

A Passion for Truth-seeking: News or Noise?

Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #298 “Wake Now, My Senses,” #159 “This Is My Song,” #108 My Life Flows on in Endless Song.” Piano selections: Sara Bareilles, “Saint Honesty” John Albert Thomas, “Awakening” Sandi Patty, “Via Dolorosa.”

Sermon

Let’s talk about the news today. Not today’s news, but the challenge of absorbing so much news in these times. The news can be so disheartening or unsettling that it feels unbearable. Current events in the world can be so complicated or confusing that keeping track of them seems impossible. We can feel helpless to change things. And if we can’t change things, why should we pay so much attention? Some of us feel this way, at least some of the time.

On the other hand, we may feel the responsibility to stay informed. We think we have a duty to be good citizens of the world. Or we may be driven to gain mastery over current events, as if we might appear on a quiz show any day of the week. When we talk about absorbing the news, I think we must ask ourselves two questions: what kind of news, and how much news is enough? In a free society, each of us gets to sort out the answers for ourselves. These questions, however, are not as simple as they were a half century ago.

In the 1960s and 70s, my family received three newspapers a day: a big-city paper in the morning, another city paper in the evening, and the local paper, also in the evening. We watched the nightly news on TV—30 minutes from a network and 30 minutes from a local station. The magazines in our house included my dad’s poorly hidden copies of *Playboy*, our proudly displayed issues of *National Geographic*, Mom’s *Good Housekeeping*, and my own *Highlights for Children*. When I was a teenager, an uncle noticed that I like to read and write, so he started sending me subscriptions to magazines like *Time*, *Harper’s*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. I developed quite a magazine habit—subscribing to them and even reading some of them. There are stacks of magazines in my house to show for it. Which ones do I get to read, you ask? That depends on which one is near me as I sit down for lunch or lie down in bed. I don’t read them all the way through, or even want to, but it is reassuring to know that journalists are publishing them.

When I was growing up, there was no cable TV news, no 24-hour news cycle. Now we can’t avoid the news. Often it’s loud and shallow, adding more to our anxiety than to our understanding. Breaking news gets tweeted over and over. Simplistic news gets repeated on a TV screen in a tavern or diner, in an airport lounge, or the cardio room at the gym. On one hand, the World Wide Web offers access to outlets of legitimate, ethical journalism. Through a website or a smartphone app, you can learn about local issues or distant ones. On the other hand, the Web has become dominated by social media. This includes YouTube. Any of us might find fault with a newspaper, a network, or another conventional news outlet, but at least they have editors and editorial standards. YouTube is a free-for-all. It tries to block the most alarming or illegal content, but it can’t keep up with the volume of it. Unlike a newspaper or network, YouTube is

not an institution with editors or with any common set of ethics. It gives equal access to unfounded conspiracy theories and cooking lessons. On YouTube there are white nationalist recruiting videos and librarians reading picture books to children. There are political disinformation campaigns and music recitals. And, of course, there are sermons like the ones we preach here at UUSS. The choices are overwhelming. YouTube and other online operators like Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Microsoft use computer programs—algorithms—to determine what you prefer to read and watch. Then they send you more of it. This narrows everyone’s perspective. Social media is not a good way to simplify the problem of having too much news to bear.¹

If you are a person who seeks to be informed but not overwhelmed, I do have some suggestions. Generally, these guidelines help me to not feel burdened by the news. Here they are: Consume *real* journalism, but not too much. Avoid clicking on things that appear in your social media feed; instead, just go directly to publications you can trust, or those you wish to explore. While much of the news is upsetting on its own, it’s a good idea to ignore websites or stories that seem calculated to provoke you. They *are* designed to provoke you.

Support real journalism by viewing or subscribing to responsible sources and outlets. How can you tell if they are responsible? Notice if they demonstrate humility and curiosity instead of antagonism and certainty. Consider if they show maturity more than mean-spiritedness. Are they willing to admit mistakes and publish corrections? And above all, listen, read, and watch at a level that feels right for you. Strive to be informed *enough* but not too much.

Personally, I don’t feel it’s good to watch, read or hear any piece of news more than once or twice. I am a loyal donor to three public radio stations, and I listen a few hours every day. However, I get aggravated hearing the headlines repeated two or three times an hour. I know this is geared to serve the listeners who tune in only briefly, but I don’t like it. When I begin to hear something that I’ve already heard, I quickly switch the radio to a music station.

I no longer worry that I should hear every story, learn every detail of a story, or read every update of a story, whatever the story is. I don’t worry about having to sort through *everything*. Sorting through it all is the job of journalists. I like to think of reporters and their editors as my curators. Because they are on the job, I feel free from having to keep up with everything that’s going on in the world, in this country, in California, and in the local area. There is a degree of trust in this relationship. I have grown to trust their judgment by paying attention to them and getting to know them. I have known a lot of reporters, and for a while I wanted to be one.

In 1979 I went to college in Bloomington, Indiana, thinking I’d be a journalist. I joined the staff of the *Indiana Daily Student*, a paper known as a training ground for a number of award-winning journalists. I had an enjoyable year of working there, but I didn’t return. I couldn’t bear the anxiety I felt every few days about the deadlines for writing stories. How ironic it is that I’d end up writing sermons for a living.

For those who are committed to journalism, deadlines are not nearly as stressful as threats of death. A few decades ago, a college friend of mine was a reporter in southern Kentucky, serving a statewide newspaper. Tim was investigating a state judge for corruption. He received a call from a federal ATF agent whom he knew and trusted. The agent was privy to intelligence that said Tim could be at risk. He said: the agent “warned me to be careful. He said I should buy

a wall mirror, put it under the car in the morning and push it around with a broom handle to look for [wires or other evidence of a bomb].” Pretty intimidating, but my friend saw the story through. He told me: “It is the only story I’ve written that had people marching in the street hours after it appeared. The judge retired, and the District Attorney resigned.” Tim’s reporting career included a few other scary stories, but he’s still alive and well.

Real journalism includes painstaking work in local communities to seek the truth and make it known. Unfortunately, local independent news publications have been closing down. Some cities and counties no longer have any local papers. Most of the closures have been the result of economic or financial decisions. Newspapers have lost classified advertising and other advertising revenue to online platforms, and they laid off staff. Some papers got purchased by investment hedge funds which didn’t care about the journalistic mission. Fortunately, in some places, not-for-profit outlets are being established in order to resurrect reporting on local issues. They publish on the web, saving the costs of printing and delivery. They are trying to find new ways to bear witness. And, of course, local public radio stations have been gathering the news for us, and presenting it, for decades.

In Vladimir Putin’s Russia, online independent newspapers have tried to portray the reality of the country’s brutal war in Ukraine. They also have tried to bear witness to its cost to their own country, such as the lives lost of young Russian soldiers. But the Russian State Censor has forced them to suspend operations, one after another. This includes *Novaya Gazeta*. Its editors won a Nobel Peace Prize for their faithful journalism. But now it’s gone too, for the time being. The other day, a week or so after it closed, its founding editor was attacked on the subway, red paint poured over his head and burning his eyes.

Bearing witness has a cost. In recent years, from 25 to 75 journalists have been killed around the world, every year. Some die in the crossfire of conflicts, like the seven who have died since the start of the war in Ukraine. Some journalists perish in the violence of street protests. And many are assassinated because they are doing their jobs, and people don’t want them to. In the last five years, around the globe, more than 60 journalists have gone missing, every year. And at least 250 journalists have been imprisoned, every year.ⁱⁱ Whether in Iraq, Syria, Mexico, the Philippines, or India, these are local and regional journalists devoted to seeking the truth and making it known.

There is so much meanness and noise that is *not* news, so it can be easy to forget the real human beings dedicated to real journalism. Here and abroad, they risk their safety to find and share good stories, bring the truth to light, and expand our understanding.

Reporters, commentators, and publishers are not perfect. They have their own limited perspectives and opinions. Sometimes they get things wrong. But there are checks and balances, including attentive readers and competing publications. Because a diversity of media is a source of balance itself, I think it’s important to subscribe to and support independent media organizations, even if we don’t consume too much of what they provide.

In this country, hostility against people in journalism is on the rise. This is true on the radical right, and sometimes on the left as well. In 2016, a news photographer I know covered the Convention of the California Republican Party, or GOP. The badge around his neck said *Press* but it also said GOP Convention. This caught the eye of antifa-style left wing protestors, who charged after him. “They hit me with an egg,” he said, “but it was only an egg.” Two years ago, he and a colleague went to the grounds of the California Capitol to cover a protest against

the State's Covid-19 lockdowns and mask-wearing mandates. They found themselves stuck between a line of police officers and a crowd of unmasked protestors, including white nationalists. As the hostility rose against the two young journalists wearing press credentials, they tried to get away, but police officers held them back, in spite of their visible credentials.

I give thanks for journalists, because they are called to bear witness to the world on our behalf. We have the freedom to decide how much of it we need to absorb. For example, I don't need to see very many pictures of the war victims in Ukraine to know it's terrible. I don't need to see all the pictures of the wildfire devastation in California either. However, I am grateful that somebody is taking those pictures.

When Donald Trump was the president, I didn't want to read his tweets or listen to him lie in public. I didn't want to hear him attack news reporters at press conferences, so I limited how much I consumed. But let me tell you, I was very glad the press was there. (I also grew tired of hearing Presidents Clinton and Bush talking to the press, but the Trump administration achieved a new level of toxicity, dishonesty, and outright threats.) It seemed to me that the press corps should have received hazard-duty pay during those times. It is the calling of journalists to bear witness, and it calls for courage. I thank them for their service.

No single journalist, publication, or news website can get it right all the time, and none of them can cover everything. Yet they are called to bear witness as best they can. Journalists are called to explore the complexity of current events. On our behalf, they bear witness to the tragedies, the joys, and the possibilities unfolding in places large and small around the globe.

In these times of trouble and heartbreak, in these times of confusion and uncertainty, let us endeavor to be informed enough, but not too much. Let us give thanks for those ordinary human beings who pursue their calling to bear witness on our behalf. Let us thank them and support them and protect them, so they will always be there. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ See my sermon "Serenity, Social Engagement, and Social Media" on January 23, 2022, at uuss.org/sermons.

ⁱⁱ Committee to Protect Journalists website, accessed April 9, 2022. <https://cpj.org/data/>