

Sept. 17, 2017

Advice to new journalists

Students are once again enjoying the start of their school year, thankful that summer break is finally over. I'd like to pass some advice on to those youngsters who may be considering a career in journalism some day.

One: Starting out, you will probably work for a smaller newspaper, covering things like County Commissioner meetings. It's difficult to describe the excitement of your first County Commissioner meeting. There is nothing remotely exciting about them, or it would be much easier to describe.

Two: "Assuming" is always a safe bet.

If you want to be truly adept at reporting, learn shorthand. My wife is a whiz at shorthand. Her notes look like pasta salad.

I, sadly, never learned shorthand, and am a very slow note-taker. If you are unable to write down the entire quote during an interview, I have found that the best solution is to assume: Assume what the speaker had intended to say. In my years as a reporter, I've "assumed" entire articles.

If, after the article comes out, the subject of your interview expresses anger, remember the following example:

"I never once mentioned Big Foot in my lecture on Proverbs!" said an angry cleric to me some 18 years ago.

"Of course, you said it," I replied. "It says so right here in the article! See?"

They can't argue with that.

Three: Always feel free to use creative editing--in articles, photos, or even cartoons. See the cartoon on this page? See the woman with the white, curly hair? That was originally a male. I changed it so that there would be a woman represented. The cartoonist should have known better. Granted, she looks a little like George Washington. My illustration skills are not that adept.

Four: When you cover an event, take lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of photos in hopes that one or two will be usable. I average 135 bad photos for every good one.

This advice is particularly helpful with group photos. There always seems to be one or two people with their eyes closed, or who are trying to stifle a yawn.

Here's what you do: use Photoshop to cut non-yawning, eyes-opened heads from the other photos, and paste them onto their bodies in a "control" photo. But be attentive!

On one occasion, I received an angry call from a man who assured me that he was NOT ("and I repeat 'NOT'") wearing a beige pant-suit with ruffles and a pearl necklace, and from a woman with a large bouffant hairdo who said she's never even owned a suit and tie.

"I'm so sorry," I responded, trying to hold my laughter until after I hung up. Which leads me to advice # Five:

Five: Just because you make a really stupid mistake, it doesn't mean you can't get joy and laughter out of it.

Six: Regarding interviews: If you suffer from severe insecurity, as I do, making it difficult to cover events where you have to speak to multiple individuals, do as I do: Go into the interview pretending that you are someone who is not shy. I've done this many times, and it does work very well.

If this proves just too difficult for you, try taking on the personality of your favorite fictional character. If you choose to take this route: 1) Always use a human character. I once tried "Scooby Doo". It does not help your interview if your subject keeps asking if you need medical attention. 2) Do not use a character who is painfully insecure, as it will defeat the purpose.

Seven: The great joy of any job is self-fulfillment. You may think this comes from a big paycheck. This is not the case. And that's a good thing, because in journalism, it's typically the big papers that offer the larger paychecks, and since the big papers will no longer exist when you graduate, you needn't concern yourself with that.

The joy is in the work--in my case, spreading good news and having a good time doing it. At a smaller newspaper, you will do a little of everything. I take photographs, write articles, do the layout, work on the webpage, and, when called upon, lance boils.

At least twice a week I get a call from someone here at the chancery: "Dave, I've got a real big boil for you to lance!" Or, "Dave, if you have time, boy do I have a painful boil!" I should mention that "lancing boils" is newspaper slang for helping with a writing or computer layout problem.

Seven: As you enter the world of journalism, you'll hear a lot about "fake news." Other than on, say, Facebook, I don't believe in fake news--only accurate and inaccurate, biased or non-biased. I mean, compare CNBC to Fox, for example. Same planet, different worlds.

In the Catholic press, we're biased, too, but what an awesome bias it is: toward Christ's teachings; we're biased toward *life*.

We're biased towards the greatest truth of all—a truth that tells us when the events we observe, whether in Washington or in our own backyard, are a part of the larger truth or the greatest lie -- the lie that makes the ol' devil dance with joy. It's the one that tells us that we should feed *some* of the poor; clothe *some* of the naked. The lie tells us that some people are not our neighbors, our sisters, our brothers.

Our Father in Heaven told us to *love your neighbor as yourself. Without condition. ... Love does no evil to the neighbor.* This is Christianity 101.

To treat our brothers and sisters any other way, and then to turn around and call ourselves followers of the greatest embodiment of unconditional love the world has ever known? Now *that* might just fall under the category of fake news.