

The McGill Lecture

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It was the spring of 1968. The weight of Vietnam caused LBJ to quit his race for the White House. An assassin murdered Martin Luther King. America rioted and its cities burned. Sirhan Sirhan shot down Bobby Kennedy.

Ralph McGill had but a short time to live.

It's been 30 years, but big news events, especially so many in such a brief period, never feel that distant.

The young man, so caught up in it all, dreamed of the day he would become a newspaperman. A college freshman with one summer of obits, police briefs and press release rewrites behind him on a big-city daily, he could only dream of becoming the journalist that McGill already was. The kind of journalist whose coverage of big events mattered.

He was 18, and he boarded his first airplane to fly to Washington, D.C. that June. It seemed to be where a newspaperman, even an aspiring one, should go. He especially wanted to see a place called "Resurrection City." The tents and lean-tos covered almost every square foot between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Children by the hundreds played in the Reflecting Pool. Poor people by the thousands had come to their nation's capital.

Their actions spoke of war, their heroes' pointless murders, as well as their poverty. Yet their actions also spoke of hope.

These were the people for whom Ralph McGill often wrote. And it's only just occurred to me, as the 30th anniversary of his death approaches, that my own youthful idealism and journalistic passion drew me to them. The McGill link, admittedly thin, is there nonetheless.

That 18-year-old boy is honored to stand before you today. But can he say, especially when measured against the legend that has become Ralph McGill, that his idealism remains firm and his journalistic passion still burns? For now that boy's focus is every bit as much on bottom-line performance as headline significance.

In his invitation, Tom Russell put it this way: "Even some journalists doubt big business and courageous journalism can co-exist in the same house. So what is the formula ... required between the marketing of newspapers and the journalism that goes in them?" Before answering, a

disclosure is in order. That same idealistic kid has also been hung in effigy — quite literally — by some of the highest high lords of journalism, self-annointed though they were. My decision to accept the resignation of a certain Atlanta Journal-Constitution editor a decade ago prompted a New Orleans-style funeral parade in the editor's honor.

As the 100-or-so marchers made their way down Atlanta's Marietta Street past the newspaper building where I served as publisher, there, swinging from a high pole, was the most amazing likeness of me that I've ever seen. A picture appeared in the next week's issue of Newsweek.

All of this, of course, prompted a call from my always-supportive mother.

"I just knew you'd make it into a national magazine," her voice chirped with pride.

I had neither the heart nor the energy to tell mom the full story, but I have plenty of heart and plenty of energy today.

I put that episode behind me soon after it happened, and I have no plan to re-visit it today. It did, however, shape and sharpen my commitment to the newspaper calling I hold so dear.

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For newspapers have never been more alive, more vital to the lives of readers and more crucial to the society in which we live. Quality journalism supported by increasingly sophisticated business practices have made it so. The two go together. I've never seen, let alone heard of, a journalistically strong newspaper that wasn't equally strong on the business side.

Such a claim in an era of flat circulation, softening readership and embarrassing journalistic missteps may sound preposterous, but it's not. The

babel of so many voices contributing to the ever-declining threshold of what passes for truth compels newspapers to perform to higher journalistic standards than ever before.

Fundamental to the past, present and future of newspapers is this pursuit of truth on behalf of the people they serve, their readers. Without this foundation, I am convinced, newspapers have no reason for being. They would have no audience to serve. And without an audience,

advertisers, who provide 80 percent of the typical newspaper's revenue, would quickly find other places to spend their promotional and marketing dollars.

Former New York Times editor Max Frankel recently put it this way: "Fiction and fact live in radically different emotional worlds, and fabricators greedily want the best of both." Frankel wrote in criticizing those recently turned out from the journalistic ranks for their greed. "Happily," however, he concluded, "journalism's infantry slogs on, struggling to distinguish fact from fiction."

For every too-good-to-be-true quote invented by a desperate columnist intent on building an undeserved reputation, thousands of workaday journalists commit their daily lives to the pursuit of

accuracy and fairness. They are the infantry to whom Frankel refers and they are the single greatest asset newspapers possess. Their work distinguishes newspapers from the breathless 24-hour-a-day chatter of all-news radio and television. Their coverage, especially that which we call enterprise, usually sets the agenda for their media kin.

McGill, I think, would be proud of the generation of journalists who have followed him. Consider, for instance, Jane Hanson, a reporter at McGill's own newspaper, *The Constitution*. Her work on behalf of Georgia's foster children years ago led to statewide soul-searching and reform when she discovered more than 50 children in the state's care had died under what could be charitably classified as "mysterious circumstances." Just recently, Jane took another look at children, this time focusing on those born into the world of crack cocaine, who now are bearing children of their own. This lost generation can be saved, the reporting suggested, and it explained how. Based on the response reported this past Sunday from those who want to help, the story touched readers in the most fundamental of ways.

Jane Hansen's work typifies what is best about newspapers. I think there is far more of this journalism than we realize or recognize. Sometimes, it travels under the banner of "civic" journalism. Other times it is called public affairs or investigative reporting. To me, it's just the plain, old-fashioned reporting that reflects the idealism that drew so many of us to the profession.

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The financial side of newspapering has grown just as complex. If Jack Tarver, McGill's publisher, felt he had to "steady the soapbox" for his newspaper star, today's publishers must do the same while battling competitors stronger and fiercer than have ever existed. For the steadiness of the soapbox, as anyone knows who has ever bought paper by the railroad car or ink by the barrel, had never been more rickety. McGill and Tarver faced competition from two or three over-the-air television outlets and a handful of AM radio stations. Time does not permit a recitation of all the competitors, in a variety of media, that face today's publisher.

Still around, of course, are the critics of newspapers (and free speech, for that matter) who existed then and now. Toppling the soapbox is their life's dream.

Sadly, they are joined by some who would undermine its stability by gnawing at the foundation from within. They're blind to the important relationship between financial and journalistic strength.

I learned this lesson as a new publisher in Dayton, Ohio, when I faced one of the most difficult professional decisions of my life. In an attempt to protect and extend our newspaper resources amid steadily declining profits, I saw the need to merge the news staffs of our commonly owned, but highly competitive, morning and afternoon newspapers. We also laid off some employees, mostly outside the newsroom. As someone who had grown up as a reporter on one of those newspapers and lived for the daily battle we fought for news, the decision was especially painful. But nothing hurt as much as when I read what one of our reporters had to say — under the cloak of anonymity — in our newspaper the next day.

"Now I know how the folks in Xenia felt," the reporter said, referring to a community near Dayton that had lost nearly 40 of its people to a tornado some years earlier.

Think about that. We were desperately working to guarantee the newspaper's survival and a reporter compared that to a tragedy that claimed human life itself. What a pity that he could see no difference. I was embarrassed for him, as well as for our profession.

Financial health returned to Dayton. Its journalistic wellbeing survived, as evidenced by last spring's Pulitzer to The Dayton Daily News for its coverage of abuses in the military medical system.

It is this ongoing assumption that those charged with a newspaper's financial health would trade quality journalism for a better bottom line that especially galls.

There ought to be a special shame (conferred) on those who once occupied some of the top newspaper editorships who now snipe from safe academic nests. They're always available with a quote that

preserves their place in history by disparaging those who have followed them. If the "villain" occupies the publisher's office, that's all the better.

Typical is this quote, attributed to Gene Roberts, former Philadelphia Inquirer editor and New York Times managing editor, in a Columbia Journalism Review article that ran this summer. It's entitled "Money Lust: How Pressure for Profit is Perverting Journalism."

"News coverage is being shaped by corporate executives at headquarters far from the local scene," Roberts, now a journalism professor at the University of Maryland, told a press group in California. "(The shaping) is seldom done by corporate directive or fiat. It rarely involves killing or slanting stories. Usually it is by the appointment of a pliable editor here, a corporate graphics conference there, that results in a more uniform look, a more cookie-cutter approach among the chain's newspapers, or the corporate research director's interpretation of reader surveys that see common denominator solutions to complex coverage problems ... As papers become increasingly shallow and niggardly they lose their essentiality to their readers and their communities. And this is ultimately suicidal."

Another editor once told me readers give us far more credit than we deserve for being Machiavellian. The same, I fear, could be said for Gene Roberts' overblown view of newspapers today. His friends and followers have spent much of the last decade mocking Roberts' former employer, Knight Ridder, which owns The Philadelphia Inquirer. To believe them is to believe that this great newspaper group bartered its journalistic soul for financial fortune. That, of course, is nonsense.

I'm not here to make a case for Knight Ridder. Nor am I here to pick on Gene Roberts whose views, if nothing else, will keep us focused. These fellows can take care of themselves.

What I am here to do is to make a case for the end to the divisive nonsense that says high-quality journalism and financial success can't co-exist. It's something that shouldn't have to be done. But I've had a gut full of these so-called lions of journalism who roar and

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preen while the rest of us lead the herd in the hunt for better newspapering.

Casting aside the handful of newspaper owners (and, thankfully, they are just a few) who use their presses as a legal way to print money, the vast majority of newspaper companies I know are playing for the

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long term. They recognize that their future rests with the communities whose names appear in their nameplates. They know these competitive and demanding times compel them to publish quality newspapers if they hope to survive.

They have names like Knight Ridder, Belo, New York Times, Tribune, McClatchy, Gannett, Scripps Howard and, I'm proud to say, Cox, to name but a few. What matters most is the commitment the owner of that newspaper has to the

community it serves. Commitment personifies itself in the quality and character of the publisher and editor who lead a newspaper.

And, if you will permit me this aside, I'd like to say a word on behalf of the Cox family, owners of the newspaper company for which I have worked for 27 years. It's not accidental that the single newspaper, bought for less than \$30,000 a century ago by James M. Cox, the schoolteacher-turned-journalist who would later become the governor of Ohio and a nominee for president of the United States, has grown into the several billion-dollar multimedia company of today.

Just as the governor's business acumen passed down through the generations to his grandson, Jim Kennedy, our chairman, so, too, did his journalistic courage. Just as the governor stood up to unenlightened civic and business leaders in Dayton, Ohio, in the early 1900s, Jim Kennedy has made his brave stands. Just as Gov. Cox and his son, Jim Cox Jr., stood behind McGill, so, too, has Jim Kennedy stood behind his newspaper men and women.

I have watched politicians, business leaders, law enforcement officials and many more attempt to sway Jim Kennedy. And Jim, a former publisher himself, has given them a fair hearing. He's followed up with tough questions of his people. Lord, do I know that! Without fail, he's come down on the right side of the answer. He's never buckled when we were right, which, fortunately, has been far more often than

not. And he's done the equally brave and correct thing of setting the record straight when we were wrong.

Here, then, is the "formula" asked by Tom Russell of this newspaper man who truly believes it is his duty to compete as vigorously for profitability as for the public's right to know.

First, believe in newspapers and quit writing their obituary. While the 80 percent of all adults who read a newspaper in McGill's day has slipped to 60 percent, a local newspaper today is the one common place, in most communities, from which citizens get their information on a daily basis. Local television news viewing, for instance, has fallen in the last decade alone by percentages equal to, or greater than, our declines over the last 30 years. And no one channel has ever come close to matching a single newspaper's audience. In an era when a place like metropolitan Atlanta has half a dozen or more over-the-air broadcasters, up to 100 cable and satellite channels and 50 radio voices, it strikes me as remarkable that newspaper readership remains so strong. Put differently, a bad day in the newspaper business is better than the best day in another medium.

It is time that those of us who believe in newspapers speak up. To the whiners, criers and bellyachers, I politely suggest you go elsewhere. Get out of the way. You're consuming valuable oxygen the rest of us need.

Second, we need to recognize that with rare exception, newspapers are no longer each other's main competitor. Television, radio, cable, direct mail (especially Advo), the Yellow Pages and now the Internet have usurped the role of foe. Yet the newspapers, big and small, look first to what they know best — other newspapers — as their competitive target. That's silly. At a time when nearby newspapers ought to find ways to perform cooperatively, especially in the production, sales and marketing areas, they persist in fighting each other. Imagine how our media competitors must watch on in amusement and delight.

Old habits must die, but it will take real leaders to slay them. Give credit to The New York Times, for instance, for building its growing national edition on the backbone of its relationship with local newspapers that print and deliver that newspaper in a quality and timely fashion. And Gannett and USA Today deserve a tip of the hat for the

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many lessons they've taught those who once viewed that newspaper cynically and arrogantly but today look at it with envy. We all should have been as smart, as committed, as gutsy as Al Neuharth.

We should have become better thieves of each other's best practices. Trade groups like the Newspaper Association of America and the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association increasingly aid and abet such theft by acting as clearinghouses for bright ideas.

Within Cox, highest praise often goes not to the inventor but to the practitioner. Ideas are abundant and easy. It's the hard work of bringing them to reality that really counts. I'm especially proud of the digital wide area network we have built on links, via telephone lines and computers, all of our newsrooms and the 1,500 journalists who inhabit them. And nothing delights me quite as much as seeing a story

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with a Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel (our smallest paper) byline on the pages of the Journal-Constitution. There is nothing to prevent this collegial approach to newspapering from spilling over the boundaries of one group to another in a common pursuit of excellence.

Third, we must identify, reward and celebrate our successes as aggressively and appropriately as we flog our failures. I think it's the old-fashioned macho way of newspapers that prevents this. An "Aw, shucks" is often

about the only reaction to praise in this business. But perhaps that is because there is so little praise that no one knows quite how to respond. Let's shelve the modesty, which I think is mostly phony in the first place, and let's tell readers what we've done on their behalf.

Fourth, be open to new ideas, new ways of thinking about newspapering. Although I've not met him, I admire the courage shown by Mark Willes, the new head of Times-Mirror. Without a background in newspapers, he's made his share of missteps and, true to form, his newspaper kin have pounced hard. Yet, Willes has forged ahead. Some of what he says, I disagree with. Much of what he says is worth pondering. If newspapermen had castigated McGill for his "out-of-step" views on the very different matter of, say, race the way they have gone after Willes, I wonder if we would even be having this lecture today.

Fifth, recruit, retain and advance our best people. Supply and demand tells us we're in an extended period of more work, especially more skilled work, than we have employees to do the jobs. We cannot afford to lose

good people. We must recruit better people. And those we have deserve every opportunity to get better in the jobs they're doing.

For years, our Cox Newspapers operated independently of each other. In many ways they still do. But we will not accept the loss of our best people for lack of opportunity within our organization. So you can imagine my delight when I recently discovered more than 200 transfers had occurred within our newspaper organization over the last two years. It signals progress in our efforts to keep our best and brightest.

Sixth, and last, lead.

My best lessons in leadership have come from colleagues.

Permit me, if you will, a couple of stories.

I had just been named publisher of The Dayton Daily News when I was 31 years old. I was scared, and I guess it showed. One afternoon, as I walked to my car, our editorial cartoonist, Mike Peters, asked me how I was doing. I looked at the tops of my shoes and mumbled something about hoping to survive. If you know Mike, as some of you do, you know an adult man who perpetually behaves like your favorite teenaged boy. But in an instant Mike's face tightened and his tone became very grown up. "If you talk like that, we're all in trouble," Mike said. With that, he turned and walked away. Lesson learned.

And no better teammates have ever existed than those who saw the Journal-Constitution through some of its most difficult days in the early '90s. Many, of course, are still at the paper — Editor Ron Martin, General Manager John Mellott, Circulation VP Dick Huguley, Ad VP Mike Perricone, production boss Stan Pantel and the list goes on.

It was the depths of the recession and The New York Times had dug in for a fight in the affluent north Atlanta suburbs. If ever a newspaper fight should not have happened, this was it. What had I done, I wondered, to deserve not one, but two such challenges?

We knew that the Times' Gwinnett Daily News, a suburb daily, planned a re-design and a move to morning from afternoon distribution. The intensity of the fight was building. We needed to do something, and it had to be dramatic.

We already had a zoned daily edition planned for Gwinnett, but we needed to make a bigger splash than the Gwinnett paper would make. We decided to give our paper away for a week, and we wanted the world to know about it. So on the morning of the big showdown, I reported to our production facility in Gwinnett at 4 a.m., planning to join those who showed up to grab an armload of papers and to stand in a busy intersection giving papers away.

As I walked in, I found hundreds of my colleagues, dressed in business clothes, gathering their newspapers and preparing to take to the streets. The same thing occurred Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,

Friday and even Saturday. Clothes got inky dirty and we were exhausted at week's end, but we made our point. We looked the competitor in the

eye and showed just how committed, just how crazy, we were. We would not be beaten.

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His tough blend of idealism mixed well with the pragmatism that more than once had him writing about southern cooking or the Atlanta Crackers. McGill knew the meaning of balance and understood that to make the

world a better place you darned well better survive to write tomorrow's front-page column. And he wrote with a fervor borne out of his idealism.

And therein lies the message I hope I have learned some 30 years after my idealistic visit to Washington. More than ever, I want to see a brighter tomorrow, but I've come to recognize the complex blend of vision, determination and, yes, compromise it takes to get there.

And because I believe newspapers and newspapering afford one of the best ways to help reach that tomorrow, I will do everything I can to ensure that the next generation after the generation that followed McGill has an ever-strong platform from which to work.