
The McGill Lecture

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You can influence destiny. Those are the four words that came to me the day before I became a publisher of a newspaper in upstate New York. They came to me from a lady who was my first boss. She was the office manager of the circulation department, and I had been the office boy for her. And I was, frankly, very apprehensive about becoming publisher of this newspaper, because there was much that I had not done. And I went to have a little private visit with her. Now Margaret Mahoney said to me, in assessing my apprehension, "You will do this job because you can change the destiny of this place." She was a thread of life for me. And what I'm going to do today is chat with you about threads of life that weave themselves into your personal tapestry and enrich your essence.

First, let me tell you a little bit about our company. The Hearst Corporation has 140 media businesses. We are the largest monthly magazine publisher in the world, and the head of that company is named Cathy Black. We are also large owners of cable networks in partnership with, now, Disney. We own ESPN, ESPN 2, The History Channel, Lifetime Television and Arts and Entertainment. We're the largest television-only broadcaster in the country, and we're the seventh-largest newspaper company in the country.

So we put all these together and what we're about is what you're all about. We're all about connecting to readers and viewers. As was mentioned, I've been with the company for 46 years. I was a young 16-year-old office boy. I happened to grow up in five foster homes. So I had no family, no background, no money, no aspirations, no possibility of being what you are here today — students of (this) great school. But I met this lady, who was the office manager, and she was a thread of life for me. And from the day I met her, she inspired me to be more than I could be, and 19 years after I walked in the door as the office boy, I was a publisher of that newspaper. And I was the publisher of that newspaper because people crossed my path and gave me some gift of theirs that permitted me to weave a personal tapestry.

Those of you who have been journalism students and have looked at the history of Hearst know that there probably was never a more powerful name in

American journalism than William Randolph Hearst, and you also know that with that power came the idea of yellow journalism, and much of our early history was basking in that pejorative of yellow. It only fell away because history caused that to occur. And Mr. Hearst believed that it was hypocritical to be a friend of the working man and not be unionized, so he gave union representation to all of our newspapers in 1932 — the so-called Hearst National Memorandum. And so, in city after city around this country, our newspapers were totally unionized, with all of the infirmities that can be included in that representation, and competing against non-union newspapers. He also believed that owning big-city afternoon newspapers was the right thing to do, but when television came into play, the least attractive thing to be in the media business was a big-city afternoon newspaper. And so the Hearst newspapers had left behind the idea of yellow journalism, and they entered into a period of being the troubled Hearst newspapers.

I ran the smallest Hearst newspaper in upstate New York, in Albany, my hometown. It was the only one that wasn't troubled at the time. I say to my colleagues that before I took over the company, I ran the most successful Hearst newspaper. But of course no other Hearst newspapers were successful, so it wasn't really a great achievement.

But that's what we had ... we had moved from yellow to troubles, and then a group of us came together in New York, just two decades ago — the time when many of you were being born. We were being reborn, and we went to New York determined to write a new chapter for the Hearst newspapers. And the very first thing we did was to determine to hire tall — to hire the best talent we could find — to begin to infuse greatness into our editorial products. And what we did was come to Georgia. And we chose as our first tall hiree Ralph McGill's protégé, Reg Murphy. And if you go back to Feb. 4, 1969, and look at the first page of *The Atlanta Constitution*, you'll read a story about the passing of Ralph McGill. And that story, on Feb. 4, 1969, would byline Reg Murphy.

A few years later, we recruited Reg Murphy from Atlanta to San Francisco, and he became a beacon. He became an emblem of the kind of commitment the new Hearst newspapers would make to excellence. He brought with him the values and the character and the spirit and the vitality of Ralph McGill. So you see our first thread of life in our new tapestry was just an extension of Ralph McGill. And that beacon has never diminished. We've never stopped excelling since that first day when Reg Murphy was infused into our operations.

Each of us has some threads of life that are woven into our personal tapestry. And that also happens within a business, and within an institution, and within an organization. This university as you walk around it today, this school of journalism as you participate in it today, did not simply happen. It is an extension of threads being woven into this tapestry of the school,

and of this university, throughout its history. So what is true for a business is true for an institution.

Last week, we had certain publishers and select colleagues in New York for several days of conferences. One of those conferences was an all-morning session about the emerging new media. Now I've been in our business for 47 years, and what I've lived through is transformational change. I've seen enormous changes in the production technology of newspapers. I've seen enormous changes in the labor and human relations and human-resource aspect of newspapers. I've seen great changes in the marketing of newspapers. I've seen great changes in the content of newspapers. But what has not changed in those 46 years are the fundamental values that make a newspaper essential. And those were the fundamental values of Ralph McGill. They were a commitment to that use, a commitment to vitality, a commitment to character and a commitment to spirit.

And as we look out on the emerging media landscape, as we listened to the panel of folks dealing with tomorrow's media presence last week in New York, the average age of that group of panelists looked about 13. You know what I'm talking about, because you know that the whole field throbs with fresh, new insights from fresh, new talents. And as I heard them talk about why traditional media may be jeopardized — and they talked about the new ways to resonate with audiences, etc. — well, what went through my mind was the fact that the flaw in their thinking was that we cannot just be about resonating with audiences. We have to be about some greater essence. That greater essence was what made Ralph McGill a legend. That greater essence has to embrace values. It has to embrace the vitality of a product. It has to embrace character: standing for something. It has to embrace a spirit. I know that what you are about here is skill enhancement and insights, and that's a fundamental that must be achieved. Our businesses must have your talents in them, but if we don't represent something beyond that in our essence, if we don't find a yearning to prove that a newspaper in a community is a vessel of character, values, spirit and vitality, then we waste your talents.

So that while the emerging media landscape is one that is fraught with uncertainty, we perceive a great fog out there as to how we will be participating — not we as a company, but we as people in the media sectors of tomorrow. We are uncertain as to what the clear direction lights are going to be. We think we are going to have a number of failures. We think we are going to have submissive ventures. We think we are going to have some bad judgments, but

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we think this: We think that if at the essence we preserve what Ralph McGill stood for as an icon and care about having that essence include values and character and spirit and vitality, then we'll find a way to clear our way through that fog. So we are optimistic about tomorrow's media world, even though uncertain as to the roads we may travel.

I was saying to McGill's widow, Dr. Mary Lynn Morgan, that the request to come here was a bonus. The second bonus in the request was the fact that I was (encouraged) to read Ralph McGill's works. And I felt as if there was a thread of life connecting us because in 1969 I became a newspaper publisher, and in 1969 Ralph McGill wrote his final column. I had no knowledge of him at that time, but we shared that year together — a year of beginning for me, a year of conclusion for him. And as I read through his columns that so much spoke to the kind of right thinking that Dean Russell described, I was so struck by the fact that he also had a capacity to be very fundamentally human. I read perhaps 30 of his columns, and in October of 1944, I read the column about Brunswick stew. A lady had written to him and asked him whether in the preparation of Brunswick stew, you should grind the beef or shred the beef, and that simple inquiry produced this beautiful, beautiful portrait of a pine-laden pot out cooking in the open air as Brunswick stew, Georgia style, was properly created. And when I put the column down, I said to myself I would pay anything for a dish of Brunswick stew. So this man, who advocated such rightness of thinking, also had the same capacity that each of you has for appreciating the simple things of life, and isn't that what we should also be about in our journalistic enterprises? Shouldn't we be about both the advocacy of what is right for our society as well as offering people the simple sinew of those things that represent basic satisfying lives?

The other bonus I got out of this assignment was to read most of the prior lectures you've had here. And I must tell you that I felt so out of keeping because almost everyone else who stood before this group has been a truly distinguished journalist: last year, Robin Wright, with her wonderful passion and advocacy of journalists having to deal with human rights across the world; Helen Thomas here talking to you about the conflict between the administrative branch and the White House correspondents; Jack Nelson, of The Los Angeles Times, talking about the inherent conflict in covering municipal governments and Katharine Graham, standing here before you talking about the proper role of a business as well as a high-quality journalistic group.

As I read through all of their remarks, I thought to myself in every case they were dealing with some wart, some gap, some absence, some warning about the free press and our society. And what struck me was that regardless of when they were here before you, their basic truths are still true. They're still resonating. Those same challenges ... will remain with us. And I thought to myself isn't this a shame, that those high-quality journalists who have occupied this platform before me had a legitimate ring of pessimism to them. And the shameful thing is that I'm just a business man. I'm just a former office boy, and I

could not be more optimistic about our business, and I worry that my optimism may make me appear like an Amway distributor before you this afternoon. But I will tell you the cause of my optimism.

The cause of my optimism is in this room because I know what drives our 140 businesses. We talked with some of your fellow students about this this morning, and what drives those businesses is what you are — talent. You must never, ever forget that. And in addition to your skills and competency here, you are talented, and you will influence destiny someday because of your talents.

The second thing that gives me cause for optimism is that we still have with us the threads of life influencing our tapestry. There was the magic of the mind of Ralph McGill. And in our case, personally and directly influenced because our first tall hire was a Georgia boy named Reg Murphy, who is still excelling, now recreating National Geographic. And it got me thinking further that if we are true to the legacy that we've all inherited from the symbol of an icon like Ralph McGill — true, true, seen to it that when we have a responsibility to influence the destiny of some media organization, that we do it with a sense of values, and we do it caring about the spirit of that place. And we do it while nourishing the vitality of that place, and we do it while caring about the character of that place. If those things are in our essence when we emerge to have the responsibility that this former office boy has had, then these journalistic enterprises will continue to be part of the essence of our free society.

You know, everyone in this room has a unique personal essence. There is a defining essence that makes you YOU. And one of the great gifts that we can have is to reveal and share that essence. As I read through all of those columns of Ralph McGill's, I could picture myself. As I just said to his widow, I could picture myself off in a log cabin, both of us wearing old rumpled sweaters, good fire going, and I was watching him have the

magic of his thoughts drip through his fingertips onto a typewriter. He poured his essence into those columns. That's what he really shared with us. And because everyone here has a unique essence to share, you are filled with the same opportunities to enrich others by your shared essence. It's only when you reveal it and share it, that essence resonates. Think about some of the great figures in history who have shared their essence. You think about it when I say Shakespeare to you. His sonnets were out of his essence being shared. You think of it when I say Beethoven to you and the magical balance of his music. That was his shared essence still with us to this day. You think about it when I say Martin Luther King (Jr.) or "I have a dream" to you. That was his essence being poured out. And if we are conscious of our essence as we emerge to have responsibilities in the media world that we're all, I hope, in love with, it is the

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sharing of that essence that will be the infusion of values in character, as spirit and vitality, into those identities.

I want to tell you about a few people who I believe are a subtle ripple reflection of the smooth stone of Ralph McGill being tossed on the lake of potential readers. Because the ripples just fight, those threads of life continue on. You see, his smooth stone urged fairness in treating people. His smooth stone urged that talents be given an unfettered opportunity to participate in our society. His ripple is in our Seattle Post-Intelligencer. It's in the form of a young man named Jeffrey Shannon.

Jeffrey Shannon is a gifted movie critic. He has a marvelous, marvelous sense of getting into the soul of reviewing a movie. And if you were watching him prepare his review, you would see Jeffrey Shannon with a stick in his mouth,

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and with a stick, he would type his review because he's a paraplegic. When he graduated from high school, there was a terrible, tragic accident that made him a paraplegic, and he went to film school, and he came out committed to being a film critic for a major newspaper. His work has been brilliant. I'm not sure that a paraplegic in a wheelchair would have been welcome in a newsroom in America if Ralph McGill

hadn't put a stone on the water that said "Welcome, talent, regardless of limitations." And similarly, if we are in one of our small papers in Michigan, and you asked to meet the courthouse reporter, Cheryl Wade, and I brought you down the aisle to her desk, you'd have to step over her seeing eye dog, because Cheryl Wade is a blind courthouse reporter. I believe that Cheryl Wade is at our newspaper because Ralph McGill put that stone in the water of fairness and seeking talent wherever it may be.

I mentioned I had a bonus in coming here and reading Ralph McGill's works. Well, I had another bonus the last time I came here because I met (then Grady student) Kelli Parker, and I came to understand from that student what it means to be motivated to excel. This fellow student of yours happened to come to New York for the summer, had an internship with a magazine and had written a note to me after I spoke to you last because we shared something in common. The thing we shared in common was the fact that she, like myself, had grown up in foster homes, and she wrote to me because she wanted to thank me for a comment I had made that encouraged her to have optimism as she faced her senior year. And so, when I found out she was having an internship in New York City, I looked her up, and I kind of adopted her for the summer. We got to know each other. I arranged for her to be interviewed by our magazine people. I set her up to be interviewed by our newspaper people. She spent two days there working the copy desk, etc., and we sent her tickets every other week to something in New York so that she'd get to know it, but my bonus was to get to

know one of your fellow students. And that bonus taught me a great lesson, because I said to her, in the last luncheon that we had together, "Why are you at the University of Georgia, which only has a six-percent minority population? Wouldn't it have been more comfortable to go to a school where you fit in easier?" And her reaction to me says a lot about all of you. Her answer to me was this: "I'm at the University of Georgia because it is the best journalism school in this state, and when I wanted to be a journalist, I decided that I wanted to excel as a journalist, and the place to learn how to do that is to be at the great school at the University of Georgia."

That's a great commentary on two things. It's a commentary on the quality of this place. It's a commentary on the appetite to excel. I think Kelli Parker is another ripple from the stone of Ralph McGill urging that we do the right thing. We benefit from having Jeffrey Shannon at the Seattle Post - Intelligencer. We benefit from having Cheryl Wade at our midland Michigan newspaper. This school benefits from Kelli Parker being here. Ralph McGill shared his essence to have that happen. The infusion of that essence into the tapestry of the media world is a permanent presence, a permanent value, in my view ...

Someone's hands have been responsible for every person in this room having threads of life that weave a personal tapestry. Someone's hands have been part of your personal essence, and there is going to come a time when you're going to be permitted the gift of giving your hands to be the thread of life in someone else's personal tapestry. Ralph McGill let his hands be the instrument of the greatness of his mind. And the greatness of his mind was anchored in very simple premises: have values, have character, have spirit, have vitality. And when you, one day, are in a position to put your hands on some media entity, let the competency of this place flow through you. Let the skills of this place flow through you. Let the aptitude of this place flow through you, but so too, ... let your commitments to the Ralph McGill icon of character and values and vitality and spirit flow through you. If you do that, then the tapestry that you help weave will have a permanent brilliance to it.

You've been very gracious to let me join you today. Thank you.