the same music that drives my pounding heart, how death really is nothing, but what remains of Tippy is Doctor Fedorko's grief. What can I do in the face of that?

I run along the East River, through the upended shoeboxes of housing projects that make up Manhattan's Lower East Side. Since spring arrived I have been watching the plane trees leaf out -- I've taken joy in this green life amid the bleak cityscape. And I'm slogging along thinking about Tippy and Buddhism and movies and death when I see a guy and his girl, she's sitting on a bench while he's carving at one of the plane trees with a switchblade. And I'm filled with life, I don't have a thought of anything other than life and so I stop in mid-jog and say, "You know, you'll kill that tree if you keep doing that."

From my hillbilly high school past I hear the voice of my older and wiser brother telling me, a little late in the game, that in a close fight a man with a knife is more dangerous than a man with a gun.

"Oh, yeah?" the guy says, neutral, not hostile. He's young, could stand to lose some weight, his girlfriend is a wisp at the corner of my eye, small and shrinking into herself but watching very carefully. It occurs to me, again too late, that he's probably carving her name.

"Yeah," I say cheerfully, I'm into it now, might as well finish what I've begun. So I explain how the tree has a skin that takes the water to the leaves, and if he cuts the skin all the way around it will kill the tree.

“What about all these other marks?” he says, pointing to other initials carved in years past.

“Well, they’ve healed over,” I say, “because up to a point the tree can heal itself. But enough of those marks and it’s going to die.”

“You think so,” he says, still neutral.

“Let that tree live,” I say. I shoot my fist in the air. “Amen, brother,” I say -- what a dweeb. I figure I’d better get out while the getting is good and so I split. I don’t have the guts to look back, but a couple of days later I return to the scene of the crime, to find, of course, that he’d finished the carving he’d begun.

And this is what I want to say to that sweet couple by the East River and all those coupled people out there, men and women and men and men and women and women, this hackneyed high school thing that I’m years into learning and losing and learning again; spoken, I admit it, as an outsider looking back: Love that life. Argue and fight and bicker and moan, but know that it’s life and it will be gone, you or your partner will be gone soon enough, you or he or she will go back into the energy of being, back into what always is and that’s O.K., that’s copacetic. As an inspired insurance salesman once wrote, “death is the mother of beauty.” But for your brief moment in the here and now, want what you have, my princes, strut and be splendid. We only have time for life.

What works about this piece?

- 1) Begin with anecdote; told in present tense (Although: Note that in general the past tense

serves the writer better.)

2) Use of many colors from the writer's palette:

-- dialogue

-- moving around in time -- the writer's past is present to the current moment

3) importance of movement: At the end of reading your work I'm twenty minutes closer to my death.

4) direct address to reader at end

5) avoid use of forms of the verb to "to be"

To sum up:

1) Fight the one-sentence paragraph.

2) Allow yourself the pleasure of occasionally using not four-dollar, but at least two-dollar words, and do so unapologetically.

3) Prefer "I" to the tired and overused informal "you" -- take responsibility for what you write.

4) Seek and tell stories, especially those of the voiceless -- of the outsiders.

5) Be a leader, knowing that to lead, in the fullest sense, is to place oneself where enemy fire will fall heaviest.

And finally, back to the issue with which I opened these remarks. What does it mean to have and keep faith? A story, after all, has no tangible consequence; it cannot be weighed and measured and sold. What name does one give to the powerful, universally shared understanding

that our stories matter? The word I choose is "faith."

We hear much these days about a crisis in faith, and I couldn't agree more. We are indeed in a crisis of faith, in which those who believe that working together we can achieve a more just, more equitable, more humanitarian society are silent in the face of the clamor from those whose response to this crisis in faith is to urge us to go shopping, to go deeper in debt, to mortgage our children's future to pay for limitless consumption today. We who take seriously the Gospel, or the Torah, or the dharma, or the Constitution have a responsibility to speak out, to reinforce and restore our faith in human endeavor -- our faith in ourselves to imagine and live out our best possible selves. In this we writers must see ourselves as prophets, and writing as our 21st century tool for spreading the word.

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