

Judith Valente Keynote Talk for Interfaith Action of Evanston
Orrington Hotel, February 22, 2009

A warm good evening to everyone. I'm deeply honored and humbled by the invitation to share a few words with you this evening.

A few nights ago my husband was reading a novel, and he shared with me this Japanese saying that one of the characters quotes to another: "In traveling, a companion; in life, compassion."

It is a privilege to be here tonight with people who understand the critical need for both companionship and compassion, especially toward the people most marginalized in our society, the people so easy to forget.

I'm going to share with you just a bit tonight about my own journey as a reporter trying to speak in some small way for people who are often forgotten, trying to add something to the compassion of this world.

As you may know, I live a kind of dual life as a poet and a journalist. So I'd like to begin with a few lines from one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, from a poem called "Messenger."

My work is loving the world
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird --
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast, there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young and still not half perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work, which is mostly standing still
and learning to be astonished ...

"My work is loving the world." As a reporter who covers religion and spirituality, it's often easy to feel my work is loving the world. I interview people about their deeply held beliefs, what most gives meaning to their lives. PBS-TV and Chicago Public Radio pay me to cover these stories as an unbiased observer. But the truth is, many times I end up being profoundly changed myself by the people I report on.

One of the first stories I ever covered for PBS was about a gentleman right down the road in Palatine named Tom Schumann, who had been the vice president and general counsel of a major health care corporation headquartered in the suburbs. And as general counsel he, one day, had to stand up in court and plead guilty of fraud on behalf of his company, for actions taken by some mid-level managers. That's when he decided he'd had enough of the corporate life. He quit his job and turned his considerable management skills toward running two homeless shelters for the PADS program in the suburbs. It was quite a sight to see this once powerful executive sweeping up, making baloney sandwiches and trading stories with men who lived on the streets.

And I remember covering a retreat at a recovery center in rural Kentucky for survivors of clergy sexual abuse. People came there who had carried with them for twenty,

thirty years, the feeling of being damaged. They wanted someone, something to fix them. Throughout the retreat, a wonderful counselor named Ray Capolla kept reminding them that there was nothing to be fixed, because there was nothing broken. They were not broken. They were still whole and valuable, despite betrayal they'd suffered. *There's nothing to be fixed, because there's nothing broken.*

And I remember going to affluent Bloomington, Illinois where a young, dynamic pastor – Ted Pierce, in the piece you've just seen - decided the city's growing homeless problem was not going to remain “the secret in plain view.” He wanted his historic church to be what he called “the heart of Christ in the heart of the city.” He put together a coalition that included not just his congregation members, and fellow pastors, but labor unions, business leaders, local politicians, and even the editorial board of the local newspaper. They built a center for the homeless that provided one stop shopping – a place where people could get help filling out SSI forms, looking for employment, finding medical care as well as food and shelter. And they called it – rightly so – The Compassion Center.

Since I began my career in the early 80's, I've seen great changes in the way the media covers religion. I remember how mystified my colleagues at The Washington Post were that Jimmy Carter would speak so openly of his born-again faith. Very few reporters knew what it meant to be a born-again Christian, let alone having ever met one.

Things were hardly better when I went to work for The Wall Street Journal in the late eighties. The Journal's religion reporter at the time was Gustav Niebuhr, who held a pretty good pedigree for writing about religion. Gus once complained to me that what the Journal editors wanted from him were stories about quirky southern preachers who peddled Jesus at Nascar races. Even better if these preachers had their hand in a little financial scandal on the side.

That was then. Today, I feel no hesitation in saying that most editors -- whether in print or broadcast – recognize that religion is an important topic to the American public. It deserves to be covered with the same scrutiny as politics, economics or social issues. A few things happened in the past two decades to cause this turnabout. We saw the rise of the religious right in politics. 9/11 gave us a critical awareness of Islamic fundamentalism. We witnessed the clergy sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. And the questions of gay marriage, gay clergy, abortion and stem cell research became not just religious debates, but public debates.

Editors pay attention to the trends. And 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God. Seventy percent report being affiliated with an organized religion. And nearly 40 percent identify themselves as committed Christians. But there is something far more important beyond these statistics. That is, when you can get people to talk about their most deeply held beliefs, where they find the core of meaning in their lives, then that becomes compelling television, that becomes compelling journalism.

Perhaps the most significant change though, is that reporters now want to cover religion. They see it as an important and exciting beat.

This is the good news. Now for the part where it becomes tricky. In the last election, 70 percent of Americans polled said they wanted their president to be a person of faith. In fact, the poll showed Americans were more likely to vote for a gay person ... than an atheist. Two presidential debates during the primaries focused on matters of religion. You had religious figures, including Jim Wallis and Rick Warren, actually interviewing presidential candidates.

At times, the candidates themselves sounded as if they were running for chief pastor as well as commander in chief.

Here's a fun little quiz. This is a quote from a speech one of the candidates gave leading up the primaries.

“Each day, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds – dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets – and coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness is not enough. They want a sense of purpose. A narrative arc in their lives ... They're looking to relieve a chronic loneliness ... They need an assurance that someone out there cares about them ... that they are not just destined to travel down a long highway toward nothingness.”

Anybody want to guess the author of this quote? Just call it out. Barack Obama, yes! Now, I do it's legitimate to inquire as to how a candidate's private faith enters into his or her thinking. But I also think we step out on a slippery slope when we make a person's religious beliefs – or lack thereof – a litmus test for running for office.

But here's where I think there a place to explore religion in ostensibly non-religious news events. It's what I call looking for the Religion Factor – the “R” Factor – in the news. I recently did profiles for PBS on violinist Rachel Barton Pine and the wonderful African American opera singer, Rodrick Dixon. Both see their talent and their gift for performing as profoundly related to their spiritual lives. To leave that fact out, would have meant not giving our viewers a full picture of these two magnificent performers.

Much of last year, I worked on developing a new religion and spirituality program for Chicago Public Radio called “Through the Lens.” The idea is to take events in the news and examine them through the lens of faith. So, for example, in the current economic crisis, we might do a segment on what constitutes a right relationship toward money if you are a person of faith. A pilot of the new show aired on Dec. 26, 2008 and you can still hear it by going to the Chicago Public Radio website and keying in “Through the Lens,” or else my name as host. We looked at the increasing gang violence in Chicago – ostensibly a secular story – and we asked the question, are our churches failing our teenage boys? If neighborhood gangs can recruit them as disciples, why can't God?

The idea my co-host Dan Pawlus and I have for the show is to bring in lots of different voices, not just pastors or theologians – but artists, poets, corporate leaders, young people, even comedians – to look at our world today ‘through the lens’ of faith.

Unfortunately, due to the current economic climate, the show is on hold for the time being. But we hope to do at least one, and maybe two more one- hour specials exploring various topics in the coming year. We want the program to be fast, hip, and entertaining. I've always felt that religion coverage does not have to be lugubrious to be relevant or reverential.

Those are some of my thoughts from my decade-long journey covering religion in the news. I thank all of you for the important work you do for the homeless. I know I can honestly say, like my work, your work too is about “loving the world.”

Thank you very much.