

NARRATIVE SWEAT AND FLOW:  
THE CHALLENGE AND FULFILLMENT OF COVERING SENSITIVE SOCIAL  
ISSUES

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PROFESSIONAL ANALYSIS ARTICLE

They have written powerful stories about life and death, illnesses, cures, poverty, discrimination, trauma and hope.

To do that, they embedded with soldiers in Iraq, rode buses across the Mexico border, tracked a corpse over continents, delved into conflicts in Africa, and lingered around Boston hospitals and Florida orchards.

They gave their subjects time and their full attention for months in a row.

They put everything into narrative form, strewn with emotion, so that readers would want to follow the characters' journey toward a resolution. Along the way, they intended to illuminate social dramas and build empathy.

Narrative writers covering social issues have produced some amazing work in the past two to three decades. Their stories, published in newspapers and magazines, have stood out, revealed truths and gained appreciation from readers and the industry.

The best of their stories read as easily as page-turning fiction where the reader gets caught up in the characters, is moved through a compelling plot and is drawn into

vivid, intimate scenes. To produce these stories takes months of immersive reporting, in-depth interviewing, context gathering and then often painful writing and rewriting.

This work often takes a toll on their lives and relationships, ranging from depression to a perceived imbalance in their personal lives.

“To some extent, I’m taken out of my own life,” says writer Amy Harmon of *The New York Times*.

Yet for many of them, reporting and being part of other people’s lives triggers what psychologists refer to as “flow” – a state of being “in the zone,” completely absorbed in the activity, when work comes along easily and time seems to expand. People from different backgrounds and professions have said these experiences were among the most meaningful of their lives. Some of the best creative work is done while people are in the zone, psychologists say.

Moreover, these journalists find purpose in shedding light onto difficult, often heart-wrenching issues. Telling true stories is a privilege, they say, and a basic instinct.

“When you got one on the line, there’s an adrenaline rush,” says writer Chris Jones of *Esquire*. “It becomes primal almost when you got a good story (...) I spent my life trying to have those moments, pursuing those moments. When you get them, you kind of become blind to anything else.”

Seven writers, all who are either Pulitzer Prize or National Magazine Award winners, talk about the sweat, tears and joy of writing narratively about social issues such as poverty, race, illness and trauma. They talk about flow, stalemates, the power of

stories and how, in the end, they care about the story so much that they'll just find a way to get it done.

In seven years of doing journalism in Romania and the United States, and working on stories ranging from breaking news and business briefs to deep-dive narratives, I realized the stories that mattered most to me and my readers had three things in common: First, I had allowed myself time to do extensive reporting and to get to know the people and the issues I was writing about. Second, I tried to use narrative writing techniques to engage the readers and tell a good story. And third, the stories happened to be about people who were disadvantaged or struggling to overcome a burden, and about the system that put that burden there in the first place.

Whenever I felt like the readers could empathize with the characters and learn something useful about the system, I felt that my work was worth it. The work was enjoyable and rewarding, even if painful at times, and I felt like I was offering something meaningful to the world.

I wanted to explore the question of motivation, satisfaction and meaning with the masters themselves and get a glimpse into what might await me down the road if I follow their path. I took a final master's project at the University of Missouri as an opportunity to explore that question.

## **Flow**

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, now at Claremont Graduate University, has spent the past half a century studying "flow" -- the state in which a person is so absorbed in what he or she is doing that nothing else seems to matter. Csikszentmihalyi

grew up in Transylvania during World War II noticing how most of the adults around him were overwhelmed by the war's tragedies and unable to live happy, satisfied lives. He became interested in understanding what contributes to a life worth living, and that led him to psychology.

Csikszentmihalyi believes people achieve happiness by being fully involved with every detail of their lives, whether good or bad. The best moments occur, he says, "when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile."

Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur -- the swimmer's muscles might ache during the race, or his lungs might feel like exploding -- but people end up describing them as some of the best moments of their lives.

There are two main prerequisites for flow: one's attention must be invested in realistic goals, and skills need to match the opportunities for action. Thus, the person concentrates his or her attention on the task at hand and momentarily forgets everything else.

A mountaineer cited in Csikszentmihalyi's research described it like this: "When you're [climbing] you're not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It's a concentration thing. Once you're into the situation, it's incredibly real, and you're very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world."

Flow is experienced in similar ways by people of different occupations and backgrounds. Csikszentmihalyi's studies have included surgeons, physics Nobel Prize winners, farmers in the Italian Alps, teenagers in Tokyo, and factory workers in Chicago.

Innovators and people who work in creative fields have also described doing some of their best work in "flow" conditions.

In the long run, these optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery, or as Csikszentmihalyi puts it, "a sense of participation in determining the content of life," which he posits comes as close to happiness as anything else.

Moreover, people use these experiences to reinforce a meaningful pattern, a life theme. "When that is accomplished, and a person feels in control of life and feels that it makes sense, there is nothing left to desire," Csikszentmihalyi wrote in his book *Flow*.

Journalists have been studied before in a context somewhat related to flow, for the book *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, written by Csikszentmihalyi, Howard Gardner and William Damon. The authors described good work as something that is both of excellent quality and socially responsible, and found that journalists tend to produce good work when they pursue a moral mission such as informing the public, supporting democracy and creating social change.

That connection – between mission and joy – was echoed by seven accomplished writers who use long-form narratives to cover sensitive social issues. They described situations in which they experience flow, where they encounter difficulties and how they overcome them, and ultimately, how journalism has led them to live fulfilled lives.

When talking about flow, journalists sometimes even used the word itself or the expression “being in the zone.” Often, it comes in the form of intense concentration.

Lane DeGregory is a long-time feature writer who started writing daily news stories in *The Virginian-Pilot*. Now at the *Tampa Bay Times*, her series “The Girl in the Window,” about a feral child who had been raised in a closet, won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her subjects are often people living on the fringes of society.

DeGregory talks about her work occupying her mind even when she’s not literally working. “It’s a blessing and a curse that I can’t turn it off,” she says.

For example, in the middle of a reporting project, she might take time to see a baseball game with her husband. But all she could think about was how to end her story and whether she needed to call one of her sources for one more interview. Or her teenage sons would talk to her about a football game or a band concert, and she would realize that she hadn’t been listening to them but instead thinking about a story. She says she shuts people around her off sometimes without meaning to.

Harmon, a *New York Times* reporter who uses long-form narratives to illuminate how technology affects people’s lives, also talks about being absorbed by her stories. She says she doesn’t necessarily lose track of time when work is going well, but rather she wants “to be doing it all the time. I feel like I have something important to say.”

### **Reporting +/- writing = Joy**

Most writers in this study take delight in one or both of two separate parts of their work: reporting and writing.

Long-form narrative writing often requires the journalist to spend long stretches of time with his or her subjects. So it's not surprising that most writers said they love being able to inhabit other people's worlds in order to tell their stories.

Anne Hull of *The Washington Post* points out that it's a very specific type of reporting that might seem boring to journalists who are used to a different rhythm; for example, reporters churning out the grind of daily news. Her reporting method is both more luxurious and more demanding. "You're watching hours and hours of nothing happen. And you just have to be prepared for when that moment happens," she says.

Hull spent several months in 1998 documenting the journey of a group of Mexican women employed as crab pickers in North Carolina. Part of her reporting involved hours of just watching them pick crabs. Hull, who writes about the "non-majority class" -- she's written extensively about immigrants, gay youth in the Bible Belt, and war veterans recovering in substandard medical facilities -- chooses these subjects because she loves reporting in these "niche" environments.

"I just have always felt at home in that world," she says.

Harmon, who writes science-heavy stories, says that though she likes the challenge of deciphering the science, she gets most enjoyment from being part of other people's lives and acting as a "fly on the wall."

Chris Jones, a writer-at-large at *Esquire*, talks specifically about a certain part of reporting: discovering "nuggets," special moments that will play an important part in the story. One of them happened when he was reporting "The Things that Carried Him," the story of a dead soldier's journey from Iraq back to the United States. Jones remembers

clearly when the soldier's mother told him how her other son was trying to put a ring on the soldier's finger only to discover that the glove was stuffed with cotton because the finger was missing.

In another instance, Jones was reporting a story about the Zanesville Zoo massacre, when 50 exotic animals from a private Ohio zoo were released by their suicidal owner and then killed by authorities. Jones remembers a local sheriff describing how a piece of fur on a tiger's back fell off, revealing its spine, when it was shot. Jones is excited about these moments because he believes they'll make the story memorable to readers. Such discoveries, horrible as they are, also are pleasurable, he says.

"I think a great story has to have those scenes or those moments that really catch in people," he says. "And what happens invariably is when you're reporting those moments they're catching you. I can remember the moment I got them. It's often crystal clear."

When the journalists move beyond the reporting to talk about writing, their experiences with flow seem to become more fickle: sometimes, words seem to flow, everything just pours out and falls into place. Other times, it's a struggle.

The nights when it goes well are like being on drugs, Jones says. "I live for those." He tries to provoke that mood by listening to music; he'll choose a track for every story and play it on repeat. When he was writing the Zanesville massacre story, he was listening to "East Hastings" by Godspeed You Black Emperor. Jones told blogger Brandon Sneed during a 2012 interview that he liked the track's creepy feel and wanted

to evoke it in the story. When he was writing a profile of late movie critic Roger Ebert, Jones listened to “Little Motel” by Modest Mouse.

Other writers have other rituals to help them get “in the zone.” DeGregory only starts writing after she has taken a shower, done laundry, washed the dishes and put her house in order. All this time, she’s thinking about the story, but she’s doing all these little tasks instead of staring at a blank page on her computer screen. It helps her clear her mind and be more focused when she actually starts working.

Freelance writer Paige Williams manages the Nieman Storyboard. She has spent a decade in newspapers and then free-lanced long-form narratives for various magazines. Her *Atlanta* magazine story “You Have Thousands of Angels Around You,” about the people who helped a young refugee girl from Burundi to settle into her new life in the United States, won the 2008 National Magazine Award for feature writing.

Williams says she needs “silence and solitude” – a period of time untethered to incoming messages of all sorts and when she abstains from texting, tweeting and sharing through Instagram or Facebook – in order to allow herself to be absorbed by her work.

Another prerequisite of flow in writing goes back to thorough reporting, journalists say. Jones says he tries to report a story to the point when he can just tell it, when he knows it “back to front.”

Harmon says: “The fun writing comes from when you finally reach the point where you feel like you are authoritative. You can answer any question, you’ve done all the research.”

### **Purpose as a condition of flow**

Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, who wrote the book on good work, discovered that journalists tend to produce quality work when they are pursuing a moral mission.

All seven award-winning journalists reinforced that finding. They believe they are serving readers by helping them connect emotionally to characters in their stories, and thus become aware of larger social issues or human conditions.

Harmon sees it as a matter of public service to inform people about the science that impacts their lives in a way that is emotionally gripping. Earlier in her career, she was doing straightforward news and features about science developments for *The New York Times*. In 2000, she was part of the paper's project "How Race is Lived in America," which won a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting, and wrote her first long-form narrative story about two business partners of different races in the dot-com boom era. She discovered the power of narrative, and now she tries to address three levels in every story she writes: the science, the individual story of a character, and the bigger story of the social conflict.

Hull says she's always been interested in people at the outer edges of society, the "non-majority class" who is sometimes marginalized. The daughter of an inner city schoolteacher, Hull has followed an unusual track herself, dropping out of college after her freshman year, and working various jobs at *The St. Petersburg Times* (now *The Tampa Bay Times*) before she became a reporter.

She says her purpose is simply to peel back the curtain on a world readers don't usually see, without scolding them or pointing a finger at flawed social policies. She just wants to get readers in touch with how other people live.

For Tom Hallman, Jr., of *The Oregonian*, stories of trauma, illness and race came naturally from a decade of covering the police beat as a young reporter. He carved a role for long-form narrative at a daily newspaper and ultimately won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for his series "The Boy Behind the Mask," which described a disfigured teenager's quest to undergo surgery to improve his appearance.

"The police beat had such a drama, such characters, such a lingo, and the way we were writing it was sterile," he says. When he started incorporating those scenes into his stories, he got positive reactions from readers, so he kept at it. He realized this type of writing got readers more involved with the story and the characters.

*Tampa Bay Times*' DeGregory, who likes to write about "people in the shadows," and especially women, says she sometimes hopes her stories will help those featured in them and bring positive changes to their lives. Other times, she hopes policymakers will regard an issue differently. But with many stories, she just wants people to reflect on their own lives or slightly change their perspective on something.

She gives the example of a story about a 99-year-old man who still goes to work at a fish factory every day. "Nothing happened in that story. There was nothing at stake, there was no movement, but everybody was talking about that story," she says. She posits that people reacted because they could relate to this man and found meaning in his story.

Stories that have emotion make people stop, think and feel, Hallman says.

“In that moment, I take this stranger and this stranger, and I bring them together,” he says. “And that’s the goal, to make them connect and feel something, or read something and be changed, even if it’s for a minute.”

He gives the example of a story he wrote about a black maid who moved to Portland from a sharecropping farm in the South. She cleaned homes for 55 years and raised five children. They became accomplished professionals, including an attorney, a school teacher, a businessman and a nurse.

Hallman believes a story like that can change someone who has never gotten to know a black person and might be a “borderline racist.”

“When they start (reading the story) they think, ‘Oh, I don’t want to read another story about an African American. I’ll bet they’ll be complaining about something’,” Hallman says. “And by the time they get to the end of the story they’re weeping. And they have been in the presence of grace, and courage, and wisdom. And it changes their life.”

Sometimes, the writer’s aim is to help people see beyond the headlines they read in newspapers or see on TV and understand how major events impact people’s lives.

David Finkel, now an editor at *The Washington Post*, has pursued long-form narrative journalism since he started his career at *The St. Petersburg Times*. In 2006, he won the Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting for a piece about American efforts to expand democracy in Yemen. He also won the MacArthur “genius” grant in 2012, becoming one of only six journalists to have had that distinction.

Finkel considers “the crucial work of (his) writing time” to be the book *The Good Soldiers*, which he wrote after spending eight months embedded with a battalion in Iraq. He says he wanted the readers of his book to have specific people in mind whenever they heard something about Iraq or any other war or read a headline about another roadside bomb exploding in Afghanistan.

“I wanted them to walk away with a fuller understanding of what was going on,” he says. “And I don’t mean just in terms of a war, but in terms of the transformation of these young, eager men into the men they became by the time this was over with.”

### **Overcoming difficulties**

Flow, joy, satisfaction and all the good things have alternated in the writers’ lives with periods of struggle, which varied from deadline stress to deep depressions. Like marathon runners in training, the writers have learned to put their feet down step after step, when it feels great, and when it feels awful.

Harmon says she constantly feels a time pressure, “like editors are breathing down my neck: ‘What exactly are you spending all of this time on?’”

Hull refers to the “new angst” reporters have about exposing the people they write about to merciless online commenters. “It’s so mean and ugly, and I almost feel bad for the people I’m going to put through that,” she says.

DeGregory talks about a concern she’s had since she started in this profession: that she’s not worthy to tell people’s stories. That makes her nervous, sometimes to the point of being sick to her stomach, whenever she embarks on reporting a story.

“That’s a huge responsibility to get someone to open up to you and trust you to tell a story about them to thousands of strangers,” she says. “Am I good enough to do this? Gosh, they gave me this amazing access or insight. I don’t know if I’m magician enough to pull off this trick.”

DeGregory gets over these concerns by trying to be empathetic with her subjects. When she was younger, she used to build her stories around what other people would say about them. Now she tries to know her subjects well, “inhabit their minds,” before she lets others weigh in.

Hull says she’s had periods of “extreme struggle,” the most recent last year, during a fellowship at The American Academy in Berlin. “It’s hard to describe. You’re just hitting the wrong chords, and everything you try doesn’t quite work out, and it’s really depressing.” She worked through and beyond those feelings by talking to other journalist friends, whom she calls her “little tribe.”

But Hull says she has never wanted to quit journalism, no matter how difficult the roadblock. “I never not wanted to work. I just wanted to beat it.”

Jones suffered from depression, with suicidal thoughts, after he finished the story about the soldier killed in Iraq. He posits that he fell into depression, in part, because he had ended an important project and didn’t know what was next. Another reason, he says, was that he had been immersed for months, mind and heart, in a tragic subject.

Getting fully involved is a “deal” you need to make to be able to tell powerful stories, he says. Caring is crucial.

“I will take the reporter with the biggest heart in the room every single time,” he says. If a writer cares, he or she will be willing to put in more time and show empathy toward the people he or she writes about. Jones doesn’t believe in journalistic “objectivity.”

“I don’t try to maintain distance; I think that’s a shitty way to treat people,” he says. “If you’re asking them to open up to you, I don’t see how you return that favor by being a wall.”

Jones is concerned that, one day, his passion for stories will disappear. That he won’t want to be sent out on assignments, and he will simply stop caring. He hopes that if that happens, he’ll stop doing journalism.

One time, he volunteered as a paramedic and helped revive someone. It was a transformational experience for him, which made him wonder why he should write stories when he could start people’s hearts back up.

“But stories can still change people,” he says. “You can make someone feel better; you can make someone think about things a little differently. You’re not changing a life in the sense that you’re saving it or ending it, but you can make small changes. And that’s a lot to ask from a job.”

## **Family**

While all the journalists believe in the value of the work they do, they also talk about the price they pay to do it – long hours, brutal deadlines, the emotional toll of

witnessing grief and tragedy. That price can also cost their personal lives, and is shared by family and friends.

The married writers say they are grateful to spouses for picking up the slack in raising children. Both Jones and Finkel said they weren't very present as husbands and fathers while they were working on their soldier stories. They feel bad about it and see it as a sacrifice that came with the process.

The women, especially, expressed mixed feelings about their work's impact on their family life. DeGregory said that while her editor, a man, brings his lunch that his wife had packed with him to work every day, she usually has "a carrot" in her fridge. She doesn't get to cook for her teenage boys as she would want, and ends up writing late at night, after she drives them to after-school activities.

Harmon, who says she hasn't been as present of a mother for her 9-year-old daughter as she would have wanted, recalls instances when she would tuck her daughter in and write by her bedside while waiting for her to fall asleep. She says her husband has picked up the slack in raising the child.

"On the other hand, she sees me doing something that I love to do and that I think is important and that gets a lot of reactions and hopefully makes a difference in the world," Harmon says. "So I like to think that I am actually being a good parent that I'm modeling that for her."

Similarly, DeGregory believes her sons are more aware of the world because they've had the opportunity to travel with her on stories and be exposed to people and

situations ranging from a group of sex offenders living under a bridge in Miami to an art gallery dedicated to foster children.

Hallman was an exception in this regard. He says he's always put his job in perspective. He usually starts work at 7:30 a.m. and tries to leave the newsroom at 4 p.m. He spends the rest of the time with his family and doing things that "renew his spirit," such as dancing, riding his motorcycle or listening to music.

He found that allowing himself that space was essential for his writing. "If you don't have the balance, you start to become jaded with the world, and you can't see stories in the world if you look at it as jaded," he says. "If you're sitting in the newsroom 12 hours a day, you have nothing left to give the world."

### **What journalism has offered them**

Of all the journalists included in this analysis, Finkel has probably risked the most, physically and emotionally. In the eight months he spent in Iraq, he was exposed to many of the dangers the soldiers faced, including mortars, rockets and roadside bombs.

Finkel says he doesn't know if he would have embarked on this assignment had he known in advance what was waiting for him. But once he was there, he focused on his responsibilities as a reporter.

"I wasn't prepared for it, and it was hard. It was physically frightening," he says. "But at the same time I was guided by the thought that this is a consequential war in my lifetime and for whatever reason, I've been given a good seat to observe it and to write

about it, to add to the archives of the war. So don't complain, don't screw it up. Just go do the work."

Finkel felt an immense responsibility to tell the story of how a group of young men were changed after being sent to war. While doing that, he wanted to make sure he wasn't telling his own story, but accurately capturing the soldiers' experiences and emotions. To achieve that, he did a lot of "staying and staying and staying" (which in Jones' interpretation would be "caring and caring and caring").

"Underneath everything I felt fortunate to be there," he says. "If I'm going to be a journalist and I'm going to be a storyteller, well, this is the great story, so shut up and tell it."

The same kind of gratitude for being able to tell stories was expressed by all seven journalists.

This is ultimately why they go through the difficult parts, and what gives them the sense of purpose necessary to experience flow. The stories they've told and the experiences they've had along the way added up to fulfilled lives.

Stories keep the campfire alive and offer journalists a place at the campfire, says Williams of the Nieman Storyboard. They offer an awareness of the world at large and our place in it, and responsibility to it.

Journalism lets you do something with your curiosity that's productive, Hull says. It offers you the ultimate privilege of telling someone's story.

At its best, journalism doesn't feel like work; it feels like you're stealing money, Jones says. You are paid to go meet interesting people and watch amazing things. He also sees a "minor magic" in being able to write something that gets printed on a piece of paper and is shipped all around the country and the world for people to read.

Finkel says he feels very lucky to have traveled to five continents, to have seen people "at their very best and their very worst and their very middling, trying to figure life out," and to have lived a life that's engaged.

"It's pretty damn luxurious to be able to live a life that feels full of being able to consider things, think through things, see things, ask questions, see life unfolding, with pretty limitless, go places, go pretty much where I've wanted to go and stay as long as I can and figure stories out and then tell stories. I mean that seems like a pretty good deal."

Or, as Csikszentmihalyi would say, a sense of participation in determining the content of life, which comes as close to happiness as anything else.