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ate of our public lands and natural resources,
ncluding *Battle for the Wilderness*.

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GREEN INK

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

CHAPTER 3

It's More than Reporting and Writing, but a Way of Living

JOHN MUIR in the late nineteenth century loved his life in the Sierra Nevada wilderness in California. It was a refuge from civilization, where he found "divine harmony." Once Muir began serious writing, however, he turned outward, contributing regularly to newspapers and magazines and authoring books, but always in the cause of saving wild places. In a way, he tried to bridge the gap between the outer world of civilization and the natural world as God made it. Fortunately, he was equipped with a vocabulary of science as well as powerful poetry and spirituality in his soul.

Muir is still a model to follow. He may be long dead, but he left an enduring legacy: in national parks of the West that he was responsible for establishing; the Sierra Club, which he founded to champion the outdoors; and the literary imagery of wilderness preserved. As he wrote in *Atlantic Monthly:* "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life."[1]

Another model to follow, Rachel Carson, in our own time wrote: "The beauty of the living world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind—that, and anger at the senseless brutish things that were being done. I have felt bound by a solemn obligation to do what I could—if I didn't at least try I could never again be happy in nature."[2]

Possibly Paul Brooks, who, as editor-in-chief at Houghton Mifflin, worked with Carson on *Silent Spring* and her other books, had her in mind when he wrote in *The Pursuit of Wilderness:* "Conservationists need words because what they are trying to do is to enlighten and inform: to change fundamental attitudes, not because they say so, but because they have the facts that will command such change on the part of any reasonable man [or woman]."[3]

That is what environmental journalism is meant to do. Environmental journalism differs from traditional journalism. It plays by a set of rules based on a consciousness different from the dominant in modern American society. It is more than a way of reporting and writing, but a way of living, of looking at the world, and at oneself. It starts with a concept of social service, gives voice to struggle and demand, and comes across with honesty, credibility, and purpose. It almost always involves somehow, somewhere, risk and sacrifice.

The word *sacrifice* seems to imply suffering and want, but if everybody in the world sacrificed by unplugging television sets for an hour or day or on Superbowl Sunday, or if everybody did not drive for a day or a week or quit driving altogether, burdens would lighten and benefits would grow. Taking less from the warehouse of natural resource and fabricated merchandise enables others to have more. "Sacrifice," surrendering dependence on all the things that actually alienate and destroy, gives time, room, and money for study, exercise, or whatever you prefer.

Many people cannot do those things because they are caught in a system of superconsumerism and resource exploitation that dictates production of useless as well as useful merchandise, marketing, advertising, buying on credit, making wealth without sharing it. "Greed is good," said Gordon Gecko in the film *Wall Street.* Maybe in real life it is not greed, but the inherent goodness of making money. That bias is taken for granted by most media. They would not exist otherwise. Newspapers and magazines and radio and television that try to get by without advertising have a tough time, and those that criticize do not get the advertising, certainly not of their investigative targets.

Thus, in environmental journalism knowing how to order facts in the traditional newspaper "pyramid" style is not enough. The pyramid tells it all in a nutshell in the first paragraph, so the editor can trim from the bottom as needed and the last paragraph or paragraphs become dispensable. In my local newspaper, the *Bellingham (Wash.) Herald,* for example, a Gannett News Service dispatch from Washington, D.C., began: "The House voted to tighten controls on illegal immigration Wednesday,

passing a bill to speed up deportations, increase border patrols and deny certain benefits. All but five House Republicans supported the measure, which passed 305–123; 117 Democrats and one independent opposed it."[4]

In some papers that might have been all that ran. The editors at the *Herald* could have cut on the inside page these last paragraphs if they had gotten in the way of advertising: "Democrats criticized the measure, saying it weakens immigration controls on employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers while it strengthens penalties against immigrants searching for jobs. 'This is a bill that says: "Gee, maybe it would be nice if there weren't so many illegal aliens. But now that they're here, maybe we can get some cheap work out of them,"' said Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass. The bill now heads to the Senate, where its passage is uncertain. Democratic leaders oppose it and hinted Wednesday they might block expedited consideration."[5]

Environmental writing reaches deeper, with beginning, middle, and end integrally joined. It thinks not simply of Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How, but of a species instead of an animal, a forest instead of a tree, and an ecosystem along with species and forest. It examines interlocking systems that touch every aspect of life: science, botany, biology, economics, history, politics, ethics, and religion. It is not necessary to know them all, but the ability to ask questions and digest answers is a skill in itself, the basis of writing with breadth and perspective.

It helps to understand and utilize the power of emotion and imagery, so that every word, phrase, and paragraph contributes to writing that is purposeful, that challenges, motivates, enlightens, and throws light on life. Couple the basic lesson taught by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White in *The Elements of Style,* "Vigorous writing is concise," with John Muir's admonition, "Dry words will not fire hearts," and you are on the way to turning people on, not turning them off.

"Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language," advised Strunk and White, but write with discipline: "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outlines, but that every word tell."[6]

Environmental writing, in other words, must be clear and understandable, based on sound data and thorough research, yet reflecting the author's imagination, deep inner feeling, and desire to advance the cause of a better world.

Now and then I ask students in my classes to define environmental journalism, not in so many words, but in words that make sense to them at the outset of their careers. "As we continue to compromise our little planet," wrote Gary Gray, "environmental journalists will remain the eyes through which the public sees the truth." Gray was deeply interested in photography, so he added, "The environmental photographer's task is to reawaken the environmental consciousness we, as humans, all inherit."[7]

Colleen Majors said it this way: "Let the people know. The job of the journalist is to inform the public. The job of the environmentalist is to research the information. Combining these two aspects of writing produces a clear understanding of issues that affect our planet—and ourselves."

Blessed with talent and desire, Gray was at the start of a promising career when he was killed in a climbing accident in the north Cascades. It was a grievous loss for me, as a teacher and a friend. I was pretty tough on him in class, but then the harder a student worked the more I demanded of him or her. I was tough on Majors too, but she kept coming back for more; I would have shortchanged her by going easy. She designed her own major, Environmental Education/Mass Communication, concentrating on producing a weekly radio show, *Ecological Perspectives,* on the campus station. After graduation she started her own audiovisual group working strictly on environmental and social issues and still does so. For her and for others who are making it into green journalism, it is more than a career, more than writing and reporting, but a way of living.

CHAPTER 4

There Is No Dispassionate Objectivity

SAUL ALINSKY in *Rules for Radicals* wrote that "All of life is partisan. There is no dispassionate objectivity." Of course not: what you choose to write about, whom you choose to interview, how stories are presented, and when they are published all reflect prejudices of writers, editors, publishers.

Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* said it a little differently: "Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias. This is inevitable as well as enjoyable. All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation—it is the Self escaping into the open."[1]

That is how it should be, for the writer, whether journalist, essayist, or novelist, who wants to make something of himself or herself and his or her work. In this respect, I like to cite Bernard DeVoto, who spoke for an entire breed of writers and editors: "My job is to write about anything in American life that may interest me, but it is also to arrive at judgments under my own steam. With some judgments that is the end of the line; express them and you have nothing more to do. But there are also judgments that require you to commit yourself, to stick your neck out. Expressing them in print obliges you to go on to advocacy. They get home to people's beliefs and feelings about important things, and that makes them inflammable."[2]

That was DeVoto's approach and it worked. He was a marvelous writer and historian, a champion of conservation causes until his death in 1955. I met and observed DeVoto in action in 1953 at the Mid-Century Conference on Resources for the Future, conducted in Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the research institution Resources for the Future. Dwight D. Eisenhower was president in a politically conservative period. A major controversy of the time revolved around public lands of the West and whether they ought to be transferred to the states, or at least whether timber and grazing resources should be more intensively exploited. I was in a small section meeting of about thirty people where DeVoto crossed swords with J. Elmer Brock, a Wyoming industry leader, and heard him later in a larger group where he challenged Congressman Wesley D'Ewart, a prominent Montana Republican.

> In effect, the Congressman says, "Cannot we westerners be trusted to take better care of these lands than the government bureaus?" The answer is, "No, they cannot be trusted."
>
> Among the areas Congressman D'Ewart specifically excepts as being protected forever are the national parks. That is not borne out by the history of the Ellsworth Bill [then pending in Congress]. This bill provides compensation to a timber operator on a sustained-yield basis, if his land should be required by the government, in the form either of money or selection from the national timberlands of an equivalent amount of timber—harking back to the operations of the Timberlake Act, under which some of the most grotesque and indecent of all land frauds were perpetrated. . . .
>
> Incidentally, the Congressman was talking almost exclusively about the Forest Service when he mentioned the great distance dividing the lands from the heads of government bureaus. In his own state, the effective control is exercised from the city of Missoula, which he can reach from his own home in two hours by automobile at an expense of sixty cents, and where he can get a ruling which will not involve Washington at all.[3]

That was the way DeVoto spoke and the way he wrote. He had command of his data, but his bold style made editors nervous. In *The Uneasy Chair*, the unvarnished biography of DeVoto, his friend Wallace Stegner wrote that "Ben Hibbs, the *[Saturday Evening] Post's* editor, got so much pressure from western lobbies and from the bureaus [federal agencies] themselves that he closed the door to DeVoto's pamphleteering and never reopened it." *Harper's* editors said they wished he would not harp on the same old issues all the time. "But that, DeVoto told them, was

exactly the point. You didn't mount the barricades until noon and then go out for a three-hour lunch."[4]

Advocacy writing is to the mainstream media and to many journalism schools sheer anathema. They want writing to be free of "value judgments," without evidence of imagination or sense of person. All quotes must come from outside sources, thus somehow eliminating bias. The president of a corporation, or the public-relations person, may lie, but that is not the primary concern. The redeeming element is that he said it—that he said these words in this place at that time. That fulfills the mandate of who-what-when-where-how. Anything else, beginning with interpretation, is suspect. The reporter must never insert herself into the story. To be an activist, personally involved, in an issue is considered gross and improper. It is not "professional." It induces loss of "credibility."

Still, there is a case for objectivity to consider. I could advise that you stick your neck out, as DeVoto did, and go on to advocacy, but you ought to weigh the viewpoint that a reporter and writer should set down the facts as best he or she can, without any injection of self, and allow the reader to reach an independent conclusion.

Ida Tarbell, one of the foremost of the early-twentieth-century investigative reporters known as muckrakers, provides a notable example on the plus side of objectivity. She joined *McClure's* in 1894 and became one of its stars, along with Ray Stannard Baker and Lincoln Steffens. In November 1902 she began her historic nineteen-installment exposé of Standard Oil, supporting all of her statements with painstaking research and hard evidence. "My point of attack has always been that of a journalist after the fact, rarely that of a reformer, the advocate of a cause or a system," she wrote many years later. "If I was tempted from the straight and narrow path of the one who seeks for that which is so and why it is so, I sooner or later returned."[5]

The late Edward J. Meeman, a pioneer in conservation journalism, offered a complementary view when he said, "Democracy requires leadership and this must come from newspapers among others." But he carefully distinguished between editorial and news: "This newspaper leadership should appear in the editorial columns, but it should also appear in purposive, although fair and objective, studies and exposures in major articles or series of articles exploring situations in depth and detail by writers who are not only reporters, but digging investigators and scientific interpreters."[6]

Various people whom I respect share this same view. John B. Oakes wrote outstanding environmental essays while serving as editor of the editorial page of the *New York Times* from 1961 until he retired fifteen years later. He had come up through the ranks as a reporter for the *Washington Post* and as Sunday staff editor for the *Times*. In 1992 I interviewed him about his career and his views on his profession.

> I was brought up in the tradition of objective reporting and still believe that news stories ought to be as objective and non-editorial as humanly possible. Pieces that express the opinion of the writer should be reserved for specially marked magazine pieces and, of course, editorials. I have found myself saying, more than once about a given story, I'm delighted to see this, but it should have been a news analysis, or editorial, or op-ed piece or something else. I would lean over backwards in favor of objectivity, when presenting something as a straight news story.
>
> Let the facts speak for themselves, that's the way it ought to be. The press should be adversarial, but not in its news columns. The public ought to be free to make up its own mind.
>
> It's very difficult. I favor in-depth reporting, giving the background, bringing out the facts—it's when the opinion of the reporter gets into that kind of story, when the reporter tries to push an opinion that I find difficult to accept. If the reporter researches thoroughly, understands the context and history of the issue, and communicates effectively—that is more difficult, yet more effective, in effecting change.[7]

Oakes recognized that opinion-free reporting is not easy. For him the best approach is through in-depth investigative reporting—honest, informed, objective but still adversarial. "Investigative journalism is in the class with news analysis. It's a difficult distinction I'm trying to make, but one cannot write an environmental story in the news columns without expressing a basic point of view of sympathy with the environmental viewpoint. It is impossible to report what's really going on and exposing what's going on without pointing out the antienvironmental actions being taken."[8]

Dan Evans has dealt with the media over a long period of years as

governor and as a U.S. senator from Washington State. In delivering the keynote address at the conference on Northwest Media and the Environment at Bellingham, Washington, he said:

> Objectivity, we sometimes hear, is simply impossible to achieve and reporters are really editorialists on the wrong page. But I turn to Webster's unabridged dictionary, which defines reportage as "writing intended to give a factual and detailed account of directly observed or carefully documented events" and objective as "expressing or involving the use of facts without distortion by personal feelings or prejudices."
>
> This doesn't say you can't have personal feeling or prejudice, but being objective requires trying to disseminate facts without distortion by those personal feelings. We all come loaded with personal feeling, but there are plenty of examples of people trying to be objective, regardless of personal belief. Referees and umpires do it all the time. Good judges recognize their responsibility to judge cases on the basis of law, not their own feelings.
>
> Environmental advocacy on the news pages is no more valid than business advocacy, education advocation or sports advocacy. We've seen them all and deplore the results when we can identify them. Perhaps we should revert to the common practice of other times and other countries, when and where newspapers were owned by political parties or organizations. When you bought a newspaper you *knew* you were buying an opinion.[9]

Maybe so, but business is almost always interpreted from the business viewpoint. So are sports, which have become more business than sport anyway. And both business and sports are accorded whole sections of the daily newspapers and segments of the nightly news, while the environment rates only occasional coverage, principally when something terrible happens. The strict separation of facts and editorial opinion leads to misunderstanding. Readers and viewers need interpretive voices to guide them through a jungle of facts. The Western European press successfully integrates news and editorials. Its journalists present fact-based reports on international news, balanced by the reporters' well-informed views based on firsthand experience and thorough understanding of events.

John Oakes said he would lean over backward to favor objectivity in the news pages. Still, Timothy Egan's 1995 front-page article in the *New York Times* about a hot issue in the Northwest might have caused Oakes to think further about where reporting ends and interpretation begins:

> Ketchum, Idaho—The high alpine country near the grave of Ernest Hemingway is some of the prettiest public land in America, with its flower meadows, wild horses and views of the tallest mountains in Idaho. Signs inform visitors that it is a land of "many uses," overseen for the public by the Federal Bureau of Land Management. But Congress is now poised to grant ranchers virtual control over this and almost every other part of the 270 million acres of Federal land where grazing permits have already been issued. People who hunt, fish or hike say the concept of sharing the use of public lands is being shoved aside for a small special interest.[10]

The article shows the author's self, or bias, if that is what you want to call it. Clearly, he focused attention on the aesthetics of place, with its flowers, wildness, and vistas, above the values in livestock and grazing. I wish the *Times* and other newspapers published more like it, but this article is the exception, certainly not the rule.

Some able journalists have learned painfully the consequences of independent investigation deeper than the shallow. Philip Fradkin, for one, had initiated the environmental beat on the *Los Angeles Times* in 1970, when he returned from covering the Vietnam War and saw that no one on the paper was writing about the emerging subject. He asked Bill Thomas, then Metro editor, if he could specialize in environmental reporting. Thomas at first turned him down, but Fradkin persisted and produced enough stories of merit to be eventually given the title of environmental writer.

He had a wonderful time, traveling the West and making it his beat. Inevitably he rocked the boat along the way. And then, "In the early spring of 1975, Mark Murphy, the metropolitan editor of the *Los Angeles Times,* called me into his office and told me he was taking me off the environmental beat. He said that I was not objective, that the managing editor could no longer trust my stories, and that I had done a poor job on a recent story. There was no appeal and Murphy would not elaborate further. I felt shocked when Murphy gave me the word. I felt betrayed. . . ."

Steve Stuebner in 1991 had won a string of awards at the *Boise (Idaho)*

Statesman and praise from officials of the Gannett chain for his coverage of the 1988 Yellowstone fires. Suddenly he was labeled as biased and was demoted from the environmental beat to city-county news. And he left.

> The top editors accused me of being too pro-environment. I asked them for proof and they looked back at me with blank stares, blushed and said, "Well, come on Stuebner, you just are. Everyone knows that." And I said, "How come this has never come up at the editing desk? How did you decide I'm too pro-environment?" They had no evidence.
>
> Later I heard the real reason they shifted me off the beat. The marketing director had complained to the publisher and editor that there was too much environmental news in the paper and it was all too negative. Considering the editor hated to get complaints and did his best to kill or emasculate hard-hitting stories, leaving the paper was a very easy ethical decision for me. The *Statesman* had fallen to pieces.
>
> In the very specialized field of environmental writing, only the people who have spent years in the field, examining environmental damage in detail, and who know how to dig beyond the rhetoric, can truly provide a balanced picture and protect the public trust. But it's like leaping into a war zone. . . .[11]

Richard Manning, as an investigative reporter for the *Missoulian*, the daily newspaper in Missoula, Montana, spent many weeks researching and writing a hard-hitting series on the exploitation of Montana forests. The timber industry complained. Then, Manning recalls, "My editors said I was being reassigned because I had lost my objectivity. They alleged I was too inclined to write what the environmentalists had to say and not inclined to write what the loggers had to say. They were wrong, but they and the system that has molded them are managed within the corporate system, groomed, pruned and thinned just like corporate trees."[12]

Kathie Durbin in 1989, after covering drugs, gangs, and minority affairs for the *Portland Oregonian*, welcomed the chance to cover the environment. Teaming with Paul Koberstein, she studied forests along the West Coast and interviewed many people for a six-part series in 1990. The timber industry dispatched an angry eighty-page letter—eighty, not eight—to the editors and made Durbin a special target: "I was attacked by the Oregon Lands Coalition, a wise use group, which urged its members to call the *Oregonian* and tell the editors they were sick of Kathie Durbin's lies. My editors were nervous, but our report was accurate and overdue. . . . In the process of this trial by fire I learned to be discreet about my own passionate feelings for the forest. Of course I belong to no environmental groups. I don't go to environmentalists' parties. My job is too important to me to take any chances. And I take seriously my responsibility to chronicle the struggle from all sides. I'm a professional journalist. I cannot be a causist."[13] Ultimately Durbin was removed from the beat and resigned.

Philip Shabecoff for thirty-two years worked as a reporter for the *New York Times*, including stints as a foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia. For fourteen years he covered the environmental beat in Washington, turning up major stories. But his editors told him he was "ahead of the curve," stale, biased, too close to environmentalists. When he was transferred to covering the Internal Revenue Service he quit.[14]

Gene Rose joined the *Fresno Bee*, published by the liberal McClatchy chain, in 1960. Twelve years later, after covering major stories, he was assigned to a beat embracing Yosemite and Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Parks and surrounding national forests, his boyhood stamping ground. For years thereafter he was known as a walking encyclopedia of valuable information about the mountains as well as a formidable reporter. At Yosemite he was the "conscience of the park." He spurred concessions reform, shed light on land-planning fiascoes on the national forests, and influenced public opinion for the environment in California.

But he made a few enemies, too, particularly after revealing in 1987 that the Yosemite Park and Curry Company, a subsidiary of MCA, the Hollywood conglomerate, grossed $87 million for its exclusive contract but paid a concession fee of only $585,000. MCA officials accused him of "smear journalism" and fronting for the environmental community. Early in the 1990s, McClatchy toned down its liberal corporate philosophy and replaced George Gruner, the longtime *Bee* editor. When Rose became a target on the inside as well as the outside, he opted for retirement.[15]

The choice of subjects, sources, and words reflects bias. And advocacy goes with it. Ben Long, reporter and columnist for the *Kalispell (Mont.) Daily Interlake* sees nothing wrong there: "First and foremost, reporters must give a damn. I doubt I could ever be a good reporter on stock car racing because I don't give a rip about it. I think I'm a good environmental

reporter because that's where my passion is. It doesn't matter what's the beat: an education reporter should want good schools; a cops-and-court reporter should strive for justice, and an environmental reporter should want readers to appreciate their environment and what's going on around them."[16]

Environmental journalism, after all, is not simply about being a competent reporter. "Do not attempt to enter this field," warns T. H. Watkins, professor at Montana State University with many years of experience in environmental writing and editing, "unless and until you feel it in your bones. This is not like accounting, or sales, or computer programming (though I suppose a good accountant, salesperson or programmer has to have a measure of personal commitment, too). It is more like a crusade, a commitment. If you do not care deeply for the fate of the non-human world (a faith that does not exclude the human world, but merely makes equal citizens of all life, as Leopold said), no craft or gimmickry can make up for what you will lack."[17]

Newspapers demonstrate bias daily, with zeal in covering affairs of business and development and through weekly real-estate sections thick with advertising, while ignoring or downplaying the environment and other critical social issues.

Good journalism requires the journalist to be thorough, detail oriented, honest, and ready to defend his or her work. Criticism of objectivity should not be used to rationalize writing "whatever I think or feel" without substance or evidence. Objectivity at its best, as I wrote at the outset, is a means of gathering information, a foundation of reality that justifies feeling.

The journalists I cited above suffered pain, but when one door closes, another opens. There will always be outlets for those guided by Thoreau, who wrote: "There are thousands hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root." And by I. F. Stone, the nagging conscience of twentieth-century American journalism. Stone quit college, taught himself Greek, and worked as a Washington correspondent and editorial writer. In 1941 he was expelled from the National Press Club for bringing a black judge to the club as his lunch guest. In 1953 he launched *I. F. Stone's Weekly* (later, *I. F. Stone's Bi-Weekly*) and for nineteen years delivered analyses of Washington and global politics found nowhere else. He was hounded by the FBI, excoriated on the floor of Congress, and scorned by colleagues of the media. Stone called himself "a flickering candle in a naughty world." He did not think much of "professional" training or

journalism schools that produce people "who know how to run a typewriter" and little more. When he closed shop in December 1971, Stone wrote: "To give a little comfort to the oppressed, to write the truth exactly as I saw it, to make no compromise other than those of quality imposed by my own inadequacies, to be free to follow no master other than my own compulsions, to live up to my idealized image of what a true newspaperman should be, and still be able to make a living for my family—what more could a man ask?"[18]