

Surviving the Journalism Bug

by [Jeff Plude](#) (September 2019)



Love never dies,
Only illusion dies
So when I bring
My love for you
I do not cry
Although my eyes
are watering

W. M.

It was college graduation season and my wife received a text from an old friend asking if I could help her son and maybe give him some advice about pursuing a career in journalism. When my wife told me, I said to her: "What did she do to him?"

I was only joking, since I knew my wife's friend. And I have no doubt that her son was born that way. It's a congenital condition, I'm afraid, though it's sometimes latent, as it mostly was with me. But it's always there, young or old. My wife often says to me, when I start with the questions about whatever she's been telling me, or sometimes is still telling me: "Stop being journalist all the time." I remember my father saying something similar to me when I was a boy, throwing in a choice curse damning my "questions."

Journalism doesn't even feel like a job to the right kind of person, that is a born journalist. I've always liked the scene in the movie *All the President's Men* in which Ben Bradlee, the flamboyant executive editor of the *Washington Post*, is challenged at a daily news-budget meeting about his "compulsion" for Watergate. What if Woodward and Bernstein get it wrong? "Then it's our ass, isn't it?" Bradlee sneers. Howard Simons, the managing editor, immediately breaks the tension: "We all have to go out and work for a living."

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In fact I think it was only during the past half century, in the afterglow of Watergate, when journalism began to be seen as not just a romantic but a noble career. And there I was, right on the crest of it, fresh out of a middling university with no clips, not even an introductory journalism class, which I was closed out of because there were already too many students enrolled in it. Even the university newspaper had no space on its staff or its pages. I hadn't decided that's what I was going to try to make a living at until my junior year, which is when I discovered Ernest Hemingway, whose clear and evocative and rhythmic prose opened my literary eyes. And I liked what he wrote about—boxing, hunting, fishing, camping, wine, food, Paris, Italy, Spain, skiing (along with love and death and courage and all that). When he was young he made a living as a newspaper reporter. Suddenly that's what I wanted to do. Though deep down, like him, I really wanted to be what I thought was a *real* writer—a novelist, a short story writer. Hemingway said journalism is good training for a writer as long as he gets out of it in time. But that was later. For now I wanted in. There was nothing else I wanted to do for a living.

But I couldn't quite believe that I would ever really be a newspaper reporter. I'd never known anybody personally who'd been one. Even more, I'd never been much of a newspaper reader myself, though both my parents were. But they read the local paper only. Daily newspapers from New York City or even Albany never made it into our house. And though like my father I was avid about history, which newspapers are supposed to be the first draft of, I read only the sports pages through high school.

Sports was what the only newspaper reporter I knew wrote about: the guy who covered local high school wrestling. Though I didn't really know him, had only exchanged greetings with him. He was young but not as young as I was when I got my first newspaper job. He was balding, maybe in his late twenties, and seemed quiet. I liked the way he wrote about our matches, though the fact that I glowingly starred in some of his stories surely wasn't lost on me. After having been a reporter myself, starting out on that very same paper only a few years later, which had a healthy daily circulation at the time of about 35,000 but now has only a quarter of the subscribers, I could tell that he'd decided to throw himself into his beat rather than go through the motions, as many reporters would have who were assigned to cover a second-tier sport in the hinterlands. He sometimes described the matches in detail—one time it was me and my archenemy in the finals of a tournament, he declared that our match was “worth the price of admission,” and went on to tell it like it was a great battle, or a play. That was my introduction to feature writing, and it left a lasting impression on me.

But landing the kind of job I wanted—William Kennedy started his career at the same paper and later won a Pulitzer in fiction—didn't necessarily mean true love. The confirmation came one night when I was working on a profile about a cabinetmaker whose pieces had won prizes in prominent art shows. My father had built wood furniture, so woodworking was something I'd grown up with. I was tapping away at my bulky computer terminal when the managing editor, who was pretty bulky himself, suddenly appeared out of nowhere at my desk. Why was I still there? he wanted to know. My shift had ended a while ago. I said I was working on the feature. “You've got the bug,” he pronounced, and walked away like some jaded doctor who's seen the symptoms all too often.

Bug is a good word for it. It's an enthusiasm, but it's also like a sickness. Journalism seems to weigh its practitioners down in a way that's different than say, doctors, who after all see the woes of the world as part of their workday. But the difference is that doctors also are lauded and respected and well-paid, while journalists are generally at the bottom of the white-collar pile, necessary but nevertheless nuisances. Doctors, at best, heal people; journalists, at best, pester them. I think of Socrates calling himself a gadfly on his homeland, destined to buzz the heads of the citizens who make up the bulk of the state. It's a symbiotic but antagonistic relationship. Though neither can live without the other, détente is the best that can be expected.

Yet after nearly eight years—with a couple of years off for grad school in literature, trying to stay faithful to my true desire—my newspaper career was over, though for a while I continued writing freelance journalism for newspapers and magazines. In my second and last newspaper job, which lasted about a half dozen years, I was a feature writer and an assistant lifestyles editor for a mid-size daily paper in a dying industrial city that was home to General Electric in its glory days and not far from New York's state capital, and I could write about almost anything I wanted. Some thought I was crazy to leave. But I was weary of the editors, a couple of whom I was constantly butting heads with. I wanted to spread my wings at a bigger paper, or even a magazine, instead of having them hacked off where I was. The newspaper business, however, was already in stage one of its slow, agonizing decline, which if not quite terminal now seems chronic. A few years earlier a large number of the editorial staff at our paper was laid off, foreshadowing darker days to come. *The Wall Street Journal*, one of whose editors I was talking to right before I became a freelancer, also downsized. I turned

down a job as head lifestyles editor at a medium-size paper near Manhattan that was supposedly a feeder of sorts to the big metro dailies. I was approaching my mid-thirties, Mount Parnassus loomed on the horizon, and I could hear Hemingway in my mind's ear: *Journalism is good training for a writer as long as he gets out of it in time.* My wife had a good job in a solid profession. It seemed like the right time for me to get out of daily journalism.

I didn't think I had much to lose—I figured I could always go back. But then all of a sudden there wasn't much to go back to, even if I'd wanted to. Newspapers are still kicking, but they're almost unrecognizable. Journalism has yet to recover from the tsunami of the internet, and in its wake the social media earthquake whose aftershocks go on and on. Along with hoards of subscribers, many of my former colleagues sought refuge elsewhere, though some lingered on in various newsrooms. Even some stars were being unceremoniously cut off: An Ivy League colleague ascended the heights to a metro daily but was eventually laid off, though he landed safely at a think tank, which I think of as a sort of upscale condo community for elderly ink-stained wretches.

Which leads me full circle back to the mother and her son, full of anticipation and adventure, the young man I'm supposed to help. First of all, let me say that when I think of advice, I remember Samuel Johnson:

I have, all my life long, been lying till noon; yet I tell all young men, and tell them with great sincerity, that no one who does not rise early will ever do any good.

Let me also say that I'm confining myself to daily newspapers. I'm doing this because my own journalism experience was at daily newspapers, which I still think is the proper and best way to learn to be a journalist. *Journalist*, in fact, is derived from *journal*, which has the same meaning in English as it does in French, and is in turn derived from *jour*, or day. Arthur Schopenhauer, as he often did, takes it one step further:

A multitude of bad writers lives exclusively on the stupid desire of the public to read nothing but what has just been written: the journalists. Well named! In English the word means "day-laborers."

That's not to say that anybody who hasn't worked for a daily newspaper can't write journalistic pieces. Just that, in my view, he isn't a journalist proper.

With that said, the first thing about journalism is the big O: Objectivity. At least on Earth, it's unachievable, but should still be striven for by the true journalist. This may seem too obvious to even mention, but in the new dark age of fake news and hit pieces, I think it bears repeating, especially to a young person who may have no real understanding or experience of such a concept. Despite the popularity of New Journalism—which is now a half century old—subjectivity and advocacy are anathema in daily journalism.

I think another obvious but necessary consideration is fraud, whether it's plagiarism or just plain making it up. It's nothing new, of course, but it seems more prevalent than ever,

maybe because it's easier to get caught now thanks to the internet. One of the worst cases in the modern era was Janet Cooke, who faked a series of stories for the *Washington Post* not quite a decade after Watergate, while Mr. Bradley was still the paper's executive editor, that won her and the paper a Pulitzer and then infamy. On the other hand, the internet may prove a greater temptation than ever for some journalists. Posts, articles, essays, and books galore, like porn, are now only fingertips away. To make matters worse, what used to be a daily news cycle is continuous. And once a journalist plagiarizes or fabricates, he becomes a fabulist. He can no longer be trusted.

I like the saying that journalists should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, though I'd add that they should afflict only when they must. Journalists usually have a strong streak of justice, but self-appointed avengers must be very careful.

For instance, I read a feature story the young man in question wrote about two of his fellow college students who feared deportation because President Trump wasn't expected to continue DACA, the "Dreamers" policy of the previous administration. At no time does the young man mention or even seem aware of the fact that the subjects of his article and their parents were living in our country illegally and willfully breaking federal immigration law. That's a fact, not an opinion. And most if not all countries have similar laws, including the countries that the subjects of his article are citizens of. The mainstream press commits the same error of omission daily. As Jesus said to his disciples in a very different context, a time was coming when people who kill Christians will believe they're doing God a service.

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What isn't in the comfort-and-afflict epigram is that the journalist, if he's good enough, can even enlighten readers, not merely inform them. I think nuance, brushstrokes of telling details, is the key. This is where journalism, in my view, can approach the power of fiction. This is fiction's true domain, which I believe journalism can visit but never truly inhabit. But they may be mutual allies that help feed and fuel each other. That's what Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, quoted in the editor's note of *The Scandal of the Century and Other Writings*, a new book of his journalism, seems to think:

I am basically a journalist. All my life I have been a journalist. My books are the books of a journalist, even if it's not so noticeable.

As for actual writing and reporting, I remember reading that a managing editor of a newspaper said that she'd rather hire somebody who'd majored in English in college than journalism, since she could easily teach somebody the ins and outs of journalism but didn't have time to teach him or her how to write well and tell a good story. So I would say that reading good fiction, paradoxically, is essential for young journalists. On the more technical side, when I was starting out, I read a book that helped me, brazenly called *The Word*, now more prosaically retitled *The Associated Press Guide to*

News Writing. I also recommend George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language."

I'd also suggest to get out of the hive of the office and from inside the tangle of the internet and to go out and see and hear things for yourself, when you can. If you're going to be the eyes and ears of the public, make sure you're not intellectually nearsighted and that you don't have psychological tinnitus. At a press conference or meeting or some such gathering, instead of joining the swarm and firing questions after it's over, stand back nearby and watch and listen. You can hover as well as buzz and be effective. And when you put your notebook away and start to walk away from your interviewee, be ready for the best quotes of all, which you can jot down as soon as you leave. And I do suggest you use a notebook, not just a voice recorder (or worse yet, shoot video), in which you write the story as you go with your notes.

Finally, I say to this young man's mother: Don't worry, he'll probably eventually wind up in a comfortable job in PR, marketing, government, a nonprofit, or teaching. The only thing is, he'll then have to work for a living.

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