

## NINE ANTIRULES OF JOURNALISM

I dedicate half of this talk (I've never dedicated half of a talk before, or a whole talk if it comes to that) to Avery Hopwood who, among other things, became rich at writing plays, which seems to me noteworthy. They say about playwrighting that you can't make a living at it, but you *can* make a killing.

I would like to dedicate the other half to Larry Goldstein, editor of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, because of the anxiety I have caused him, and continue to cause him. He requested, quite reasonably, that I give him the printed copy of this talk. I informed him, quite unreasonably, that I don't write out my talks, but that if someone would care to record and transcribe it, that would be fine with me. Goldstein shuddered, and is shuddering still.

The reason I don't like to write out talks is that I don't like to read things aloud in public, and I kind of like the fear of not knowing exactly what I'll say. I kind of like to look at the fear in *your* eyes, too. I don't even like the title of this talk, but being magnanimous, I conceded to Goldstein a title: "Nine Antirules of Journalism." Then I realized that I had to come up with nine.

I am leery of titles from my experience of working at *Time* magazine. My colleagues and I used to collect the titles of books that we most favored. These are titles of real books that came in over the years. We had a special shelf on which we would keep them. Office favorites included *God and Vitamins*, *Socialism for the Dead*, an animal book called *Do Reindeer Experience Religious Ecstasy?* This was one of a whole series of animal books, which we discovered sell very well. Alan Coren, the former editor of *Punch*, was always trying to write a best seller. One day he asked his agent, "Well, what kind of books sell? I mean, on what subjects should I write books?"

And his agent told him, Nazis, cats, or golf. So Coren wrote a book called *Golfing for Cats*, with a swastika on the cover. My own favorite title on our shelf was a book called *1637, a Year of No Significance*. And the absolute favorite of the boys in the office, a computer book called *Using Your Wang for Business*.

When I saw the distinguished roster of Hopwood lecturers before me, I realized that I also had no *authority* to give this talk. This was not news to me. I have no authority, generally. Every time I try to establish authority, I always bring humiliation upon myself.

When at *Time* I worked for a wonderful editor, Ray Cave—very dour man, had a beard, looked like Rockwell Kent's illustration of Captain Ahab. My family and I were living in Vermont when Cave called me, and I very much wanted to work at *Time*. But I didn't want to look over-eager. I didn't want to look like a hick. So I drove down to New York and had a conversation with Cave, in which everything sounded fine. The hours were fine. The salary was fine—in those days any salary would have been fine. Fifty dollars okay? Fine, fine. But I wanted to show Cave that I had some gump-tion. So I said, "Well" . . . my voice cracking because I was about to tell a lie. I said, "Well, I'm used to four weeks vacation." Now this was both true and not true. At the *Washington Post* where I had worked before, I got three weeks vacation, but at a university where I had worked before that, I got three *months* vacation. So I figured the whole thing averaged out. "Well," I said, "I'm used to four weeks vacation."

I looked at Cave. Cave looked at me. I could tell he could tell he wasn't dealing with any corn-fed. I could tell he could sense my authority.

"All right, Roger," he said after a pause. "We ordinarily start with five weeks, but in your case we'll make an exception."

I only had one experience in my life in which I managed to turn a humiliation into triumph. I've never told this story before. And the only reason I am recounting it at this university is that the incident involved a member of the English literature faculty here.

Richard Tillinghast and I were good friends at Harvard when we were in graduate school, and it so happened that we had our oral exam for our Ph.D. on the very same hour of the very same day. In graduate school I was quite undistinguished, quite unmemorable, but Richard was a star. Everybody knew Richard. That morning of our orals Richard and I decided to walk over to Warren House,

where the English department was located, together. When we got to Warren House three professors greeted us, two congratulating me for being such a supportive friend as to walk Richard to his orals. One of the professors congratulating me happened to be on my board.

The orals began, Richard's taking place in the next room. I could clearly hear Richard's orals through the wall, as two of my examiners immediately went to sleep. I noticed that because the third examiner didn't show up. Meanwhile, through the wall I continued to hear raucous laughter, explosions of celebration. "That's great, Richard! Who would have thought of *that* before, Richard! Oh, the hell with this, Richard, let's go out and have a drink!" . . . while the tedium of my exam went on, and the seasons passed.

I interrupt this anecdote to bring you to another moment which I will then relate to the anecdote itself. Earlier in the year I was teaching a survey course in English literature. I like memorizing poetry, and I memorized Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," for two reasons. To show off was the first reason; and the second that it was easier to teach if I could just recite the poem freely and then talk about the lines. The students couldn't have cared less whether I had memorized the poem or not. Nonetheless, it rested in my mind throughout the term as I studied for my orals.

Back at the orals, where the professors are drowsily starting to awaken, the third examiner, an assistant professor, has finally remembered that this exam was to take place, and he bursts in the room wearing tennis togs, just off the court. He didn't want to appear foolish in front of his colleagues (he certainly didn't care how he looked before me), but he wanted to look like he was with it, you know, to rush into this exciting event with a question at the ready. "Where are we?" he asked the two others who, of course, could not answer that question.

One of them said, "Wordsworth."

"Wordsworth! Ah, Wordsworth!" said the assistant professor, as if he had just come from Wordsworth's cottage and a chat with Dorothy. "Wordsworth, Wordsworth, Wordsworth," he said. "Mr. Rosenthal . . ." he began. (Who were the other two to correct him? I didn't have the energy.) "Could you, Mr. Rosenthal, tell us how the poem, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey'

begins?" Before that son-of-a-bitch settled his fat ass in that chair, I gave him the whole poem right between the eyes.

In his characteristically gracious introduction of me, Nick Delbanco referred to my most recent humiliation: my publisher suggesting that they publish a collection of my work. I know that this may sound lofty; really it means that you're all washed up and that they just want to get the detritus out of the way and print the eight copies they send to reviewers, and then pension you off to some asylum. The humiliation consists of reading all the stuff that you've written, and realizing how little you are not suicidally ashamed of.

But I did discover something in the course of this investigation which became the seed of what I will try to make sense of today. I discovered that the one characteristic that defined this odd body of my work was mystery—not just the love of, or appreciation of, mystery, but a professional desire to dwell in mystery. I saw that it had done me good. That is, when I least understood a subject, when I was most overwhelmed with some experience, I was, strangely, most self-assured as a writer, most accurate as an observer.

It is in the interest of that idea of mystery that I concoct these nine antirules of journalism. These may be of use to those of you who would be journalists, but they really are intended to apply more generally to us as readers, writers, citizens, dealers in the experience of words. So I hope you won't mind if I present these antirules as if I were talking to young people about to enter that trade, because by this method I can most clearly state what I mean.

Let me start off simply by stating what these antirules are—you'll see why they are weird—and then I will try to explain them as I go along. 1) Be out of things, (2) Be slow, (3) Write dead stories, (4) Go to hell, (5) Distrust rational thought, (6) Be beside the point, (7) Avoid the company of people, (8) Betray your sources, and (9) the most important antirule, Do not understand it.

Be out of things. Oscar Levant said to Joan Crawford in *Humoresque*, "Don't blame me, lady, I didn't make the world; I barely live on it." That's the ticket. To be out of things you must create an atmosphere in which you deliberately generalize your knowledge and your experience. You must cultivate, believe it or not, the old general education. And this cultivation involves several decisions.

First, it involves the deliberate avoidance of the narrow focus, usually the assigned focus. If I could show all that journalism can and cannot do by using one movie, it would be *Citizen Kane*, which

is largely about journalism. *Citizen Kane* is a wonderful example of how *not* to go about discovering a story.

You remember how *Citizen Kane* begins: there is the newsreel about all the high points of Charles Foster Kane's life spilling loudly on the screen, and then the newsreel winds down to that kind of awkward halt. The room is dark. The editor, unseen (always the best condition for an editor), says in effect to the reporters in the room, "Um, how do we go about this? I understand his last word was 'Rosebud.' Let's find out what Rosebud is. If we find out what Rosebud means, we will discover Charles Foster Kane." And so he sends a reporter on the quest to discover Rosebud, and that is the entire plotline of the movie. The reporter, of course, does not discover Rosebud. *We* discover Rosebud only at the end when the sled is in the furnace, and we are to conclude from this disclosure that an entire life might be defined by a single moment — when Kane as a little boy used this instrument of the sled to resist the force that was going to take him from his bucolic bliss to the world which he then began to command and mess up simultaneously. As if any life could be defined by so small a discovery. The reporter does, in fact, get to the life of Charles Foster Kane by talking to all the people who *cannot* identify Rosebud.

But it's an accident, and only a partial truth he discovers anyway. And even at the end of the movie we are not sure who Kane was, which is exactly what we were supposed to learn. Any quest that looks for the narrow answer is usually the wrong quest. Any quest that looks in the direction in which you were initially pointed is usually the wrong quest in the wrong direction. If you want to find Rosebud, look almost everywhere but at that sled and find almost everything *but* that sled.

Being out of things involves anti-specialization, and, unfortunately, we live in a world of specialization. In the most recent issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* someone writes, "The ego-self is being replaced by the eco-self." I wish it were true, but I do not believe it for a moment. We live in a time when specialties are becoming both stupid and dangerous. There are specialty markets, target audiences, specialty magazines like *Wood*, *Teeth*, *Aleut Life*, and so forth. But we are also living in a specialized country in which we divide ourselves among races, among regions, between sexes, and on and on. We live increasingly in a segmented world that defines itself by remorseless violence, as in the tribalism in Bosnia, or in

New York, or in the Sudan, from which I have recently returned, and where I saw the work of specialists firsthand. Specialists in the north, specialists in a peculiar sect of Islamic fundamentalism specializing in "ethnic cleansing" — a high point of specialization. With sufficient specialization, eventually there will be nobody left but us, whoever the "us" is; through such specialization we live in and we will be living in a country that is the antithesis of the one that we anticipated and deserve.

Being out of things also involves avoiding the news. If anyone were interested in going into journalism I would tell him or her, "Do not read the news." I realize that is something of an encumbrance when it comes to conversations with one's employers, but there are ways that you can pick up the news secondhand.

Instead, read history, read poetry, read fiction, if you really want to understand something, if you want to get to the heart of something. We watched John McEnroe trying to make a comeback. And he would get so far and he would fall back; and he'd get a little further, and he would fall back. And you'd wonder what was happening here. People said, "Well, he's older than he was, his serve isn't as strong as it was." All the rational explanations for people who follow the news.

If you ask me, if you want to know why John McEnroe couldn't make a comeback, read Bernard Malamud's novel *The Natural*. The reason that McEnroe couldn't make a comeback is that he was a natural; he didn't believe in discipline. He couldn't work at tennis because he was so naturally good at tennis. And when all of those inborn reflexes failed him — as if he were shocked at the mismotion of his own arm, at the slowness of his own leg — then we understood John McEnroe.

The opposite of a McEnroe went to this University — the pitcher Jim Abbott, who worked and worked and worked at his craft. Abbott pitched with his left hand because he was born without a right hand. And here at Michigan he worked at and acquired the pitches that made him a star in the majors.

The nice and interesting thing about Abbott is that for all that sunny, farm-boy ordinariness about him, there is no doubt that he is eccentric too. What sort of boy at the age of five or six would look down and see emptiness at the end of his right wrist and say, "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to be a pitcher." Naturally, he was also a quarterback. Do you want to understand what makes a

pitcher? Don't worry about the physics of a curve. And surely don't read the sports pages. Read a poem by Robert Francis called "The Pitcher." It's a poem about deception. It's a poem about fooling people, which is what a pitcher does.

Do you want to understand George Bush—I don't know why you would—but if you want to understand George Bush read Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. Bush was a man with no center. You could tell he had no center by his use of language. Referring to Vaclav Havel, then the president of Czechoslovakia, George Bush praised Havel for having been in jail "and living and dying, whatever, for freedom."

"I think it no exaggeration," said Bush about his own election in 1988, "to say that the undecideds could go one way or the other."

I miss Bush. I hope that Larry Goldstein will forgive me for these digressions. I miss Reagan, too, for the same kind of stuff. Reagan once returned from a trip to Latin America, after which he informed us, "You know, you'd be surprised. They're all individual countries."

"Sure we made mistakes," he once said, "but point them out and we'll correct them. Let's not throw the baby out, though, with the dishes."

My favorite thing Reagan ever said is the following. The Lebanese foreign minister was giving him a half-hour lecture on all the political factions in Lebanon. *All* the political factions in Lebanon. You may imagine what this lecture sounded like. When the foreign minister concluded, Mr. Reagan approached him and said, "You know, your nose looks just like Danny Thomas's." Maybe this isn't a digression; I *am* talking about being out of things.

Being out of things involves a connection with nature. I mean a real connection with nature. We have of late, I mean of late in the last 25, 30, maybe 50 years, lost a connection with nature, and we are paying severe penalties for it.

There was a wonderful photograph I saw in a magazine a few years ago of a public demonstration by French farmers in Paris protesting against the Common Market, and they decided to make this a vivid protest by bringing in cows and sheep and slices—I forget what the technical term is—of wheat fields, so that the wheat fields could be recreated on the Champs Elysées. They put this stuff right in the middle of the city—an agrarian revolt. The police were ready for all sorts of trouble.

What happened instead was that couples started strolling through the wheat fields, and the police joined them, in a kind of visceral remembrance of something that existed in a buried life — Matthew Arnold's phrase — "the buried life." There were no clashes. The instant countryside bred companionship.

I am persuaded that the real force of the environmental movement, however other many good things will come of it, arises from a desire for our reconnection with nature. We can talk about cleaning the air, the water and oil spills, and so forth — all of which is needed. But I think the movement comes from somewhere hidden. We wish to remind ourselves of our primal connection with nature.

Being out of it involves living in the past. You remember in Thornton Wilder's play *Skin of Our Teeth* the fortune-teller says something like: "Your future? Anybody can tell you your future. I'll tell you your *past*." Live in the past. Find the past, find *your* past. You *can* go home again. Often finding the past involves cultivating a dream state. Again, that phrase of Arnold's, "the buried life," retrieving and occupying a state of reverie. "A state of reverie does not avoid reality," said Somerset Maugham, "it accedes to reality."

Mark Twain used to curse a lot. His wife wanted to cure him of the habit. One morning his collar button was lost or something, and Twain let fly with the usual barrage: Goddamn . . . blah, blah, blah. And his wife, Livy, wanted to show him how ugly such language sounded, so she repeated verbatim what her husband had just said: Goddamn . . . blah, blah, blah. Twain stepped back, looked affectionately at his wife and said, "Livy, you know the words, but you don't know the tune." Know the tune of your life. Be out of things.

Second antirule — Be slow. All I mean by that is to wait on experience. Wait way beyond the point that you think you ought to wait before you start to create some understanding of experience, much less to make some judgment about it. Going slow is anathema for journalists, of course, who are taught to get something in as fast as possible. But it's an anathema for citizens generally, too. We pick this up, perhaps, from journalism: the need to get something fast. Get it fast. Forget it fast. Move along.

Imagine the weekend in the Politburo when the Soviet Union was still the Soviet Union and all those guys gathered together in that place, while hundreds of thousands of people in the streets of Moscow were waiting for some revelation to come out of the meeting.

And the Soviet leaders emerge from that weekend, and they say to the people: "Well, from now on you can vote for a party that isn't the Communist party." After seventy years, after a single weekend, they emerge and say, "Just kidding. We really weren't serious about this Communist thing. Go about your business."

What could it mean? Every headline noted the collapse of Communism, and journalists went through the facts that traced the collapse of Communism. But what was happening here was that people realized—and what could it have meant to realize this?—that they and their parents and perhaps *their* parents, too, had been living a lie. And it was now admitted that it was a lie. And what are you supposed to do when you live a lie? I don't mean the big lie, I mean the little lies that people told to one another. The competitions for personal advancement. The lurches toward individual achievement. Any of you who visited the Soviet Union saw signs in hospitals and schools: the teacher of the week, the best worker of the week, all that stuff to reinforce the lie. And then after a single weekend the leaders say, "Well, we really didn't mean this." Vaclav Havel, so honored by President Bush, wrote an essay called "The Power of the Powerless," or "The Power of Powerlessness," in which he describes a worker in Czechoslovakia who, every day, made sure that the sign "Workers of the World Unite" stood in his window, as if he had any idea of its meaning. As if the application of it had anything to do with his life.

There was, at the time that Richard and I were at Harvard, a terribly strange story of two high school seniors who had applied to Harvard from the same high school. Let's say their names were Jones and Smith. Smith was under great pressure from his parents to go to Harvard. Nonetheless, he was rejected. Jones got into Harvard and he also got into Yale and he decided that he wanted to go to Yale, so he wrote to Harvard and said "I'm sorry, I'm not coming." Wrote to Yale and said he was coming, and went off to Yale.

Smith, knowing that Jones had done this, then wrote another letter to Harvard under Jones's name and said, "I've changed my mind. I'm coming after all." And so, Smith, under the name Jones, entered Harvard. Ordinarily you have to live in a freshman dormitory—he figured a way that he didn't have to so that he wouldn't run into people he knew. He led a life in hiding under his false name. Everything was going along fairly well for Smith, now Jones, but there is a rule applying only to the first semester, that if you get a C or below in any subject, your parents are sent a letter

informing them of this. Jones, *né* Smith, was doing pretty well at Harvard, except for one course in which he got a C. Anybody, as everybody knows, can do very well at Harvard. The trick is getting in — that's the second hardest thing. The first hardest thing is being thrown out.

At any rate things were going swimmingly for our Smith, now under the name of Jones, but he got a C in one course and a note was sent home to his parents. Of course it wasn't sent home to *his* parents, it was sent home to the parents of the *real* Jones, who wrote back to Harvard saying, "We're dismayed to hear our son isn't doing too well at Harvard because he's doing quite well at Yale." Whereupon Smith/Jones was thrown out of Harvard. A minor irony in this story is that his name was expunged from the record, but of course it wasn't *his* name that was expunged from the record.

But what if he *hadn't* gotten the C, I've always wondered. That might have been the only time he could have been caught. And Smith as Jones would become Jones the sophomore. And Jones the junior. And Jones the senior. And Jones would enter law school. And Jones would get married to someone who might, if she chose to, adopt the name Jones. And their children would be called Jones and they would live a whole life named Jones. And he would die under the name Jones. And he would be buried in the cemetery, and written above his grave would be "Jones."

What does it mean to make decisions the accretion of which results in living a lie? If we knew that, we would know what happened all those decades under Communism, the meaning of those gulags, that art, those inventions, that shoe of Khrushchev's.

When I was in what was then the Soviet Union, I was taken to Latvia. Every place a visitor went in the Soviet Union, someone was attached to him who had multiple functions. He was your translator. He was your guide. And he was a spy. It was all understood, and it was all good-natured. He was also a propagandist. "We will now visit a typical Latvian fisherman," he told me. The man had been prepared for this visit for months, you know, given new clothes, a new house. "We will just drop in on him."

So, we get to this guy's house and you can see he is practically shaking. He's not prepared for any of this stuff. And meanwhile I'm told how happy all the Latvians are to be Communists and how happy it is to be fishermen in this system because you have the privilege of donating all your fish to the community fishery. And,

sure enough, I would dutifully ask questions of the fisherman about his life, and he would say: "Never better, never better. I love to go out there and catch these fish and give them all to the state."

Getting nowhere in the interview, I noticed a guitar in the corner and asked simply if he played, and would he play us a folk song. He started to play, and he had the most beautiful voice. He started to sing a folk song in Latvian. And then it happened. My translator-guide-spy began to sing also, to sing thirds harmony with the fisherman in an equally beautiful voice. And for one moment, the only true moment of the day, I could understand everything that was happening there. My accompanist was, after all, Latvian. He was home. The song had brought him home. But you had to wait.

Antirule #3: Write dead stories. The rule applies to readers as well as writers. Pay attention to the stories that people forget, that they say are over. Whenever something happens there is a closure, a verdict and a trial, something that says, "You will hear no more of this." Yet the stories that reverberate in our minds, in the after-effects of our minds, are almost always the most significant.

You may remember a story that happened in a small town in the midwest near Kansas City about twelve years ago. There was a bully in the town, I mean a really dangerous, bad-guy bully who raped women and beat up the men and was drunk all the time, and terrorized this small town. One day this guy is walking through town in the middle of the day, shots ring out, and the bully is dead. Cops come in and ask who did it. Beats me, says the town, didn't see a thing. Middle of the day, small town, everybody knew who shot this guy, but nobody saw a thing. Maybe there were several who shot him.

The cops give up. Federal agents come in, as in the Rodney King case. They decide, "Well, if we can't get anywhere with this as a murder case, we can decide that the man was deprived of his civil rights." There is a kind of logic to that. When you are killed, you really are deprived of your civil rights. Feds go in there, the town clams up just as it did before. Nope, didn't see a thing. Nothing.

For twelve years no one in that town has said a word in public about what happened on that Saturday afternoon. But imagine the story now. Now the dead man is no longer a bully. He's dead twelve years. And the town, meanwhile, has been living with a conspiracy, with the common knowledge that one or more among them is capable of murder. And this is a secret they cannot divulge. If you want a

story, don't worry about the bully. Go into the town now, if you dare.

In New York a couple of years ago there was a terrible incident involving a man named Rodney Sumpter, who, being menaced by a homeless man in a subway — Rodney Sumpter was with his child — leapt upon the homeless man and beat him to death; beat his head against the subway platform. There was no indictment, and *that* case was over. It was in several ways a dead story. But why did that story reverberate in the minds of New Yorkers and in the minds of those who would read the story outside New York? Because it involved the inarticulate, unexpressed rage at the impotence people everywhere feel about homelessness. The admixture of fear and pity. Of wanting to do something to correct what you know is wrong, and not being able to. All the feelings that New Yorkers have as they step gingerly over the bodies of their fellow creatures on their way to work; they were in that story. Yet it was a dead story; there was no indictment. Nothing is ever over. The mind lives in aftereffects.

Antirule #4: Go to hell. What I mean by that is simply something you writers in the audience know already. You discover chaos inside you. It is useful. Use it. Nietzsche said, "You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star." I mean discover real chaos. The kind of chaos that Huck Finn discovered when he decided to go to hell to do something honorable. Where I live there is chaos everywhere. I look out my window on Broadway and see chaos performing. What reverberates in me is the same chaos. Go to hell. It is useful.

Antirule #5. Distrust rational thought. We know the value of rational thought. We ought to be more in tune with the instruction of irrational thought, of intuition. We see public figures about whom we know something is terribly wrong, but we listen to the evidence and the words, and we decide to make definitions about those figures according to the externalities. You see Bud McFarland testify in the Iran-Contra investigation. You feel something is terribly wrong with him, and then something actually goes wrong; he tries to kill himself. Your intuition was right. Bess Myerson is picked up for shoplifting. All you had to do was trust your intuition. Oliver North with all that stolid talk, and that solid stance. Is there doubt in anybody's mind that he is crazy as a loon?

I work with some friends in my neighborhood with a homeless group. We do very little — put out a journal once a month consisting

of the stories of their lives. We interview them, and then we write their stories, on the idea, which seems to work, that seeing their lives in print gives them a kind of credibility, puts them back on earth.

In one of these interviews I said to a woman named Betty, a woman in her sixties, "Betty, can I talk to you about your life?" She said, "Oh, I'd like to talk to you, Roger, but CBS is coming over later to interview me, so I don't know how much time I have. And you know how it is when you've been a former showgirl and Miss America and you've had all this celebrity and you've had a Hollywood screen test, and you've dated Joe DiMaggio. But if I have the time, I'll talk to you." So I wrote up what she told me, but I asked the psychiatrist in charge of the place if there was any harm in recording these fantasies. He said not if Betty believed them herself.

Two weeks before Betty died peacefully in her sleep a young woman came looking for her, who turned out to be her daughter, born in a mental institution in Texas where Betty had been a patient. The daughter in her dogged search for her mother had gone from state to state, and had finally come to our neighborhood and found her mother, and they were reunited. It was miraculous for the couple of weeks of life left to Betty.

The daughter also carried with her evidence that everything Betty had told me was true. She *had* been a showgirl in the Latin Quarter nightclub. She was not Miss America, but she was Miss Ohio, and she had gone to the Miss America contest. Another fact she *didn't* mention was that her brother was a pitcher for the Cincinnati Reds. She *did* date Joe DiMaggio, and she had a Hollywood screen test.

If I had been looking where I ought to have been looking, I would have believed all that about Betty, but I was trusting what seemed to be reasonable, rational thought. You see, Betty sang in the streets. If you listened to the voice, even through all that cigarette smoke, there was the truth about Betty—in her songs. Shelley said, "We need the power to imagine what we know." (That quotation, by the way, was taught to me this morning by Larry Goldstein, my closest friend.)

Antirule #6: Be beside the point. It's a variation of being out of things, but with a specific direction. It means literally choosing the other direction. I'm going to begin with a basketball anecdote, though I realize basketball is a painful subject to raise here at Michigan after the NCAA finals.

The basketball anecdote about looking the other way has to do

with a back-court man at the University of Arkansas who was not doing so well, and he asked his coach what he was doing wrong. The coach said, "What do you do in practice?"

The kid answered, "I dribble and shoot, like most people."

The coach said, "In the next full scrimmage game, have somebody clock how much time you actually have your hands on the ball. That is, whether you're dribbling or you're shooting."

The kid did that, came back, and the coach asked, "How much time was it?" The kid was the point guard, so he would have his hands on the ball more time than other players. He reported that the time he handled the ball came to something over two minutes. A little over two minutes—out of forty. The player was shocked, of course. The coach asked, "What do you learn from that?"

The kid said, "I don't know."

The coach said, "Most of the game is played away from the ball."

In journalism, in the things that we watch, in the life we observe, most of the game is played away from the ball. Journalists are taught to be like heliotropic plants, to turn where the light is, or to turn where the noise is. But if you want to know about something, I mean really know about something, look away from the ball. If you want to know about poverty, don't look at a march on Washington, or at a tenement fire. Study the poor all the time. The poor are poor all the time.

Every time there is a natural disaster—the Ohio flood, the hurricane in Florida—people are missing the point by being on the point. So we are always told about these events in terms of the millions of dollars lost or how many people were injured, property damage, and so forth . . . when what we know to be the deeper truth, the inner life, the buried life of the story, is that we are helpless in nature still, and that nothing prepares us for certain events no matter how "advanced" we are. As we develop invention after invention, and sophistication after sophistication, these inexplicable uncontrollable things will always occur. *That* is the story of natural disasters.

Look away from the ball. Study people in repose, not people in crisis. There is a myth that exists among writers that behavior in the critical moment will reveal character. I do not believe it. I believe that behavior in the critical moment merely reveals behavior in the critical moment. And that people behave in aberrant ways in crises. But study people in repose, and you might have a chance of knowing what is going on inside their minds.

Antirule #7: Avoid the company of people. I regard that as an excellent general rule, but I will apply it to this talk as well. What I mean by this is to cultivate a useful privacy. There is so little privacy in our world, and again, as with the separation from nature, we are paying penalties for it. Rousseau said, "If I had to choose my place of birth, I would have chosen a state in which everyone knew everyone else so that neither the obscure tactics of vice nor the modesty of virtue could have escaped public scrutiny and judgment." Rousseau is what one would call in French a *tête* case. Who in his right mind would want a society where everything that one did or thought would be available to public scrutiny and judgment?

What purpose was served by revealing Arthur Ashe's AIDS? What good was served, except to provoke an extra amount of pain in a man who was going to die anyway, for those last months of his life? And it is not just that privacy is invaded in our time. Privacy is surrendered willingly—surrendered on Oprah, on Geraldo, on Donahue. I am always dumbstruck to watch the parents of children killed in a crossfire able to talk to a television reporter moments afterwards with all the aplomb of a seasoned television performer. They are ready to be public figures, ready to give out.

I don't really mean to advocate avoiding the company of people as much as I mean husbanding your time so that you are aware of the value of yourself without stumbling over into egocentricity or selfishness. I go back to Wordsworth. Coleridge was said to have visited Wordsworth, gone into the cottage, stayed four or five hours. They didn't say a word to each other. As Coleridge was walking out the door, he thanked Wordsworth for a perfect evening.

What privacy does is to develop certain valuable things in you. It develops a sense of language, of real language, not false language, not public language. For you, prize winners in these writing contests, the development of private language is essential. You will be misled. There will be temptations all the time to use some other word that is not your word.

So many words are used oddly today. I hear the word "fun" in the craziest contexts. A man works twenty years composing a dictionary of Zoroastrianism. Asked how the project went, he said "It was fun." An actor appears in a one-man play, *Pol Pot Tonight*. Says it was "fun," it was a lot of "fun."

There is a product advertised on late-night television in New York called "Safe Ears." A woman steps forward to advertise gold-looking

earrings that contain condoms inside. Condoms hidden in the earrings. Most inventive. The world has certainly come a long way from the Roy Rogers bullet ring I had as a boy, with its secret compartment, which contained nothing. Something else about "Safe Ears." They sell three to a set. Three earrings to a set. You'd think if your date was so constructed as to be able to wear three earrings, safe sex would be the least of her concerns. But the woman steps forward to say, "Safe ears are fabulous. And *fun*."

Cultivate privacy because private thoughts are much more complicated than public thoughts. It has to do, again, with this chaos within you. Think of the way the mind is most of the time. This roiling of words. All this chaos which then comes out in some orderly fakery we call conversation. But the state of mind before that moment; that's the thing to cultivate. That is the private self.

Most of all, privacy, oddly enough, makes the best social sense. I think civilizations are made up of interacting privacies. That's where people really learn community; to be with one another. A sense of self, and then a sense of other, in that order.

The eighth antirule: "Betray your sources." I don't mean this the way it sounds. If somebody tells you a secret you don't say who it was. I mean something far colder. Every journalist deliberately betrays the people he or she interviews. The act is justified in the name of a larger truth, but it is still a betrayal.

The most extravagant experience I had with betrayal was with Richard Nixon. I interviewed him twice. The first time I put my tape recorder beside him. He looked at it—true story—and said, "Oh, that's one of those new tape recorders. They are so much better than the old tape recorders." I did not know if he was joking. I did not laugh. I did not say, "Oh, yes, Mr. President, these don't skip a minute." I did not say that.

I was interviewing him for a story I was doing on the anniversary of Hiroshima and I wanted to talk to somebody who had had his finger on or near the button more than anyone else, and Nixon qualified. The story came out; Nixon was delighted. I wasn't interested in Watergate for the story. I made no comments about his character or about his leaving office or anything. I was interested in Nixon as nuclear diplomat, and he was very knowledgeable on this subject. So we became pen pals in a sense. He would send me notes from time to time. I thought that this was a unique distinction until

I discovered that he was sending hundreds of people in my profession notes, all for the same purpose – redeeming his name.

Then I was asked by *Time* to write a profile of Nixon. I did, and do, think he is the most interesting political character in my lifetime, and I was glad to write about him. I wrote a scathing profile. It was called “The Dark Comedian” and I just let fly with all the contempt that I held for what he did to the highest office in the country. Nixon flew off the handle, wrote to *Time* saying, “I will not give an interview to any organization in which Rosenblatt is working.” His timing was poor, because in that particular summer I was working for *Time*, MacNeil/Lehrer, and CBS.

Of course, he didn’t mean any of this. The thing that got him sore was the thought that I had betrayed him, and of course I had. In the interview he granted for this profile, I showed no sign that I was about to tell the world what I thought of Richard Nixon. I did my very best to let Nixon be Nixon, and to say all the things I wanted him to say, without misrepresenting what he was saying, in order to enact a work of obvious, blatant betrayal in the name of something else, of some other loyalty.

Yet did I understand Nixon? Do I understand Nixon now? No. It was and is all beyond me.

And so, I come to the ninth and last, and to me, the guiding antirule – Do not understand it. I do not mean pretend not to understand it and then create some other fiction within the fiction. I mean do not understand it. Retain the mystery.

I was watching the Academy Awards a couple of years ago. Typical ceremony: the most glittery people in the world, dressed to the nines. Dazzling. I had the remote control and I turned to the news, on which they showed the bodies lined up in that Bronx Happyland Social Club fire of the same year. The bodies were awaiting burial. I thought: How can I be seeing these two things almost simultaneously? Will they, said the mind trying to make connections, make a movie of the Happyland fire some day? Will it win an Academy Award?

I came back recently from a trip to the Sudan where I saw the worst place in the world. There is no second place. I’ve seen places where, physically, things were worse. But what makes Sudan the most heartbreaking place I have ever seen is that while people are dying from intratribal war, and the ethnic cleansing by the Moslems in the north of the Christians and animists in the south, while they

are dying of all the diseases attributed to starvation and malnutrition, the thing that makes the Sudan the worst place I have ever seen is that nobody cares. Nobody is doing anything about it.

How can what is happening in the Sudan exist in the same world in which we, now, look at one another in this gracious hall, in which we take pleasure in one another's existence, wish one another the best? George Steiner in *Language and Silence* asks, "How could I be going to the movies and making love in New York at the same time that children were being dumped into the ovens in Auschwitz?" It is beyond us. I do not understand it. Do not understand it.

From that lack of understanding comes the kind of awe of experience out of which our work as writers could do a little good, could have its reverberations in other souls. Do not understand Rosebud.

When I was in high school, my father took me to the play *Inherit the Wind*. It starred Paul Muni playing the role of Clarence Darrow, and Ed Begley (Ed Begley, Sr., you have to say now) in the role of William Jennings Bryan. And it introduced a new actor, Tony Randall, in the role of a character called Hornbeck who was to represent H. L. Mencken. You know the story of *Inherit the Wind*; it's the Scopes "monkey trial" in Tennessee where the teacher was tried for teaching evolution, and lost the case, but won the point.

I was sitting there with my father, having no knowledge that I would ever enter journalism, wanting to be a writer but not knowing how that was ever going to be achieved. In the middle of the play, the Bryan character has a stroke. He has a stroke because he is overwhelmed by the idea that he is defending the indefensible, and as eloquent as he is, he can't take it. And Hornbeck, the journalist, regards this as Darrow's triumph. Darrow has been brilliantly rational throughout on the matter of evolution, and the two of them, the journalist and Darrow, are on the stage together. The journalist gloats and says to Darrow, "Well, you really got him! You really made a fool of that Bible-beating bastard!"

And Darrow, heaving with contempt, looks at the journalist and says, "What could a man like you possibly know about a man like that?"

That is our question.