

Harvard Awards Luncheon

Oct 12, 2010-10-08

Marjorie—thank you for that warm introduction, far too generous I think.

And thanks to all of you associated with the Harvard Club of Washington for considering me worthy of this award, which has, over the last ten years, been granted to many notables, such as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Donnie Graham of The Washington Post and former Secretary of Just-About-Everything James Schlesinger.

I must tell you that when I got Marjorie's call informing me of this award, I thought there must be some mistake. Almost immediately, though, it reminded me of a Saul Bellow story, certainly apocryphal but certainly appropriate.

One day, the story starts, Bellow got a call from the President of the American Writers Association.

“Mr. Bellow,” she cried, “I have great news for you.”

“What is that?” Bellow replied.

“Well,” she continued, “my Selections Committee, after long deliberation, has decided to award you our top prize as the ‘greatest living American writer.’”

Bellow, obviously pleased, said: “‘The greatest living American writer’—Wow, that’s wonderful. Thank you. What now happens? When?”

The President of the Writers Association, thrilled by her catch, answered: “Well, it will all happen at our annual luncheon, and of course when you receive the award, you will deliver a major speech of acceptance.”

“When?” Bellow repeated.

“The lunch will be on October 12 at noon,” she said.

Bellow looked through his appointments book. “Oh dear, I am so sorry,” he said, sounding truly disappointed. “I have another appointment then that I simply cannot change.”

There was a long pause in the president’s response. Finally, she said, “Mr. Bellow, do you know someone else who might be free on October 12th, any writer we can give the prize to as the ‘greatest living American writer’?”

Well, I was free, and so here I am.

Our theme is **Public Service**.

Anyone associated with the Kennedy School of Government knows that the School’s credo, its mission, its purpose, is to train young people for “public service.” In fact, just this week, Dean Ellwood proclaimed

the week of October 12 to be “public service week” at the Kennedy School, beginning with a series of special events and ending in January of next year with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States. We are, after all, the Kennedy School of Government.

Do you remember President Kennedy’s inaugural address? I reread it the other day in anticipation of this lunch, I must confess on occasion with tears in my eyes—its magnificent prose, its courageous call for a new-age-commitment to freedom and democracy, its glowing reaffirmation of American values: the individual over the collective, morality over expediency, good over evil.

It is an extraordinary address. I think it ought to be reread by all of us once every year—a reminder in prose and rhyme of what could have been, and what may yet be. “Ask not,” Kennedy concluded unforgettably, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” That was his call to public service. It is, the Dean stressed, “what inspires us all.”

When I arrived at the Kennedy School officially on June 1, 1987, let’s face it, I was not your classic scholar. I had never finished my PhD, and I had just concluded 30 years as a network correspondent at CBS and NBC. I had been a Moscow correspondent, chief diplomatic correspondent, host of Meet The Press and NBC’s White Paper documentary series. I had written, at that time, more than a half-dozen serious books about international affairs, but none weighted down with

the footnotes one usually finds in scholarly works. I was not your typical Harvard professor, saluting the statue of John Harvard every morning, thesis in hand and tenure in my dreams. I was the lucky beneficiary of a set of circumstances I knew little about at the time and learned about only years later. And what I learned was this.

A young, talented CBS producer named Joan Shorenstein, whom I knew—I'd worked with her--had just then died of breast cancer. She was in her late 30's. Her totally devastated father, Walter Shorenstein, a real estate tycoon in San Francisco, wanted to donate \$5-million to Berkeley for cancer research. In a hardly stunning example of the power of the Washington press corps, three prominent journalists had another idea about where the \$5-million should go. Al Hunt, then of the Wall Street Journal, David Broder of the Washington Post and Tim Russert of NBC, knowing that the Kennedy School had an interest in setting up some kind of media research center, arranged for Walter to meet the brilliant and dynamic Dean of the Kennedy School, Graham Allison, whose reputation as a legendary fundraiser was fully deserved. Before Walter realized what was happening--and he was a very shrewd man--the Dean had created a glorious vision of a research center in Joan's name focusing on the intersection of press and politics—what could be more important?, he asked--and Walter simply fell in love with both the vision and the Dean at first hearing.

So, instead of giving the \$5-million to Berkeley, Walter gave it to Harvard, to the Kennedy School, and hence the birth in 1986 of the Joan

Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. Next year, I am delighted to say, the Shorenstein Center will celebrate its 25th birthday, having become in this time an integral part of the School, having rearranged the focus of the School's mission to accommodate the crucially important element of the media in the fashioning of the nation's public policy and having established itself as one of the pioneering institutions in this field of academic study.

But the three Washington journalists did not stop there—the Dean needed a founding Director of the Center, someone knowledgeable about the field and yet able to fit into the cloistered Harvard environment, and the journalists knew of an experienced reporter and anchor who was at just that time getting restless about the direction of television news and who might be interested in a job change. Without telling me, they mentioned my name to the Dean, he called and invited me to dinner in Chinatown, DC, and before we finished our moo goo gaipan, or some such dish, we had the shape of a deal. True, I'd be taking a 90% cut in salary, but the idea of returning to Harvard, where I'd been a graduate student, of becoming a professor with teaching responsibilities, in addition to setting up the Shorenstein Center, thrilled and excited me; and thus began a period of my life that has enriched me with experiences far beyond anything I could have imagined in my years as a reporter.

This combination of reporting and teaching has defined my life and career and opened the door to the honor you bestow upon me today, an

honor in the name of public service. I am mindful, believe me, that there are others far more deserving of this honor—and I see three here today. Arthur Hartman, one of America’s great diplomats, our Ambassador to France and the Soviet Union, an Assistant secretary of State. Chuck Edson, a Harvard-trained lawyer who did more for low cost housing in this country than anyone I know. My brother, Bernard Kalb, also a journalist, who agreed in the mid-1980’s to become George Shultz’s spokesman at the State Department. In 1986, he quit at a very sensitive moment to express his strong disagreement with the fact, just then disclosed, that the government he served had been caught lying to the American people. Because quitting on a matter of principle is so rare in official Washington, I salute my brother-- and my friends for their examples of public service.

At the Kennedy School, for twelve years, I taught two courses—a lecture course, heavy on reading and writing, and a seminar, heavy on research and writing. Both were called “Press, Politics and Public Policy,” and both were based on my experience in Washington, DC, where it was apparent to me (and, I thought, to many other reporters, government officials and politicians) that the media played a central role in the election of the people who ran our government and in the every-day functioning of our democracy. That the media, once called the fourth branch of government, was indeed a crucially important aspect of our governing system, and it had to be studied with the same seriousness and intensity as the other branches of government.

I considered this observation about the media to be so obvious that none of my new colleagues at the Kennedy School would object. How wrong I was! First, many of the scholars were uncomfortable with a journalist sharing their inner sanctum deliberations about budgets, courses and tenure. Then they were uncomfortable with the very notion of studying press and politics, as though it were history or economics. And finally they raised questions with dripping disdain: where is the scholarship for this field? The books? The research? More important, who are the professors who teach these courses, and where are they now?

Here they had a case. There was very little scholarship in this field, very few professors. The study of press and politics—the lifeblood of the Shorenstein Center—was new. We were breaking new ground at Harvard, and were it not for the support of Dean Graham Allison and President Derek Bok, our effort would almost surely have foundered. But we had their support, we had Walter's money, the subject was compelling, we worked 20 hours a day, plus weekends, the students flocked to our fledgling enterprise, and within a year or two a hundred students were enrolling in my lecture course.

You want a definition of personal excitement, reward, gratification: set up a research center at the Kennedy School, and then watch, as similar research centers in this country and around the world sprout up in splendid reflections of the Shorenstein Center. Not bad.

Very quickly, I learned two things: I could run something—I'd never run anything in my life, I was a journalist! And I loved teaching, which I have come to regard as the ultimate public service. Without the transmission of ideas, of governing philosophies, one generation to another, as the Bible reminds us, we're dead, or dying. Teaching is the essential spark, our link to a vital life, to regeneration, or reform, of ourselves and our system of governance. It is maddening to me that teachers do not get the respect they so richly deserve. I can only tell you that there is nothing more satisfying for a teacher than seeing that small, early spark of understanding in a student's eye. Then you know, an idea has been conveyed, a task has been created, a vision has been etched—a job has begun. Again, teaching for me is simply the highest form of public service.

Journalism, if properly practiced, is another form of teaching, of public service. I know, many of you, perhaps with echoes of Glenn Beck or Shawn Hannity in your minds, are thinking, Marvin's gone mad. Journalism doesn't teach or inform anymore, except in rare moments of national tragedy, such as 9/11, when it recaptures its original mandate, and does a terrific job. Now, the thinking goes, journalism is just another form of entertainment, where profit is the guiding measure of success. Blonds and blue-eyes on Fox, and everyone else rushing to the Internet. News, if and when it happens, seems almost to be an after-thought, an accident that could not be avoided.

All true, all sadly true; and yet, oddly, given my penchant for pessimistic projection and analysis, I remain an optimist about the continuing power of journalism, in some form yet to be clearly defined, to enrich American democracy.

How is it possible to believe that, and read on an almost daily basis one obituary after another on American journalism? These obits make interesting reading, but they are not obits on all of journalism, or its purpose and power, but on one era of journalism—my era, my brother's era, the era of Edward R. Murrow and Eric Sevareid, James Reston and Herblock. I'm thinking about that journalism, and I'm asking, does it have relevance for today? And my answer is yes, absolutely.

It is not an accident, as the Russians used to say, that Murrow's name is invoked whenever a journalism prize is awarded. He is still the gold standard. In an age when standards seem almost quaint, his banner remains tall and unsullied. When I had the chance to name my professorship at Harvard, I named it the Edward R. Murrow Professorship of Press and Public Policy. It took me a second to make the decision. So long as there is a memory of Murrow, there will be a pinnacle of professionalism and integrity to which other journalists can aspire. Even bloggers tell Murrow stories, perhaps to remind themselves of their own provenance. I tell those stories all the time.

On December 7, 1941, the day the Japanese destroyed most of the American navy at Pearl Harbor, Murrow had a dinner date with President Roosevelt at the White House. Roosevelt told him all the gory

details. What did he do with that exclusive? He did not rush to a microphone, or to the CBS office. He walked back to his hotel room and considered what he had, what it meant and when he would use the information, offered by the way without any groundrules.

After Murrow had visited the Dachau concentration camp in April, 1945, a visit that opened our eyes to the horrors of the Holocaust, again he did not rush to a microphone. He went to his hotel, had a drink, maybe two or three, and thought about what he had just seen. Only a few days later did he write his memorable broadcast, now a treasured item in any collection of great journalism.

Journalism changes as technology changes, but its core values remain essentially the same. Get a story, but tell it right, responsibly, and then move on, and get another story. Don't get hung up on a story, don't become the story. Your opinion is irrelevant. The words "I think" should never be part of a news story. Just tell the story. Murrow said a television story, in the right hands, can "teach, it can even inspire"; in the wrong hands, it's only "lights and wires in a box."

It seems to me that now is one of those times in our national history when journalists could again become our great teachers. Most of us can not get on the campaign trail, but political reporters can and do. Most of us can not cover the war in Afghanistan, but war correspondents can and do. Ninety-nine percent of the entire blogosphere, and most if not all of radio and television talk show hosts, sit at home, or in their offices, offering their definitive views on politics and war. And where does their

basic information come from? Journalists, on the road, doing their thing for us all.

Democracy is a fragile thing. It must be treated with exquisite care. Journalism is the essential nourishment of democracy. It holds, or should hold, the words of our leaders up to the sun as a check on their truthfulness and reliability. What greater public service?

At times this check can be disturbing. Bob Woodward's latest book, for example. Its portrait of an administration at war with itself is painful to read, suggesting to the world and to our enemies that the US has serious problems. Was Woodward's book a public service? Yes, absolutely yes. No one else can do what journalists must do in a democracy—their role is real and fundamental, and it must be better understood. The journalists are our teachers, or they should be. I am under no illusion that the blogger of today is Murrow in mufti, or Bill O'Reilly, a former student of mine, is the Severeid of our time. But so long as they remain free to convey information, even to express their opinions, we shall all be free too.

Thank you, Harvard, for what you have done for me, and thank you, Harvard alums, for being so kind and for listening.