Finding a Voice

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Essay by Bob Shacochis, BJ '73, MA '79

Can facts alone tell the truth? A National Book Award winner and literary journalist charts the course that helped him develop his distinctive style.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to claim that when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Missouri's J-School, my pig-headed allegiance to voice — the package of literary elements like tone and texture that make a writer's prose distinctive — quickly landed me up to my neck in some very hot water. The early 1970s were after all the halcyon days of New Journalism, and I had been permanently influenced by the singular voices of its star practitioners: Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer and the young Hunter S. Thompson, who had embedded himself into the violent madness of the Hell's Angels. Their writing was compelling, exciting, original and innovative. They didn't just pick up the phone for quotes; they immersed themselves in the world of their stories, refused to disappear behind the veil of objectivity, and were infatuated with language and unashamed of aesthetics. The University seemed content to train the infantrymen of journalism. Nothing wrong with that, and having spent a lot of time in recent years in the field with the U.S. Army, all I can say is Hoo-Ah! But the New Journalists were the fast movers, the jet pilots, the astronauts of reportage, daredevils, risk-takers, and I made them, not the more staid James Reston or Harrison Salisbury, my role models and tried my best to emulate their brazenness, with predictable results.

Bob Shacochis went on assignment for Outside *magazine in 1996 to revisit Haiti, the setting of* Immaculate Invasion, *his book about the 1994 U.S.-led military intervention in that country.*

Feature writing class, a prerequisite for Donald Romero's magazine writing sequence, was a disaster for me. Assigned to write a 600-word bromide about a city-sponsored Most Beautiful Lawn contest in Columbia's downtown housing projects, I handed in a 6,000-word in-depth piece on race and racism in Midwestern college towns. As every editor I've ever worked with since would verify, apparently I was born to overwrite. When asked by the co-teachers of the feature writing class to redo the assignment properly, I arrogantly insisted I had produced exactly the sort of article the subject warranted and deserved. My teachers didn't blink — they flunked me.

I was not privy to all the backroom details of my salvation, but I do know I was paroled out of feature writing class into the custody of Professors Romero and Robert Knight and a young graduate student named Kelly O'Brien. Simultaneously, I enrolled in the English department's creative writing course, taught by a professor who would become my literary godfather, William Peden. Under the tutelage of these four mentors, my embryonic self as a writer began to mature.

The lovable Romero was my cheerleader, almost subversive in his encouragement of my rebelliousness. Knight was the stern but patient patriarch, applauding my solid reporting while chastening me for my stylistic sins. My writing, he once scolded me, was pretentious, flamboyant, over-energized, undisciplined, self-important and shamelessly subjective. Of course he was right, at least by the standards of the newsroom.

As luck would have it, Romero had successfully negotiated with the *Columbia Missourian* to add a Sunday magazine insert. O'Brien was in charge of the start-up, and she drafted me to be the magazine's first staff writer. Without too much editorial bloodshed, she ran my marathon length features on professional wrestling in Kansas City, country doctors in the Ozarks and Brezhnev's Soviet Union. I felt that I had been let out of a cage, although I would be back in it soon enough.

If you're a genius or a wunderkind, your gift comes with its own accelerated tempo, but I think it's true for most people, as it was for me, that if at age 21, you're certain about your dreams and know what you want to do with your life, you'll find you have to pay your dues for another 10 years, more or less, until your destiny catches up with your aspirations. At 21, I yearned to write for the legendary magazines, but how does one do that? After graduating from Missouri with a bachelor's of journalism in 1973, I traveled overseas for several years, trying to make myself believe I was a fledgling correspondent. In South America, I tried freelancing for *National Geographic* and pitched pieces to lesser magazines, with no results beyond the experience itself. Finally, in 1975 I joined the Peace Corps as an agricultural journalist, spent a year on a Caribbean island writing articles about banana diseases and the artificial insemination of pigs, and then bailed out back to the States, frustrated and convinced it would be my fate to write obits for a small-town newspaper in Nowhere, Oklahoma.

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Perseverance, author Joseph Heller once told me over coffee in Brady Commons, is everything. Luck and talent are only the handmaidens of one's tenacity. I was 19 years old, Heller was on campus to give a reading, and his insight into the process of becoming a writer has been reaffirmed again and again throughout my career. One carves out a life as a writer the same way one becomes a concert pianist or a ballet dancer: Practice, practice, practice, until your fingers ache, your feet cramp, your mind grinds to a halt with fatigue. Like many returned Peace Corps volunteers, I began writing short stories about my experiences overseas and then applied to all the graduate schools offering a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at the time. Why short stories? Simple — because early in a writer's career, it's easier to find an audience for fiction than it is to publish a nonfiction account of the same material, no matter how well written. Literary journals, of which there are hundreds, are a welcoming environment for a serious young writer; trade magazines are not. I desperately wanted to write, but I had little faith that a graduate degree in journalism would make me a better writer, and I felt I had already proven my competence as a reporter who knew how to investigate, double-check, get it right and write it up. Succinctly, clearly, factually.

I had asked my former mentor, William Peden, for a letter of recommendation to the MFA programs; when he learned I had been turned down by all of them, he encouraged me to come to Missouri's English department for a master's degree, with an emphasis in creative writing, and offered me a teaching fellowship. I spent the next two years in Columbia, working with Peden, Speer Morgan and the poet Larry Levis, refining the writerly techniques that the J-School, by its very nature, could not, and need not, provide. In J-School, Who, What, When, Where and How are the questions one asks in order to file a

report. In creative writing class, Who, What, When, Where and How are the questions one answers in order to craft a narrative and tell a story. Character adds depth to the story, unexpected details create verisimilitude, descriptive or metaphorical language agitates the facts in such a way as to make them release insights and meaning and, ultimately, profound truths about the human condition.

After I received my master's degree in 1979, I moved back to Florida, where I live now, and took the only job the *Palm Beach Evening Times* had open when I walked in the door — copy boy, bicycling to work at 3:30 in the morning, returning home at noon to work on my fiction. Before the year was out, I had reapplied to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, was accepted and began publishing short stories in major national magazines. I received an MFA from Iowa in 1982 and published my first book, a collection of stories called *Easy in the Islands,* three years later. Suddenly my phone was ringing with calls from editors at all the great magazines wanting to know if I had any interest in writing nonfiction. Twelve years after leaving J-School I had come full circle, and it was clear to me that I had serendipitously fashioned a perfect marriage in my education between journalism and creative writing. One without the other would not have been enough.

Now, as a contributing editor and foreign correspondent for several national magazines, I have occasionally, throughout the past 15 years, found myself at dinner in exotic places — Kathmandu; Port-au-Prince; Tirana, Albania — with my colleagues from the daily press. Our mealtime conversations always begin with war stories about the events we have been assigned to cover, but invariably the discussion turns toward magazine writing. "I have a great story," someone who works for a newspaper will tell me. "How do I get it into *Harper's Magazine?"* Or any of the quality general interest magazines, where facts tend to be disseminated in a wrap of fine writing.

My first response is meant to be sobering rather than helpful. "Great" stories are in abundance in the world, their supply limitless and timeless, and there's no such creature as a working journalist who isn't sitting on a fertile nest of them, waiting for the hatch and the subsequent transformation of the reporter's career, with marquee bylines on newsstands across America.

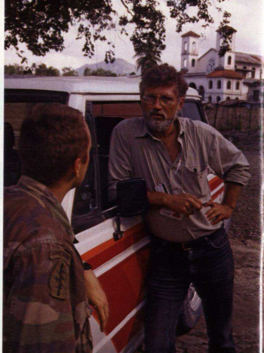
But the real answers never quite seem to satisfy those members of the press asking the question, hungry for the formula, hoping for a magic phone number, the name of an amenable editor, a powerful agent. They want to know the secret, but there is no secret; there's only sensibility.

I suggest they write a book, any book; even, and perhaps preferably, a book of poems.

Because journalists wanting to make the transition from newsprint to gloss are often ambitious and highly motivated people, my fellow diner will sometimes declare that he has indeed written a book but can't seem to get it published, or she has indeed written a book, but it sailed from publication to oblivion without an intervening period of readership. Such confessions put us right on the doorstep of the only genuine solution I could possibly offer.

Voice, I tell them. Cultivate a distinctive voice. From their pinched reaction, you might think I was speaking in Farsi or suggesting a sex-change operation.

Voice, I realize, is anathema to the orthodoxies of credible, corporate, mainstream journalism, the moody province of columnists and other grandstanders and narcissists. Personality complicates the delivery of the day's facts. Information must stand naked before its consumers, unencumbered by subordinate clauses and not obscured by ribbons of adjectives or adverbial blooms. Well, yes, but therein lies the divide between a journalist and a writer, between generic reportorial skills and the art and craft of the written word, and to bridge the gap the journalist must turn inward and unlearn almost every convention — except accuracy — he or she developed in J-School or on the beat.



During his reporting of the 1994 military intervention in Haiti and on his return in 1996, shown here, Shacochis traveled Route Nationale One. The beautiful and dangerous road originates in the coastal slums of Port-au-Prince, traverses Haiti's rugged interior and ends in Cap Haitien. American soldiers nicknamed it Highway to Hell.

At the top of this list rests the notion of objectivity, or neutrality, one of the great conceits of journalism. Frankly, our most respected periodicals and news outlets, and our most respected reporters, are no more models of neutrality than, say, Switzerland, which we now know negotiated a much more duplicitous posture during World War II. Although one can acknowledge the honorable intentions of objectivity and its appropriateness for gathering hard evidence, one must also recognize that the ideal leaves room for intellectual dishonesty among its practitioners. Or room for an aesthetic that chills me — like T.S. Eliot's insistence on the "impersonality of art."

Voice is personality, the personality of the writer and, not always the same, the personality of the language the writer has manipulated on the page. Identity — who the writer is, rather than who the writer isn't — I would argue, is most definitely

a part of the story, regardless of the precious detachment coolly manufactured by so-called objective reporters. Objectivity is a matter of degree, and its threshold is rigid; past a quickly reached limit of purpose, the principle itself becomes a type of guise or ruse. And even the most "objective" reporting is obliged to serve the higher agenda of the establishment press and its unanimous support of the status quo, or quite often a partisan ideology. In this context, objectivity is a comforting lie, a tacit endorsement of a system or an administration. "Trust us," it urges. "We are disinterested messengers." Well, not even a camera is a disinterested messenger, but an extension of the personality holding it, and a picture might well be worth a thousand irrational words in a society so easily swayed by imagery.

I remember a young Cuban in Havana telling a friend of mine that some North American reporters came to the island just "to find our unhappiness." In other words, some correspondents arrived in town committed to their own presumptions and prejudices, and for these journalists a happy or fulfilled Cuban might as well be an invisible Cuban, or simply a dupe. Hard news is the inevitable product of the extremes and polarities within a society, but the real story, the human story, which is always more complicated, is harvested from in between those extremes, where most people, whether in Cuba or Iraq or the United States, struggle to live and prosper.

At the most basic level, a writer earns credibility and therefore an audience by getting the slippery, shifting facts of the moment right, of course, but it's never as simple as that, and beyond accuracy, beyond convention, there's plenty of room for disagreement about the nature of the correspondent's role. Objectivity, for someone trying to understand the most complex and difficult things about the world — politics and power, the human heart, betrayal, sacrifice, evil — is a false, or at least an inadequate, science.

In its stead, fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, honestly expressed in the envelope of the writer's own value system (call it bias, if you like), are the best we can hope for — are what we should hope for. A writer shapes what we know as much as any other player invested in a story — policy analyst or historian, spin doctor or diplomat, leader or peasant or exile or anyone else, and to report from a vacuum of self becomes a political, and perhaps ethical, sleight of hand.

To have a direct, unobstructed view of the person writing, to have access to his or her interiors and moral universe, is a vital component of our ability to judge a work clearly, judiciously, responsibly. Correspondents as separated in place and time and sensibility as Mark Twain and Martha Gellhorn knew instinctively: that they were not some sort of truth machines — neutral transmitters but somehow not unique receptors; that what they saw and heard and, just as significantly, what they felt and believed, mattered; that they had a point of view, and it was as much a part of the totality of the story being told and interpreted as anything else. Rather than diminish credibility, point of view places the writer's integrity on the line, and instead diminishes the fiction — the self-righteous bluff that objectivity invites onto the page.

The bottom line is, when sometimes all the facts in the world don't quite add up to the truth of a people or a nation or a revolution or a war, hot or cold or interminably lukewarm, the writer must step forward and let his voice be known. ❋

About the author: Bob Shacochis is a novelist, essayist, journalist and educator. His work has received a National Book Award for First Fiction, the Rome Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Shacochis currently teaches in the graduate writing programs at Bennington College in Vermont and Florida State University. He has written two short story collections, a novel, and a collection of essays about food and love. His most recent book, The Immaculate Invasion, *about the 1994 military intervention in Haiti, was a finalist for a literary award for best nonfiction book of the year from* The New Yorker *and was named a Notable Book of 1999 by* The New York Times.

Shacochis trekked India's Himalayas for Outside *magazine in 1994. He went looking for a clearer sense of the spiritual.*