

WHAS Seminary
How My Work in TV News Helped Prepare Me for Ministry
By
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I have four college degrees. Three of them were in preparation for the ministry, including my undergraduate in Philosophy, my Masters of Religious Studies, and my Doctorate of Ministry. But my B.A. in Communications, which I managed to squeeze in between faiths, between being a Southern Baptist and becoming a Unitarian Universalist, and the 16-year-career in TV news and corporate video production it led to, may have prepared me for ministry as much as anything else.

It gave me time to further work on my personal issues and to evolve as a person, so that I'd be better prepared for ministry. It exposed me, first hand, to the plight of many hardworking, often well-educated Americans, struggling day after day, year after year, just to make ends meet and provide for their families, so that I could better know the need for ministry. It taught me how to remain a calm, objective presence during times of suffering and crisis, so that I'd be capable of ministry. It grounded my faith and philosophy by exposing me to the harsh realities of life, shaping my humanistic and empirical mindset, so that I'd have an honest and meaningful ministry. And, as a bonus, it gave me some unique practical skills that compliment my ministry.

I'll talk more about all this in a bit, but let me begin by saying more about how I got into the field and to say at the outset that being a TV reporter was never my intention and was a job I seldom enjoyed. So why and how did I ever get into a vocation I didn't seek, found unfulfilling and unrewarding, especially when so many others strive to get into it with little success. To answer this, let me back up by saying I had inexplicably wanted to be a minister from the time I was five-years-old, was trained in ministry, and was already an ordained Southern Baptist minister before I ever began working in TV news. The problem was, at that point in my life, I was a minister without a religion. I had dropped out of Seminary and renounced Christianity, and had only begun irregularly attending a Unitarian Universalist church.

Peggy and I, both ex-seminary students, had recently married and I needed to find a way to make a living. Even though I kept my framed ordination certificate on my wall, as if it were an unbreakable contract, I also couldn't imagine any church that would have a minister who doesn't believe Jesus was born of a virgin, performed miracles, or rose from the dead. I also realized my philosophy degree wasn't going to get me a job given that the market dropped out of the industry 3000 years ago. So, I returned to college for a year to earn a second B.A., in communications, believing it would enable me to do something more practical with my life.

During my studies, the Executive Producer at WAVE 3, a Louisville TV station, became one of my instructors. He caught me after class one night and said that I "impressed the hell out of

him,” and offered me an entry level part-time job as a news clerk. In retrospect, I don’t know if I really impressed the hell out of him or if he was just desperate to find some poor dupe dumb enough to take the position. The latter is more likely the case given that we are both now part of a Facebook group called, WAVE 3 Escapees. Nevertheless, I took the job and spent the next four years archiving new video, retrieving old video, running the teleprompter, monitoring a bay of police scanners, and, eventually writing copy and editing video.

Peggy worked full-time at a bank in a low-paying position she hated, which, at least, gave us benefits, and I continued to work just under the 32 hours that would have required my employers to give me benefits. I spent much of my time applying for positions at other stations all over the country, usually for beginner reporting positions, without success. Being a creative person, I wanted to do it all, to write, video, edit, and report my own stories, but, at the time, no such position existed; you were either a photog, as they called them, who shot and edited video, or a reporter who interviewed, wrote, and voiced the story. Since I had some experience writing news and no experience videotaping it, I pursued reporter openings.

After almost four years, just after my son was born, a position came open at WAVE for a Saturday morning cut-in anchor. It basically meant I would write, edit, and report news briefs during regular Saturday morning programming. It was also a part-time position and would have merely been a lateral move, but it would have gotten me the additional experience I needed to finally move on. So, I took a resume tape into my boss and expressed my interest. He immediately responded with, “You don’t have much experience.”

“Ed,” I said, “who are you going to get for a part-time Saturday morning job that does have much experience?”

“True,” he said.

The next day, however, I happened to find my resume tape already placed in a pile of junk tapes. I walked into Ed’s office and told him I was quitting, that I’d work another month, up until my scheduled vacation, which would give me six more weeks of pay, then I was done. He tried to talk me out of it, but never mentioned the position I’d applied for. “Sorry, this job is holding me back,” I said, “It’s a crutch that won’t let me go anywhere until I leave.”

At that point, given all the financial struggle we faced, the many disappointing rejections, the constant pull to do something more important and meaningful with my life, I was done with TV, vowing I would never work in it again unless something just falls into my lap. A few days later a friend who had been an intern at WAVE called to let me know he’d just been hired at another local station, WHAS, to produce a new hour long morning news show, and that they were looking for an overnight person to work as both a reporter and a photographer. It was just what I was looking for. Nowadays, to save a buck, these “one-man-bands,” as they are called, are everywhere, but back then they were almost unheard of (in fact, I was the only one in the that market the entire time I worked there).

Even so, I was no longer willing to waste my time applying for a position that would only end in more disappointment. Nor did I wish to explain all of this to my friend, so when he asked me submit my resume tape I told him I would, even though I had no intention of doing so.

Toward the end of that long final month at WAVE, he called me again, asking if I'd submitted my resume. "Not yet," I said.

"We're ready to move on this," he said, "If you're interested, get it in as soon as you can."

"Okay," I said.

After I left WAVE, I ended up being a stay home dad for the first three months of my son's life, which I loved doing, but after a few weeks I began feeling light headed, tired, and weak most of the time. Fearing the worst, that I might have a brain tumor or the like, I scheduled an appointment to see my doctor. It turns out he was on vacation and I was referred to someone else. After examining and asking me a few questions, the doctor suggested I might be depressed because I'm out of work.

"What an idiot," I thought, "Here I am with physical symptoms and he thinks I'm depressed!" I didn't feel depressed in the least. So, I decided to wait to see my own doctor once he returned from vacation. When I told him about my experience with his colleague, he shook his head and asked, "He didn't bother to check you for sinusitis or anything?"

"Now we're getting somewhere," I thought, as he pressed his thumbs against my sinuses and looked up my nose and inside my ears.

After his more thorough exam, he said, "I think you're depressed because you're out of work." He then wrote me a prescription for antidepressants.

"No thanks," I said. "So long as I don't have a brain tumor, I'll be fine."

"I don't understand your resistance," he argued, "It's a very mild dose and will help you feel better."

"Doc," I said, "I don't need the medicine. Knowing I'm only depressed makes me the happiest guy on Earth."

Perhaps this incident helps you understand just how unprepared for the ministry I still was at that point in my life. Trust me, you never want a minister so out of touch with his or her emotions that they only come out psychosomatically. So, whether I liked it or not, my days as a Cinderfella sweeping up ashes were far from over.

A few days later, my friend called again to ask if I'd ever sent in my tape. Embarrassed that I hadn't, and not wishing to explain why not, I told him I had. "Good," he said. The following week he called again, saying, "Our news director remembers seeing your tape but can't find it. Do you mind sending another?"

"Sure," I said, even though I knew it was unlikely that I'd follow through.

Finally, a couple of weeks later, the News Director himself called, saying, "I understand you're interested in our overnight position. Would you mind coming in for an interview?" At that point, given that I'd never submitted my resume or filled out an application, it began to feel

like something was falling into my lap. I went in for the interview and a few days later was back in TV news, with no more fatigue or light headedness.

Sometime before leaving WAVE I had been talking with a colleague, the Assignment Editor, who was telling me a story about an incident that included him exploding in anger. "You know, everybody gets angry occasionally," he excused himself, "except for you, I've never seen you get mad." That was a pivotal moment for me because at that point I felt angry most of the time at work, and I knew enough to understand that suppressing my feelings wasn't healthy.

So, when I began at WHAS I decided to turn-over-a-new-leaf and to express my frustrations whatever the consequences. My resolve was tested early, after the Assistant News Director, who also insisted I not put any overtime on my time sheet, asked me to drive all the way across town during rush hour to do something after my shift had ended. She didn't like my response, but I refused her pressures to work for free, which ended up making my early months at WHAS difficult. Fortunately, before long, my work ethic and ability to do what seemed impossible to many, mainly, shoot, edit, write, report, set up and fully conduct my own remote live shots, gained the admiration of my colleagues throughout the market, and the appreciation of my main boss.

Ours wasn't a Union shop, which means I didn't have to have an engineer driving and setting up the live-truck, which further meant I was almost always the first on the scene, and our station was always first on the air with the stories I covered. Being first is everything in TV News, probably because the newsroom had a bay of screens that showed what was happening on every station in town. So, the newsroom was always excited to see breaking news on our station first. But I thought it was a silly obsession. Who else, after all, is watching eight televisions at once, and how are they going to know who's on first? But that's the insanity of TV news.

Covering the news was hard and stressful work. Back in those days I had to carry a heavy camera in one hand, which I balanced out with a heavy tripod in the other, and, working overnight, often had a hot, heavy belt of brick sized batteries wrapped around my waist just to power my light, not to mention pockets stuffed full with extra tapes, microphones, a two-way radio (since there were no cellphones yet), and a few other accessories. Today my right shoulder still bothers me from having to wind up hundreds of feet of AV cable every day after a live shot, usually so I could rush off to another scene. It was exciting work, being in the thick of things, no matter how disastrous or dangerous, and I saw quite a lot. There are some images, some horrors, seared into my neural synapses that will never go away, things I'll never mention to anyone, the kind of stuff PTSD is made of, which I think comes out most when I'm driving in heavy traffic, having been reminded too many times how deadly cars can be. I've stood too close to burning buildings, and exploding pesticide trucks, face to face with murderers, and watched people die. In fact, that was my job, that was the work I did most the time.

It sounds traumatic, and probably was, but, after I got used to witnessing so much tragedy, it began to feel normal or, maybe, I just became detached from it. Police officers, Firefighters,

Paramedics, and other emergency responders know what I mean. In fact, one of the most difficult things for video editors is finding clips in which emergency responders aren't smiling and don't look happy. It's not that they are sadist who enjoy seeing others suffer, or have become so desensitized they just don't care; but these events become a kind of social gathering among colleagues who don't have a chance to see each other elsewhere. So they wave and smile at each other and catch up in friendly conversations, even as they block off a scene, reel out a fire hose, or prepare a stretcher. The only time this isn't true is when a tragedy involves children. There's something about the death of a child that profoundly impacts everyone involved.

I also did a lot of fun stuff, went to some interesting places, and met a lot of powerful and famous people. I never made a big deal out of meeting celebrities, unless they were from *Star Trek* or were scholars most people never heard of. Then I couldn't help myself. I once met George Takei, who played Sulu and was a real gentleman. I also met James Doohan, who played Scotty. He was kind of grumpy and didn't care much for what was then the new series, *Star Trek the Next Generation*, because he didn't think it was very original. Nor was he complimentary of Gene Roddenberry, though he stopped short of calling him an SOB. I also once met an up and coming movie director, a slightly overweight young man in a sport coat, sneakers, and a ball cap, who came by the station to promote his first big documentary, *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore.

So, I often enjoyed being in "the business," as we called it, but, at the time, what had happened to radio after the advent of television was happening to television after the advent of the cable TV industry. The three-way pie, mostly shared between NBC, ABC, CBS, and their affiliates, just got sliced into thousands of different pieces, leaving little profit for anyone. The result was local TV stations demanded more from their employees to keep up with the 24-hour news cycle on CNN, doubling, then tripling the number of news programs, while seldom hiring additional staff to help. We were overworked, stressed, and underpaid because there wasn't any money in "the business" anymore.

It was also about this time Ronald Reagan's disastrous reforms of the Federal Communications Commission began having a negative impact. Reagan eliminated the time-honored Fairness Doctrine, which had prevented shows like Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and MSNBC from existing, and he got rid of the regulations once limiting the number of stations media companies can own in a single market. When I first entered the industry the news and sales departments were entirely separate and any salesperson who entered the newsroom was met with dismay just because of the appearance of impropriety. News coverage could not be influenced by the financial interests of the station.

By the time I left, however, sales managers, instead of news directors, were regularly promoted to station managers, and all the old dinosaurs who clung to their journalistic ethics were politely retired. Local news was no longer about providing unbiased information to the community. It was about making as much profit as possible, whatever it takes, for what has now become just five corporate conglomerates who own all the mainstream media. Today, there is an entire generation that has grown up without knowing what it's like to turn on the news and expect an unbiased opinion. Nowadays, most talking heads make their careers by

expressing their own opinions, and often become the subject of the very news they're supposed to be covering.

Finally, after about 10 years, I left TV for a job in corporate video production, which was a better income and less stressful, but was a bit boring. It also ended badly when, after six years, I was fired after I took a public position in favor of same-sex marriage. By that time, I had already been the bi-vocational minister at Clifton Unitarian Church five years. I worked there full-time another seven years, at part-time pay, before coming here to Spokane.

The reasons I consider my career in TV news a kind of seminary, is because, again, it really gave me the time I needed to work out many of my own issues. Not all of them, but a lot of them. I needed the time to mature, emotionally, but also, intellectually. Since I couldn't stand my job, I spent much of my free time continuing to pursue what I did enjoy, my philosophical interests, my quest for better understanding myself and the world, my search for meaning. It was during this period I first turned to psychology, to the study of the soul, which opened me to my bottled-up feelings and exposed many of my personnel hang-ups.

More importantly, it prevented me from being one of those stuffy ministers with little life experience. There's nothing worse than listening to someone preach or attempt to give you advice who still has a few pimples to pop. I know what it is to struggle to provide for my family, to have inadequate benefits, to pay one bill at the expense of another. I know what it is to do everything I'm supposed to, to struggle through college, to work hard, to prove myself over and over, and still not be able to earn a living wage. I know what it is to have to compromise my values or else end up without a job, without the resources necessary to feed, clothe, and house my precious kids. I know what so many people go through day after day. I know what it is to live one paycheck away from being destitute. I know how they struggle, how tired they are, how hopeless they feel; and I know it is no fault of their own, that they are not lazy, or dumb, or inept. I know how desperate they are to break through their cocoon and spread their beautiful wings, but can't because of forces beyond their control.

And, yes, I've witnessed some terrible scenes, and had to find a way to do my job amidst it all, something I must do as minister much of the time, to be with the people I care about in the worst of times while remaining a non-anxious presence, someone who can hold them steady, or just hold them when they can't manage to hold it together themselves.

Finally, I would say, in addition to appreciating modern communications technology and how it can enhance our shared ministry, having to somehow compose a news story while rushing to a scene, shooting video, editing it in the back of truck, setting up a live shot, stringing cable, and propping up a camera, then standing in front of it to calmly tell everyone what's happening live on the scene, has enabled me to prepare solid, intelligent, and, I hope, meaningful sermons each week with no anxiety and no doubt that I can.

All my other prep, working on my Masters in religion and Doctorate of Ministry, were also extremely valuable, but I wouldn't be the minister, or the person I am today, were it not for the fine ministerial training I received at WHAS seminary.