

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: GETTING PERSONAL: THE PERSONAL ESSAY IN PRINT
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Thesis directed by: Professor Judith Paterson
 Philip Merrill College of Journalism

This thesis explores the use of the personal essay in newspapers and considers its potential to enrich newspaper journalism and perhaps retain – and even increase – readership in a time of declining circulation. Personal essay addresses the changing expectations of readers, who are increasingly demanding to know more about the people who are gathering and reporting the news. Writers also benefit from publishing personal essays, often becoming more empathetic journalists. This thesis also describes some of the early uses of personal essay in newspapers, reviews the roots of the concept of objectivity, which discourages journalists from writing in the first-person, and gives several recent examples of personal essays published, what the experience was like for the journalists who wrote them and readers' responses to them.

GETTING PERSONAL: THE PERSONAL ESSAY IN PRINT JOURNALISM

By

Stephania Heather Davis

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Judith Paterson, Chair
Lecturer Christine Harvey
Professor Kathy McAdams

Preface

I first became interested in the use of personal narrative in newspapers when I was a young reporter and published my first piece about myself. At The Hartford Courant, where I was a town news reporter, the paper's Sunday magazine, Northeast, sent out a call to the staff for submissions for a holiday issue of the magazine. They wanted personal stories about the holidays. At the time I received the message I had been thinking about the approaching holidays and dreading them, somewhat. My father had died in September and this would be my first Christmas without him.

I wrote the essay in an afternoon and sent it to the magazine editors, thinking that my piece would not be chosen considering the variety and caliber of writers at the Courant. They couldn't run them all and I was just a young reporter working out in a bureau. Even if it wasn't published, writing about my father's death had helped me deal with some of my feelings and I was happy about that.

But, to my utter surprise, my piece was chosen. It ran, along with those of nine of my colleagues, on December 20, 1992 (see Appendix 1). I received praise and congratulations from my co-workers and family and friends. But it was the reactions of readers that touched me the most. I received several letters, including one from a man who told me my story had inspired him to try and mend the strained relationship he had with his father and that they had just spent the best Christmas together. And people in the town I covered, Portland, who saw me often as I reported stories and attended council and board meetings, were more open and less wary of me than they had been before. It

seemed that my essay had helped them to stop thinking of me as just "the press" and seeing me as a person.

As for myself, I realized that in my relations with sources and contacts I had often

hid myself behind a cloak of objectivity, taking but not giving. After the experience of having my essay published, I began to give more of myself. If I had a common experience with a source, then I shared it. Before, I would have kept such personal things to myself, thinking that it wouldn't be objective to share, or relate or even commiserate. But once I did, my interviews became more like conversations and less like interrogations. Not hiding my voice - not hiding myself – made me a better journalist. People shared things with me that, I think, they would not have shared before, and I feel the resulting stories were richer for it. That, to me, is the power of the personal essay in newspapers.

Dedication:
To Mommy, Kim, Eric, Helen, E.J. and Tommy
For giving me roots and wings

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

A review of the literature on personal essays in newspapers turned up very little existing scholarship.

There have been several studies of the role of opinion writing in print journalism. In the Autumn 2000 issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication, Joshua Greenberg in the department of sociology at McMaster University reviewed the important function of editorials, columns and op-ed articles in giving readers a distinctive and authoritative voice that speaks to them directly and calls such opinion discourse important to the critical study of news. This study has some intriguing examples of the power of opinion pieces, where the voice of author or authors is strong.

Also in 2000, Geoffrey Baym published in the Western Journal of Communication a study of how television journalists use several different methods, including expressing their personal feelings, to establish their authority to tell stories with a moral bent, taking a specific look at news reports immediately following the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 10 years ago. I found this study interesting for Baym's detailing of how the TV reporters very quickly turned from objective, authoritative professionals into a "representative we," positioning themselves as locals who are members of the community. This study takes into consideration the value of journalists showing their

real feelings and emotions in order to connect with viewers.

An interesting look at how personal biases can affect a journalist's reporting and writing was published by Nat Hentoff in the Media Studies Journal in 1998. He found that, far from being completely objective, most journalists chose the stories they covered because of the way the story appealed to their particular feelings about a topic.

There are several studies that look at the roots of objectivity and the role of opinion pieces. But despite extensive searches, both on my own and with the aide of other trained researchers, I was unable to find anything studying narrative nonfiction or personal essay in newspapers and the effects they have on the writers and readers. For this reason, I feel my work is unique.

Chapter 2: Blood on the Page

“The personal essay requires blood on the page, whether it has death in it or not.” Lary Bloom, founder and editor of *Northeast*, the magazine of “The Hartford Courant”

“I am terrified” (Fielder 24). From the moment Carla Fielder wrote those words, she felt a knot balling up her stomach. An assistant art director for “The Washington Post Magazine,” Fielder had been used to the anonymity provided by working behind the scenes at one of the nation’s most revered daily newspapers. But from the moment she agreed to write “The Rules of Engagement,” an essay about the premarital counseling classes she and her fiancé, now husband, Stephen Broyles, took at her church in preparation for their wedding, she had felt fear and trepidation (see Appendix 2). “It felt kind of like I was sticking my hand in a campfire,” she said. “You know it’s dangerous and you really shouldn’t do it, but it looks so pretty, so inviting. You just want to touch it” (Fielder). Fielder’s description sums up the dual nature of writing a personal essay for publication. When done well, it is wonderful, often for both the author and the readers. But getting there can be a difficult journey. And for journalists, trained to be objective and to present facts in a fair and unbiased manner, writing about themselves, even using the pronoun “I,” goes against everything they have been taught to do.

But when journalists do step from behind the cloak of objectivity and close the distance between themselves and readers to give them a sense of the human beings behind the bylines, the result is often positive. Readers respond enthusiastically and journalists learn what it is like to be where their subjects often are: exposed for the world to see. As Christopher Scanlan, a senior faculty member at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, explained, “Writing about yourself means doing all the things that writing about other people demands: asking tough questions, listening to the answers, and using the power of words to convey truths about life with accuracy, care and precision” (13).

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the use of the personal essay in newspapers by taking a look at several examples from the past 10 years and interviews with reporters and editors. Personal essays are an effective means of connecting with readers. The technique also addresses the changing expectations of readers, who are increasingly demanding to know more about the people who are gathering and reporting the news. Writers also benefit from publishing personal essays, often becoming more empathetic journalists.

Chapter 3: The Roots of Objectivity

Essay is the first form of structured writing most of us are introduced to, often in grade school. Remember those assignments to write about “What I Did on My Summer Vacation,” and your exploration of symbolism in “Catcher in the Rye”? And don’t forget your attempt to make yourself stand out from the other thousands of applicants to some college admissions director who held your future in his or her hand? We all know what an essay is: simply put, it’s saying what you think about any given topic. Phillip Lopate says “The personal essayist looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historic circumstances, and what might be called the catastrophe of personality” (16).

But most people leave writing essays behind once they leave high school, moving on to research papers, legal briefs, memos, cover letters and, for journalism students, news and feature stories. In journalism class the urge to reach for what seems easy, saying what you think and talking about yourself, is beaten out of you by the repetition of one word: objectivity. A journalist is taught to gather the facts and present them, bare and unadorned, to readers and viewers, who then use that information to make up their own minds on the news.

The concept of objectivity encompasses five components, according to David T. Z. Mindich, a journalism historian, associate professor and chairman of the journalism department at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont, and also author of "Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News". They are detachment, nonpartisanship, the inverted pyramid style of writing, facticity and balance (2). Detachment and nonpartisanship grew out of the violence journalists were often engaged in as the penny press rose in the 1830s and competition for stories, sources and a growing number of literate readers became fierce (Mindich 15-63). The inverted pyramid grew out of the Civil War era, when war correspondents rushed to get their most newsworthy information over telegraph lines that were often unreliable (Mindich 67). The embrace of facts over conjecture or religion and superstition came during the late 1860s and 1870s with medical advances that transformed cholera and other illnesses into survivable events with anesthesia and antiseptics widely available (Mindich 97). Mindich describes how the importance of balance emerged during the 1890s and early 1900s as the minority press began to thrive and report accounts of lynchings, attacks and other violence against Italians, Irish, blacks and other immigrant and minority groups that were drastically different from those of the mainstream press, which eventually sought to present all sides of an issue or event as a way to keep from losing face in the minority press (113 - 137).

But after his exploration of the history and elements of one of journalism's guiding principles, Mindich comes to the same conclusion about objectivity that most journalists eventually reach.

Quite simply [...] reporters, despite their claims to be 'objective,' did not (and do not) operate in a vacuum. This is what makes the information/story dichotomy so untenable: information cannot be

conveyed without an organizing narrative, and stories cannot be told without conveying information. [...] certain information cannot be conveyed without the intrusion of cultural biases and journalistic demands like the quest to be first with a story. (133)

A vivid example of this dichotomy, Scanlan points out, is the case of the Susan Smith, a mother in South Carolina who, in 1995, claimed her van was stolen by a Black man who drove off with her two young sons in the backseat. Journalists flocked to the small, Southern town to record the sobbing and distraught mother pleading for the safe return of her children and broadcast the story to the world. But police soon learned that Smith herself had strapped her children into her car and drove it into a lake, drowning the children in an effort to get rid of them and make herself more attractive to a man with whom she was having an affair. It was “a pure case of journalists indulging a cultural bias, without question, in order to frame what seemed to be a great news story,” said Scanlan. “The story seemed to have all the elements: a black man preying on a white woman and her defenseless children, a distraught mother, photogenic children, a massive manhunt. What more could you ask for? It never occurred to anyone that the mother may have done it and even if it did, no one would take the time to check it out because everyone was trying to get an exclusive quote or angle or interview” (Scanlan). So the story of Smith was told, and with it, information was conveyed and stereotypes were reinforced: Black men are dangerous and white women and children need to be protected from them. The Smith stories were, ostensibly, told objectively. But it is clear cultural biases and journalistic demands played a paramount role. It is not that personal essays are free from the same cultural biases and journalistic demands as stories. But writing subjectively and with an unhidden voice allows the writer to explore those aspects honestly and frees up the writer to not just stick to the story, but also discuss their feelings about an event or issue. It is this freedom from the

straightjacket of objectivity that writers often cite as a benefit of the personal essay. Scanlan describes how personal essay is distinguished from columns, features and editorials:

Unlike the column that usually delivers judgment on others, the feature that focuses on someone other than the writer, or the op-ed essay that explores an issue or situation, the personal essay is not detached. It trains its sights on the writer's own life and the writer's emotional, psychological, and intellectual reactions to the most intimate experiences. (12)

This ability to be subjective, after writing dozens of stories that begin with “The school board approved new textbooks for high school science classes today...” and the like is seductive. Mark Kramer, writer-in-residence and director of the Neiman Program on Narrative Journalism at the Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says the prose of newspapers adheres to “a depersonalized emotion set because there are certain emotions, like patriotism, horror at those who commit violent crimes and the sweet satisfaction of the triumph of the underdog, for example, that journalism is comfortable with. But there is a whole range of more personal emotions that are out there and, until recently, those hadn't been explored in journalism” (Kramer).

Scanlan says that while the personal essay has long been used in newspapers, it is only in the last few years that readers and editors have become more comfortable with the format and that it has been applied more often. The aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were a landmark for writing with an unhidden voice. “Everyone was running stories by reporters of their personal experiences covering the attacks. Editors began to realize they had eyewitnesses right in their own buildings. Not only did these people know how to write, but they wanted to share their experiences with readers. It was cathartic for the writers and contributed to the national mourning period the whole country was

feeling. Screw objectivity, people were hurting” (Scanlan). Since then, Scanlan said, the personal essay has become a standard part of the coverage of disasters like the tsunamis in Asia in December 2004 and the ongoing War in Iraq.

Chapter 4: Defining Literary Journalism

That is not to say that personal essays and other forms of narrative nonfiction have been absent from journalism. Narrative nonfiction or literary journalism, or one of a half a dozen other interchangeable labels, describe a way of writing that combines factual newsgathering with techniques more common in fiction, such as character and scene setting. Early examples include Daniel Defoe's profile of the legendary confidence man Jonathan Wild, published in 1725 in "The Review", a London newspaper Defoe edited. The piece combines interviews with Wild's victims and jailers with Defoe's own encounter with Wild for "a prototype of the modern true-crime narrative" (Kerrane and Yagoda 17). Over time, some of history's most celebrated writers emerged from the staffs of newspapers and literary magazines, including Walt Whitman, Charles Dickens, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. From their carefully crafted reported stories it was just a short hop to fiction and poetry.

Kerrane and Yagoda describe literary journalism as a piece that is both factual and "thoughtfully, artfully and valuably innovative" (14). Their historical anthology includes everyone from Whitman to Tom Wolfe. Kramer also favors the term literary journalism.

“The paired words cancel each others vices and describe the sort of nonfiction in which arts of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what’s happening – the essence of journalism” (Kramer and Sims 21).

In addition to the personal essay, literary journalism can take several other forms. There are profiles that rely on characterization of the subject to tell not only the story of the subject, but a universal story about life for readers. Joe Nocera, whose article in *Esquire* magazine “The Ga-Ga Years” about the rise and fall of the stock market in 1987 later became a book, turned the stock market, with its quirks, ups, downs and corrections, into a character. “If money is the new sex – and isn’t that what everyone is saying these days? – then this place is the whorehouse. The scent of the market is powerful here, intoxicating” (qtd. in Kramer and Sims 235). There are also investigative stories and features that are the result of hours of hanging around, getting the feel of a place and then making it come alive for the reader in order to explore a current issue. Tracy Kidder, whose book “The Soul of a New Machine” won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction in 1982, spent a year at a nursing home in Massachusetts researching his article “Memory,” which also later became a book, “Old Friends”. He said he started out with the issue of old age and “[...] found myself in a particular nursing home and facing a particular group of people. [...]. At that point all the issues of aging ceased to interest me much. They’re not interesting except when they’re in the context of real people” (qtd. in Kramer and Sims 370).

Regardless of the form, examples of literary journalism share the common characteristic of an identifiable, intimate and unhidden voice. It is not what Kramer calls the “civic voice of a beneficent bureaucracy, the speech of informative sentinels on the walls of the city, issuing heads-ups to citizens (“A fire yesterday at 145 Elm St. destroyed...Damage is estimated at...”)” (qtd. in Scanlan 5). But it is the voice of a present narrator, engaged with

the story as much as the reader is, guiding the reader to the end. The personality of the writer is as important to the story as the story itself because it is “[...] the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person not representing, defending, or speaking on behalf of any institution, not a newspaper, corporation, government, ideology[...]" (Kramer and Sims 29).

It is the unhidden voice that sets literary journalism, personal essay included, apart from journalism's objective history, for these pieces are unabashedly subjective. And, when done well, they illustrate how “outsized and unabashed subjectivity can be a superb route to understanding. The disembodied, measured voice of classic journalism is a kind of flimflam; the pure objectivity it implies is probably unattainable by humans” (Kerrane and Yagoda 16).

Given that, it seems perfectly natural to reach for the form of personal essay to tell a story. Why then, does doing so feel counterintuitive for journalists? Walt Harrington says it is because, after writing about world and civic leaders, people whose jobs and passions create and sustain families, communities and even countries, writing about ones self feels “like a cop out.” In his seminar at the 2004 Neiman Program on Narrative Journalism entitled “Can Writing About Yourself Still be Journalism”, Harrington, a former staff writer for “The Washington Post Magazine” whose profiles and essays appear in several collections of literary journalism, cautioned journalists from thinking that “what you have to say doesn't matter. It matters to you and those around you as much, if not more than, what the head of the school board is doing or the owner of a new shop has to say. Where did we get this idea that we're somehow apart from society?” (Harrington). Indeed, Harrington said, journalists who write about their own experiences generally find overwhelming support both in and out of the newsroom.

In the Afterword to the paperback edition of his book about his years of reporting in

Africa for “The Washington Post,” which grew from an article he wrote for the Posts’ Sunday magazine, Keith Richburg wrote that, “Hundreds of people [...] sent me letters, postcards and E-mail, thanking me for sharing my journey and telling my story so vividly [...]” (249). And seven years later, Richburg said, his colleagues at the Post still recall his work and ask him when he’ll write another essay. “But I don’t think I have another one in me. The first one was so hard, and I only agreed to do it because I felt I had something new to say about Africa and the relationship between African-Americans and their ancestral homeland. To do it again, just because others want me to would not be true to my original purpose” (Richburg).

Chapter 5: Putting the Blood on the Page

Is a clear purpose needed to write a personal essay? Good ones, argues Kramer, not only have a purpose, but a destination and a “sequence of subtextual comprehensions that work toward the reader’s ...discovery that the story has a theme, purpose, reason, destination – that it’s worthwhile to ingest it” (qtd. in Scanlan 5).

When her editor first broached the subject of writing about her experience in premarital counseling, Fielder said she was “dead set” against it. “Just the thought of having all my business on the page for everyone to see made me cringe” (Fielder). But then, Fielder said, through prayer, she reached another conclusion. “I talk with my editors and other journalists all the time about how newspapers do a poor job of covering stories about religion and how religious people are conducting their lives. This was an opportunity for me to provide them with a religious-based story. If I turned this chance down, I no longer would be able to complain” (Fielder). Once Fielder decided to write the piece, she decided not to go halfway. By the time her essay ran on February 13, 2005, as part of the Post Magazine’s Valentine’s Day-themed issue, Fielder had revealed more about her relationship with her fiancé, her parents, her God and herself than she ever thought possible:

My biggest fear is not the day-to-day of marriage...It is the possibility that

one day...he might leave me to fend for myself. Because when I do the math, it adds up like this: Thirty-two years ago, I was perfection. The perfect smile. The perfect disposition. The perfect weight. Beautiful and blameless. Yet, one man – the first man in my life – was never there for me. Now, this woman, this stubborn, opinionated, card-carrying member of Weight Watchers with a furry upper lip and chin whiskers, will stand before a man – a stranger just three years ago – as he vows never to walk away. (36)

Talk about blood on the page! Fielder's writing is heartfelt, sincere and certainly moving. She has clearly dug deeply to share with the reader her intimate thoughts and fears. It is such accounts that Scanlan praises for allowing journalists to reveal to readers the commonalities journalists share. That "we're not different at all and that the more personal we are, the more universal we become" (Scanlan 12).

To be effective, Kramer says, personal essays do not have to be soul-wrenching tearjerkers. But they should be compelling, he argues, as "there is enough navel-gazing flotsam and jetsam out there to fill a hundred newspapers. It is part of our celebritydriven, if-it's-real-it-must-be-important culture. Leave that to the magazines and blogs. It's journalists' job – and even their duty – to talk about the real things we all deal with in life, but don't necessarily talk about".

That is what George Lardner Jr., former investigative reporter for "The Washington Post", said he was thinking when he wrote about the stalking and murder of his 21-year-old daughter, Kristin, at the hands of an ex-boyfriend. More accustomed to writing about corporate corruption and political scandal, Lardner called writing the feature that ran November 22, 1992, "the hardest thing I ever have or ever will write". Though the piece, which won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, takes an indepth look at the

Massachusetts judicial system in which Kristin sought support and protection from her violent ex-boyfriend in vain, it is also a first-person love letter to his daughter. In it, Lardner's feelings are palpable:

This was a crime that could and should have been prevented. I write it as a sort of cautionary tale, in anger at a system of justice that failed to protect my daughter, a system that is addicted to looking the other way, especially at the evil done to women. (2)

Lardner said he did not set out to write a personal essay, “but when I was done with my first version, I realized that, while there was a lot of detail, Kristin was missing. And I felt I could not publish something that did not tell the world about her. And who better to write about my daughter, my baby, my beautiful, talented little girl, than me, her Dad? If I didn't, who would? So I hit the ‘I’ key and I talked about Kristin, fully expecting my editor to send it back to me and tell me to take all that personal stuff out. But he never did” (Lardner).

Lardner's editor had probably discovered what Fielder's editor had: that personal essays that showcase the journalists unhidden voice are usually a success with readers. Susannah Gardiner, deputy editor of the Post Magazine, was the one who first urged Fielder to write her piece. “I've been asking writers to do this for years, not just those on the magazine staff, but also people in business, sports, food, whoever has a good story to tell. Often they take convincing, but I've become good at soothing the fears that come up when you ask people to bare their souls, especially journalists” (Gardiner).

If the use of personal essay as a means of making greater connections with readers is to increase, editor support is crucial. Support not just for the writer, but also for the form. Terry Tazioli, who is recruitment editor for “The Seattle Times”, had to write a personal

essay as part of a writing course at the Poynter Institute. The topic was “my secret prejudice.” He found the exercise so powerful, he used it in the Times’ newsroom. Several of the resulting essays have been published in the paper and, he added, “I am a bit in awe of the number and power of essays still to be written” (Poynter 25).

Kramer says editor reluctance to print essays is often a legacy of journalism’s roots. “Many of the editors in top positions today came up in the Woodward and Bernstein era, where the hard-boiled, investigative, just-the-facts-Ma’am detached kind of reporting prevailed. So writing about how you ‘feel’ seems not nearly as civically important or urgent as government corruption and the people’s right to know.”

But Aly Colon, a faculty member of Poynter and editor of its quarterly reports, said exposing Poynter participants, writers and editors alike, to the essay form is its way of driving home the point of the need for journalists to change their minds and allow essay to become an integral part of the paper. “Too often we dwell on what’s on the surface – of people’s lives as well as the issues that affect them. The fuller, truer story lies buried below” (Poynter 3).

Chapter 6: Reader Reaction and Response

It is not news that newspaper circulation and readership have been declining sharply over the last 20 years, especially among people age 25 and younger. And the numbers keep going down. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, which collects circulation numbers voluntarily reported by 814 member newspapers, for the six month period ending March 2005, daily circulation fell 1.9% from the previous period to 47,374,033. Sunday's drop was even steeper, with a decline of 2.5% to 51,073,104 for the 643 papers that reported ("Readership...").

It would be naive to suggest that publishing more personal essays would slow or reverse the decline in newspaper circulation. It is a powerful tool, but not that powerful. But what it can do is make the paper more enjoyable, relevant and compelling for those who do read the paper. Readers say so themselves, using the many tools they now have for telling publishers and writers how they feel about what is published.

For example, as part of her agreement to publish her essay about pre-marital classes, Fielder also agreed to respond to readers' questions during a live online chat the day the piece ran. At a predetermined time, Fielder logged onto a chat room specifically set up for the purpose and readers could e-mail their queries, to which Fielder would respond immediately. The transcript of the chat provides valuable insight into the minds of

readers. The postings ranged from congratulations to criticism. One poster from Washington, D.C., wrote:

Stephen seems extremely controlling of you. He doesn't "allow" you to spend your money on something you want (the couch) because someday, maybe, both of you will have to live on his salary? That makes no sense. And he didn't even discuss it with you at first, he just said no, and basically ignored you as you chased after him. Don't you feel that relationships should be more of a partnership? ("Online Chat")

Other posters had advice for Fielder's editors. A woman from Sterling, Virginia, wrote "Please editors, publish more articles like this -- they work to inspire, encourage, and empower women with an awareness of their true worth. Women can aspire to more than blog-notoriety or the accumulation of designer handbags, our lives are worth much more than that" ("Online Chat").

Another poster, also from Virginia, praised the paper, saying:

It was such an encouragement to me to see a story about a woman in her 30s who had decided to wait for sex until marriage. I'm a 30-year-old single woman and someone who chooses to remain a virgin because of my faith. I'm more used to reading stories and seeing shows that imply my decision is unhealthy, impractical and freakish. It meant so much to me to see that there was someone else out there who had made the same decision. Thanks for your story and thanks to the Magazine editors for running it." ("Online Chat")

Fielder said that, although she was apprehensive before the chat, she ended up enjoying it. "It was great to hear what they thought, the same day it ran, not days later when

I would have been working on other things. And it wasn't like reading letters to the editor. These were real people, talking to me and I was able to respond right away, off the top of my head. I wasn't looking for validation, but I got quite a bit of it and it was great" (Fielder).

Lardner didn't do a live chat after the story about the murder of his daughter was published, but he did go to church the day it ran where, he said, the reactions were surprising. "Three people came up and told me about how someone they knew was struggling with domestic violence and abuse. And these were people I had known for years and I never knew this about them. But all it took was for me to talk about Kristin. Knowing that people felt comfortable enough to talk about it, this dark issue, that was even better than getting the Pulitzer" (Lardner). Lardner said when he returned to work he learned that the paper had received more than 100 calls and e-mails from readers about his article. The response prompted him to continue to write about the issues of stalking, domestic violence and legal protection for female victims.

A more recent example of reader response to an essay occurred in dramatic fashion in January. Chris Hondros, a photographer for Getty Images news service, was traveling with a U.S. Army battalion in Tal Afar, Iraq, as it patrolled the streets. When a car approached the platoon and did not stop when ordered, soldiers fired on the car. It turns out the driver was a civilian returning home with his wife, five of their nine children and a young cousin. The parents in the front seat were killed and two of the children were injured. Hondros snapped an arresting photo of one of the children, a four-year-old girl spattered with her parents' blood, screaming in the circle of light cast by a flashlight mounted on the end of a soldier's rifle. The photo ran on the front pages of several papers, including "The Hartford Courant" in Hartford, Connecticut. Hondros wrote his essay about the shooting for the Web site of Photo District News magazine, a trade journal for working photojournalists.

But it was picked up and run by several papers in the weeks after the photo appeared (see Appendix 3). He described the scene after the shooting in vivid detail:

From the sidewalk I could see into the bullet-mottled windshield more clearly. The driver of the car, a man, was penetrated by so many bullets that his skull had collapsed, leaving his body grotesquely disfigured. A woman also lay dead in the front, still covered in her Muslim clothing and harder to see.

Meanwhile, the children continued to wail and scream, huddled against a wall, sandwiched between soldiers either binding their wounds or trying to comfort them.” (Hondros)

Jon Long, editor of the photo desk at the Courant and a subscriber of Photo District News, urged the paper to run the essay when he saw it online. “I thought it would give our readers some insight into what led up to the shooting and the photo, which many of our readers criticized as too emotional. It is very rare that a photographer gets to write about how they came to take a controversial picture” (Long).

Reader response was overwhelming, surpassing the response to the photo itself, which was substantial. In a Letter to the Editor, one anonymous reader wrote: “I have this view of photojournalists as mechanical beings, putting their fingers on the shutter button without really being a part of what’s going on in front of them. Now I know better. We need more of this” (“More from photogs”).

The response to the essay surprised Courant Managing Editor Cliff Teutsch. “I look at it as a wake-up call to give readers more insight into who we are and what we’re thinking as we do our jobs” (Teutsch). Kramer agreed, adding that “readers crave the voice of the author and when they get it they lap it up like cats do spilled milk. And when you think

about it, it's only fair. Journalists go up to people with their notebooks or microphones or cameras and say 'Spill your guts!' It makes sense that they should get to see journalists do some spilling too" (Kramer).

Chapter 7: The Aftermath of Spilling Your Guts

We have seen how readers respond when newspapers publish personal essays, but what about the journalists who write them? How do they feel afterward and how does lifting the veil of objectivity affect their work once they return to more traditional reporting? Several journalists called the experience of publishing a personal essay transformative.

“I found I was more willing to ask people tough questions than I had been before,” said Lardner. “That used to be the hardest part of interviewing, especially talking with someone after they’ve suffered a loss or tragedy. But now I’ve been there and shared myself, so I know it’s hard, but it can be done” (Lardner).

Harrington, who has written in depth about his interracial marriage and the issues it has raised, said writing about his own life has given him a better “ear” as a reporter. “If I could recognize in my own life the kinds of intimate details that make for a good story...then I also would be more attuned to those details in telling the stories of other people’s lives” (Poynter 13).

Richburg, who began covering China for the Post after his time in Africa, said writing about his experiences as an African-American man in Africa led him to rethink his concept of objectivity. “Instead of thinking of it as a hard and fast rule, as I did before, I now

think of it as a guideline, something to strive for, like following the Commandments. Who hasn't coveted something that is thy neighbor's? We fail. That doesn't make us bad, it makes us human. It's important to try to be objective, to be aware of when my values, or biases or preconceived notions may be getting in the way of me understanding a story. But having feelings does not make me a bad journalist, just a human one" (Richburg).

In the conclusion to his study of the history of the concept of objectivity, Mindich advocates a more enlightened, informed view, saying "journalists should not assume that 'objectivity' equals a correct picture of reality... This is not to embrace relativism. I am not suggesting that the search for truth is futile. There is an out there out there... Perhaps the best a reporter can do is strive to tell the truth, as the reporter sees it, negotiated with his or her editors" (143).

For journalists, essays may serve as a litmus test for whether they are able to come close to telling the truth in their so-called objective stories, says Harrington. "I'm convinced now that if you can't tell an honest story about yourself, you're a long way from telling an honest story about someone else" (Poynter 13).

Fielder, who, after the publication of her essay and online chat returned to the relative anonymity of her job as assistant art director for the magazine, said her experience has led her to relate better to her co-workers who are writers. "I started my career as a writer, but I never published very much before getting into art design so I still got a thrill from seeing my name in print. But with that thrill comes responsibility and I'd never really had to deal with that in the same way reporters do, who have their names out there each day. Sure, my name is on my designs and the staff list, but no one is really looking for me. I can now see why writers get so stressed about their copy." So, would she do it again? "I would, but only if I felt I was putting something out there that was

different and could help someone” (Fielder).

This notion of helping readers seems particularly important to journalists who write essays. I know that it is to me. Many of us were led to journalism as a profession because of its promise of being able to help others with our reports by giving a voice to those without one or illuminating the dark corners of society or simply exposing government corruption or other malfeasance. After my essay about my father was published, I received a letter from a woman who talked about her estrangement from her father and how my piece had led her to try and re-establish ties with him. I cherish that letter as reminder to myself of the power of the press and how that power is held by each individual practitioner, from the publisher and managing editor down to the copycarrier. And that knowledge makes most journalists more careful, considerate and compassionate in the way that they practice the profession.

As Richburg explained, “Am I a better reporter because I told a personal story? Probably not. But I am more sensitive and more thorough and more open to different points of view than I was before I told that story. And I think that that can’t help but affect the way I work, in what I hope is a positive manner” (Richurg).

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The personal essay offers many advantages to newspapers. As a format, it offers readers a glimpse into the personal trials, triumphs and tribulations of the reporters and editors who gather and disseminate the news. It is a side of journalists that, despite the long history of the concept of objectivity as a central tenet of journalism, readers crave and are glad to receive. The form of the personal essay also allows writers to emphasize the human side of various issues: domestic violence, faith-based relationships, racial identity. Can those issues be written about without getting personal? Of course they can and they have. But I believe those stories that center on the writer's experience resonate more with readers and allow the writers to explore their own voices. The popularity of blogs, or personal online diaries, indicate that there is a voracious public hunger for open and intimate expression. But it was newspapers that first thrived as the home of essays and other participatory journalism and it is newspapers that should embrace the personal essay again. It is where some of the most creative journalism has been done and, despite declining readership, newspapers still offer readers the most accessible and user-friendly daily journalism.

Appendix 1

Northeast: The Hartford Courant Magazine/December 20, 1992

Season's Readings: Stories and Visual Delights from the staff of The Hartford Courant

"To Daddy"

By STEPHANIA H. DAVIS

The funeral was over, the friends and relatives were gone and my sister was asleep. It was just me, awake in my father's house at the end of a very long day.

I wandered from room to room, looking at photos, opening drawers, peeking in closets. This house in Winston Salem, N.C., was where my father had spent the last seven years of his life.

I went into the bathroom looking for another box of tissues. There weren't any on the lower shelves so I stood on the toilet to look higher. There, on the top shelf, was tissue. And next to it were several dusty bottles of Old Spice Cologne and petrified Brute soap-on-a-rope. They all looked familiar.

One of the bottles still had a faded red-ribbon and gift tag wrapped around it. "Merry Christmas," it read. "To Daddy." It was signed by me and my sister Kim.

After that, I needed that box of tissue more than ever.

Before my sister and I were old enough to buy more useful things, Daddy got a lot of those bottles as gifts.

As I grew older I learned my father hardly ever wore cologne and, when he did, it was never Old Spice or Brute.

Still, I never imagined he had kept those gifts. And I never imagined that he'd kept other things I found around that house: old Father's Day cards, a popsicle-stick letter holder I made in summer camp, and every letter I'd ever written to him.

My parents divorced in 1985 and Daddy moved from Connecticut back to his hometown. The divorce was hard on our family. Bitter and painful things were done and said by all of us. It threatened to tear our family apart for good and, in fact, my mother and sister severed all ties with my father the day the divorce became final.

But even though I too had wounds from the divorce, I felt I couldn't disown my father. Like it or not, he was the only one I was ever going to get. So we forged a relationship across the miles. Through college and moving across the country and trying to establish a

life for myself, it was hard to find the time to write and call. But every Christmas, no matter what, Daddy and I would perform our own ritual. He'd send me money. But I'd agonize over what to get him because I never knew what he needed. I guess I did OK though, because after he died three months ago I found the suede gloves well-worn in a coat pocket, the combination flashlight and ice-scraper in the trunk of his car and my college graduation portrait in a silver frame on a table in the den.

We did our best to keep our relationship going and I'm glad. We didn't exactly become friends but, I think, by the time he died both our wounds had healed some. Still, we didn't spend any of the past seven Christmases together. I would always spend my breaks with my mother and sister.

I'm not sure why that was. I guess we both thought there would be time. That one day I'd be married, with a less hectic life and children of my own, and then it would be important to spend the holidays with both my parents. But now, I won't have that choice, and I regret those chances to see him that I squandered.

Taking things for granted is easy to do when you're young. Especially at Christmastime, for the holidays are a time of tradition. We know we'll hear the same Christmas carols, see the same gaudy and elaborate light displays on neighborhood streets and hang the same decorations.

Yet it is also a time of change. Kids get older, needs and circumstances change, and the season seems to start earlier every year. And, most of all, relatives and friends come and go in our lives. You think they'll always be there, and then they're not. Christmas is always the same and somehow never the same.

I don't know what this Christmas will be like for me. But I do know that I will try to spend less time caught up in the shopping and the cooking and the mailing and the wrapping and other chores of the season, and more on the fellowship and the feelings of goodwill and the generosity of spirit that always comes with this wonderful and special time of the year. And I'll look less at the presents under the tree and more at the faces of the people I love, memories I can hold onto when time has run out.

And I know I'll keep a box of tissue near the television in case I encounter an Old Spice commercial that makes me think of Daddy.

Appendix 2

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February 13, 2005 Sunday
Final Edition

SECTION: Magazine; W24

LENGTH: 4851 words

HEADLINE: The Rules Of Engagement

BYLINE: Carla Fielder

Subhead: Unpack your emotional baggage, learn to compromise, prepare to love unconditionally. No holding hands, ring-shopping or getting giddy on romance. And don't even think about sex!

Body:

He was supposed to have long dreadlocks and be accustomed to linen and sandals. He'd take photographs like Gordon Parks and be a lover of Langston Hughes. Instead, his haircut resembles that of a soldier fresh from boot camp. He's suited up in black shadow stripes, complete with white shirt and tie, and management consulting gets him all excited.

He's my prospective mate, Stephen. And this April evening in 2003, we're sitting in premarital enrichment class at From the Heart Church in Temple Hills.

I am terrified. I never take my eyes off the Rev. John Cherry II. Because if I look away while he's teaching, the Holy Spirit might blow my cover. The Spirit would say that the girl seated strategically behind the woman with the big hair has no clue about what she's getting herself into. And He'd be right.

I can see that Rev. Cherry is irritated. No smile accompanies his hand gestures. He doesn't open with a funny anecdote of life with Mrs. Cherry. Tonight, he begins class with a line from I Corinthians 7:1. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman . . ." He says he's spent the last six weeks explaining to adults what does and does not constitute a date. "How can you hear the word of God clearly, if you can't get your flesh out of the way?"

He says that if the class doesn't get past this issue of dating, he will start over from lesson one.

Stephen and I are annoyed. We certainly don't want to start over from scratch. We survey the room like innocent siblings praying that the guilty one comes forth so everybody won't have to get the whipping. There are 122 of us in this modest auxiliary sanctuary. Ironically, it is the room in which small weddings are performed. There is plenty of space, however, for 61 couples to spread out. Stephen and I are sitting on the left -- the bride's side.

Rev. Cherry says that if the class has a problem with the rules, we can go elsewhere. "I'm not the only person who marries in town," he says.

"And the reason I keep getting calls on dating," he continues, "is because you've got a fire that you can't control. Who started it? I didn't start it. I'm trying to help you put it out. Why can't you get your flesh out of the way? Because you've touched somebody that you weren't supposed to touch. And now love and lust have gotten all mixed up."

Stephen raises a brow and nods in agreement. I steal a glance at him. Nobody speaks.

This isn't what I expected. When we agreed to begin premarital counseling, I imagined two or three feel-good-about-the-Good News sessions with the pastor, during which he'd deliver the standard lecture on the benefits of good communication and the divvying of household chores. If he'd heard a word from the Lord about how many children we should have, I would've appreciated him passing that along, too.

Don't get me wrong. In a culture that created the drive-thru Las Vegas wedding, Stephen and I are headed in the opposite direction. Our common Christian faith is a big part of the attraction. We really do view marriage as a sacred covenant with God, and we know better than to have sex before marriage.

But premarital counseling in Rev. Cherry's class not only means no dating, but also eight months of no kissing, no touching, no heavy breathing, no one-on-one alone time, longing looks or 1-800-FLOWERS, no browsing bridal magazines, no shopping for rings, no proposals, no wedding planning, no absences, no tardies. We are to discuss class topics over the phone, unless otherwise instructed.

Period. End of discussion.

In October 2002, Stephen had offered to buy me a raspberry tea at Starbucks. We sat near the window on a cloudy Thursday afternoon and talked for two hours. After 30 minutes, I couldn't believe I was still there spilling my guts to a man I didn't even know. Initially, it was his eyebrows that drew me in and compelled me to accept his invitation to sit down. He looked like my father (and a little like the Count on "Sesame Street"), and I liked that he clearly expected me to say yes and take a seat. I was nervous. I remember picking at my fingernails and thinking that I should have stopped by the ladies' room before I left the office for a break. Had the wind been kind to my hair? He told me that he was a transplant from Detroit, and immediately the black shadow-stripe suit he was wearing made sense to me. But I didn't hold it against him. He had deep brown eyes and a contagious smile.

We didn't inquire about significant others. All I wanted to know was if he attended a church and if he was a member. He was. In fact, church membership was his first priority after settling in the city. I didn't have to ask the next question.

"That's my ace," he volunteered, referring to Jesus. "I can't do anything without Him."

Stephen's reference to Jesus gave me a grin that I'd wear all day, because, for 12 years now, my faith has been the most important thing in my life. And, finally, it seemed, I'd met a man who believed as I did.

Stephen must have felt something, too, because right in the middle of our conversation, he confidently touched my hand and asked to see me again. Later I would learn that it wasn't love at first sight for him. "You seemed like good people," he said. "But at that point in time, I had no intention of having a relationship with anybody. I was focused on my business."

I, on the other hand, immediately called my mother. My best friend. My cousin. Any co-worker who would listen. And canceled several dates I had lined up. Something about being really busy for the next couple of months.

We got in a few dates, then Stephen left on a two-month business trip. I wondered if he'd keep in touch. Then he e-mailed me with his itinerary.

I was careful to keep my words platonic. I told him where I'd be and at what time I'd be there. He called me from Memphis and Milwaukee and Seattle and Sioux City, and we covered a lot of ground. I learned that his parents had split up before he was 2. After that, he didn't see his father much.

Our stories were similar. My father and mother were both 17 when she became pregnant. While I was growing up, my father was kind of like the uncle you saw on the weekends. My mother says he was a smooth talker and mighty good-looking. He's pretty even-tempered and friendly, and I am, too. But my mother, a fiercely independent woman, didn't have the patience for his immaturity.

Stephen and I continued dating when he came home in mid-December 2002. I learned later that he was secretly putting me through a battery of tests. On one date, he took me to ESPN Zone at Baltimore's Inner Harbor. He told me a year later that he needed to see if I could let my hair down and break a sweat. I guess he got his answer, because after I beat him at the free-throw line, he told me that he wanted to court me. "Okay," I said, not fully understanding. I'd heard my grandmother use that word as she shooed boys off the porch when I was 13. "Carla's too young to court," she'd say. I asked Stephen for clarification, and he replied that it meant dating with a purpose. And that purpose was marriage.

Stephen didn't know that the idea of marriage was a scary thing for me. In reality, I'm haunted by the fear of some cosmic force that turns once-loving, self-sacrificing spouses into mortal enemies. But in my dreams, my wedding day finds me on my father's arm, draped in a designer gown with a bateau neckline and a 10-foot train. After the wedding, (insert groom here) whisks me off to some exotic hideaway where we make love all day and night, resurfacing only for sips of sparkling white grape juice (neither of us drinks) and nibbles of the occasional chocolate-covered strawberry. After a month, we fly back to our three-story brick home, and, exactly 33 months later, I give birth to a beautiful, healthy baby with (insert groom here)'s soulful eyes and my rich, caramel-colored skin. Two years later, another baby makes four of us. My family assembled, I live happily ever after with my husband, and our two very well-behaved children in one really big house. Of course, I had no clue how I could make a loving marriage last in real life.

Although we both wanted to get married, we didn't see eye to eye on when to start counseling. Stephen thought that the proposal and the ring should come first. I told him that, at my church, which he had just joined, couples take the class before they make up their minds to marry. He resisted at first, but then finally agreed it would be wise to seek guidance sooner rather than later.

At the first class, Rev. Cherry tells us he won't pull any punches. He has no vested interest in our relationship.

"I'm not going to be living with you," he says. "From a personal perspective, I don't have any reason to stop you from getting married or any reason to tell you to go ahead and get married. It doesn't benefit me one way or the other."

He says that one of the reasons premarital counseling is necessary is because love is a like a cloud that doesn't lift until you say "I do." "It's very hard to see objectively when you love somebody. It's good to have somebody who's not emotionally involved look at the facts."

His interest is to help us make sure that we get God's best. "These classes are going to be hard-hitting," he says. "Some of them are going to be tough . . . If God gives it to me,

I'm going to give it to you."

Stephen and I are glad that Rev. Cherry, who is the assistant pastor, is teaching the class. He is one of us -- in his early thirties and cool people. He is also honest about himself and unafraid to share his own experiences. He's been married for nine years, has three kids and has taken this class himself -- from his father, Pastor John Cherry.

"He didn't waste time explaining to the couples why they couldn't date," Rev. Cherry tells us of his father.

Later, he launches into the three principles of success in marriage, the first of which is unconditional love.

"When you were born, Momma stroked your hair because she loved you, gave you a bottle because she loved you, changed you, and, when you cried, she responded to your cry because she loved you. You grew up thinking that love is all of those things that you get."

It occurs to me, while he's talking, that my blueprint for marriage doesn't include service. I have imagined all of the perks. Someone to make love to me. Someone to talk to me. Someone to hang out with me. Someone to make the big bucks and put me in my big house. Someone to move the big, heavy stuff, take out the garbage, kill the bugs, fight for my honor, hold my purse while I shop, and tell me that I've never looked thinner. But I haven't dwelled on my responsibilities.

Rev. Cherry says that I will have to love Stephen through not only misunderstandings, disappointments and bad attitudes, but possibly through cancer, layoffs, miscarriages and impotence, too. We make vows to God that we will take care of an imperfect person for life. The focus should not be on self, he says.

Principle Two: Do not be anxious.

Outside of salvation, marriage is the single greatest decision we will ever make, Rev. Cherry says. We will be judged and our lives will be measured by this relationship.

"Bill and Hillary," he says, illustrating the impact the choice of a mate will have on the rest of our lives.

The last principle is purpose. Why are we getting married? Anything without a purpose will fall apart, he says.

Now I think I'm really in trouble. I can't articulate why I want to get married. I can take care of myself. I have a good job. Good friends. Oh God, maybe I didn't think this one through. The best I can do is say that I love him.

I love that he wasn't afraid to tell me that he loved me, or concerned that I hadn't said it first. I love that he is an old-fashioned man who flew to meet my mother and share his intentions. I love that they excused me from the room and, to this day, I have no idea what they said. All I know is that she loves him, too. I love that he sees the Bible as I do -- words to live by, not bedtime fables. He reminds me daily of my beauty and worth but never asks me to compromise myself. I believe that he is 100 percent turned on, but he has never, and I mean never, tried to convince me that God would be cool with a little sneak preview. Stephen loves me in spite of all of my mistakes. He forces me to grow, and the closer I get to him, the more I am exposed. Rev. Cherry says in marriage you have to allow yourself to be so close to another person that that other person can destroy your life.

I love him and I'm willing to risk it. Is that enough?

It's been a month, and so far I've had a pretty good grasp of the issues we've discussed in class. But the episode tonight, appropriately dubbed "The Trashmasher," has got my number. The trash- masher is the place where people store their past hurts, bitterness and disappointments. This is where I am undone.

I remember watching TV with Stephen one Sunday evening in his living room. His phone rang. He answered and, after a few minutes, he walked into another room. By the time he got off the phone, I was thoroughly annoyed. He asked me what was wrong, and I said, "Nothing." Translation: I was trying to decide if I wanted to talk about it then or make him ask me over and over again until I had no choice but to tell him, loudly. I decided not to talk about it and left. A few days later, I called Stephen and apologized for my attitude.

I didn't understand why I had reacted that way until this particular class. When I saw him walk into the other room that Sunday evening, I had been immediately transported to my childhood home, where my stepfather would rush to the phone, then head for another room. It would be his girlfriend. An hour or so later, he'd be out the door, cologne reeking.

My stepfather's behavior had apparently followed me into this relationship. It wasn't until I was an adult that my mother talked about his unfaithfulness and the choices she had made with men in the past. She said she realized that, in her relationships, she somehow positioned herself as the better catch, subconsciously choosing men who didn't have as good a job or weren't as stable as she was. "I guess I liked that feeling," she said. As we talked, I realized that I had done that as well. Maybe, in my mind, I was making it impossible for any guy to consider leaving.

But with Stephen, at least on paper, I don't hold the title of Better Catch. He'd been accepted at three Ivy League universities but chose to attend the University of Michigan on a full scholarship to earn two bachelor's degrees, in psychology and sociology. By 24, he also had gotten two master's degrees and had gone on to a career consulting for nonprofits. Spiritually, well, he is as grounded as, if not more grounded than, I am, and his character goes without saying. What does he need from me?

I realized all this and called Stephen a few days later and tried to explain my behavior. He understood. And just in case I wanted to know, he said, he had left the room that Sunday evening so that I could hear the TV.

Thanks to the class and a whole lot of prayer, I have been able to forgive my father. I called him up and told him that I want him to walk me down the aisle. He's having a very hard time accepting my forgiveness. He feels too guilty. I don't care. I have his eyes, his eyebrows, his nose, his lips, his disposition. Now I want his arm.

Stephen is reaching out to his father, too. His father called him in 2001. At first, Stephen was hesitant to talk with him. Then, he said, something clicked, and he realized that his father was doing the best that he knew how. "You take people as they are," Stephen said. "I finally wasn't scared about being disappointed anymore. Whatever he could do had to be good enough." Stephen won't hold it against his father that he learned to tie a tie by reading a Cub Scout book.

In counseling, Rev. Cherry tells us not to try to erase our pasts, because they make us who we are. Stephen, for instance, easily adapts to changing circumstances. I now understand that this is because he's one of five children and had to be flexible to survive. I, on the other hand, am an only child. It is far more difficult for me to switch gears. But Stephen believes that there's not good and bad -- there's what he can live with and what he can't. And he realizes that if he can't deal with my difficulty being flexible, I'm not the woman he should marry.

At one point, Rev. Cherry tells us that marriage is mostly a business partnership and only "about 3 percent romance." If we disagree on something, we shouldn't mouth off but rather call a meeting to discuss the problem. His description deflates me a little -- I like the idea of being swept away -- but I also feel relieved. I trust my mind much more than I do my heart.

It's the final class. Of the 61 couples at the beginning, 44 remain, and we've moved to an even smaller room. We give ourselves a hand, and prepare to stand up and announce the decisions we've made. Some couples acknowledge that they need more time. Some want to clean up their finances or finish school before marrying. Some have resolved to be friends and not marry. Most of us don't plan to marry until 2005 -- at least 15 months from this moment. Rev. Cherry says that he will counsel couples as long as it takes if they are determined to be married.

It's our turn, so Stephen and I stand. All I can think about is why I shouldn't have worn jeans tonight. I should have worn a suit, something that says, "I'm mature now and equipped to move forward." Stephen says that we want to get married in the spring of 2005. I nod in agreement. Rev. Cherry says he will let us know much closer to our date when private one-on-one sessions with him will begin. He gives us the okay to begin our wedding planning, which was forbidden until this moment. But I realize that, even though we're settling on a date, Stephen won't formally propose to me until he has bought the ring. And he pays cash for everything, so who knows how long that will take?

Anyway, Rev. Cherry cautions the men to take their time and do it right: "Don't propose in the parking lot. How you treat something is what it becomes."

After class, we stroll into Bible study hand-in-hand. I feel like I've just finished a workout -- a little bit sore, but satisfied.

I recognize a couple from our class seated behind us at a Tuesday night Bible study. She has a ring on. At second glance, I see that she has two rings on. They're already married?! I look at my finger. It's been two months since that final group class. I've felt engaged ever since Rev. Cherry gave us the thumbs up, but everybody keeps asking about the ring. When am I going to get my ring?

I'm so excited the class is over that I suggest we start shopping for furniture for our future digs. We drive to Storehouse Furniture in Arlington, and I point out a gorgeous chocolate armoire. It's \$1,700. A decent price to pay for quality, I think. I've made my decision. I turn to Stephen, who's not signaling for a salesperson.

"When are you planning to buy it?" I ask. "Not right now," he says. "Well, I can get it" for us. "No."

"When will I be able to help?" "It's not the time."

"You're just like those other people who won't take me seriously because I'm not wearing a ring." And we're off. "I don't understand why I can't contribute to the household I'm going to live in."

In a hurried succession of phrases, I try to explain that it makes perfect sense for me to start paying for things because he needs to save for the ring. He doesn't hear me, mostly because I'm walking behind him and he's got nearly a foot on me. Still I continue on my rant, questioning the legitimacy of our relationship.

Later that night, he prepares my favorite seafood feast. His kindness is heaping hot coals on my head, and I apologize for my earlier impatience. He tells me that he wants to make sure we can live on his salary alone, in case I decide someday that I want to stay home.

I love him, and I'm glad he's not eager to use my money.

It's now a year before our wedding day, April 30, 2005, and I'm betting that he will formally propose. A few days ago, I made an appointment with my magician, Tonya. I specifically asked for light brown highlights in my hair. Stephen likes highlights. I am going to wear his favorite blue dress. A while back, after some prodding, he obliquely volunteered that I would know when the day was because he "would send someone" to get me. But there was no message in a bottle today requesting that I meet him. Just another day. He calls me late in the afternoon. I disguise my disappointment by saying I'm sick. He doesn't suspect a thing.

Then one evening, on my way home from work, I stop at CVS, and the guy in the car next to me in the parking lot is grinning. Inside, he pursues me down the allergy medicine aisle. He wants to know my name. Gertrude, I lie. He says I'm a very attractive woman. I say thank you and make my way down another aisle. He follows. He asks me if he can call me. I say no. I tell him that I am getting married. He says that there's no ring on my finger. I say not yet. He keeps talking, insisting that that means he still has a chance. For a moment, I think: "Maybe you're right. Maybe it does mean that you still have a chance." Then I recall Rev. Cherry's voice urging the women in the class to try to avoid the distraction of diamond rings, wedding dresses and gift registries. I flash my I've-had-enough smile, pay for my drugs and go home.

But it really kills me when one of my closest friends asks me whether Stephen has asked me to marry him yet. She has been there through the entire process. I thought she knew that Stephen had already demonstrated his commitment to me.

Later, about four months later, when I am not so angry, I ask her why she asked that question. She tells me she thought that she had missed the formal proposal and didn't want to be left out. I tell her that I was reacting to months of questions from other people and that I am sorry.

The wedding is now just seven months away, and I'm both nervous and excited about our first private meeting with Rev. Cherry. Thankfully, Rev. Cherry is, as he always is, jovial and down-to-earth. He wants to know how we ended up in the class and what we believe the other's purpose is in our lives. He notes that we didn't seem to be eager to speed through the process, and I tell him that I'm now realizing that eight months is no time at all. He encourages us to stay on track -- holy, as in untouched, and Christ-centered -- and gives us homework for our next session. Rev. Cherry and Stephen share a moment of kinship when they discover that they share a birthday. Oh Lord, I'm thinking, now I'll never win a fight.

In my infinite wisdom, I want to find out what Stephen thinks of the way I dress.

Translation:

I need a way to tell him that there is one item in his closet I could live without. The diva in me is dealt a crushing blow when Stephen discloses that the pink and red rose pins I have carefully incorporated into my wardrobe are his least favorite of my fashion statements. I counter by revealing my fantasies of burning that black shadow-stripe suit. "You're not in Motown anymore," I want to say, but I don't. It's really quite strange, though; I love how he is when he's in the suit. Very cool and confident, but I hate the suit.

While watching television at Stephen's house, I feel inspired by something on the news to ask him a question. Would he ever donate an organ?

"I would if a friend needed it," he answers.

"Sounds like you've already made up your mind about it," I say. "How can you make a life-threatening decision without discussing it with me?"

I ramble on about the dangers of anesthesia, and my frustration at his disregarding me, his wife. (Most of my inquisitions take place in the context of marriage now.) But I'm not that great at getting him to play my game of what-if. A little voice tells me that my time is up and I should let this one go. I can reserve my argument if it actually comes to pass. I'm showing maturity now. A year and a half ago, I would have run this subject into the ground. These days that little voice asks two very important questions: One, is this a matter of life or death? And, two, do I have to bring this up right now?

Still, I secretly decide that I am going to bring the issue up with Rev. Cherry so that he can tell Stephen directly that, after he's married, he can't just go around giving away vital organs.

As I look back through homework and handouts and notes in my journal, something becomes clear to me. My biggest fear is not the day-to-day of marriage: having to check in with Stephen, considering his opinions and his feelings, talking to him before making major purchases, making sure his mother and his five siblings feel at home, enduring reruns of his favorite stories and corny jokes, cleaning up after him, washing a sink full of dishes after one of his gourmet meals, bearing our children, serving him when I am tired, battling medical emergencies, surviving economic downturns, or forgiving lapses in judgment. It is the possibility that one day, after all of that, he might leave me to fend for myself. Because when I do the math, it adds up like this: Thirty-two years ago, I was perfection. The perfect smile. The perfect disposition. The perfect weight. Beautiful and blameless. Yet, one man -- the first man in my life -- was never there for me. Now, this woman, this stubborn, opinionated, card-carrying member of Weight Watchers with a furry upper lip and chin whiskers, will stand before a man -- a stranger just three years ago -- as he vows never to walk away.

My bag is packed for a day trip to Ocean City, just as Stephen has asked. Ocean City? In November? I don't ask questions. He planned the trip, and I am just happy to have some time together.

At 9:30 a.m., Stephen and I walk down M Street NW, where, I am told, a guy will be waiting to give us a key to his property on the beach. On our way, Stephen suggests that I drop by the Paris Alexander day spa on 18th Street. Earlier in the week I mentioned to him that I wanted to check out prices there. When I see a woman at the front desk, I inquire about spa packages. I look over a brochure she's given me. Before I'm done, Stephen leans in. "We have a little time, why don't you get a manicure or something?"

"Naw, baby, we don't have time for that. We have to get moving to beat traffic." "We have some time," he says.

The woman behind the desk jumps in. "Carla," she says, like a keeper of secrets, "you have been booked for a day of pampering."

"What? But what about Ocean City?"

"We'll get there," Stephen says.

I grab him and give him the bearest of bearhugs before he leaves. "Oh, baby, thank you!"

After my massage and facial, I am ushered into a quiet waiting area and handed a sealed envelope and disposable camera. "Stephen wants you to take pictures of your day," my spa attendant says. I open the envelope. In it there's a letter from the staff members at the Daily Grill, where we had our first date. They're taking care of lunch today. It will be delivered to the spa. I shake my head. I can't believe he has done all of this.

At about 2:45, I'm on the chaise lounge, gingerly turning the pages of Elle magazine with my nails freshly polished, when my cell phone rings. It's Stephen.

"Hey, sweets, I'm stuck in traffic and won't be able to get you. So, my friend Loretta is going to pick you up."

"Who's Loretta?" I don't know any

Loretta. "She's a friend of mine."

"But."

"Just be downstairs at 3:30. She'll be waiting."

Click. Stuck in traffic? Where was he? I get myself together and rush down the stairs, but no one's at the door waiting. I peer down the street. I see a limo a few feet away. Hey, there's a woman driver. You don't see that too often. I continue to scan the block for this Loretta person.

"Carla?" calls the woman near the limo, who is wearing a cap and chauffeur uniform. "Yes." I say cautiously. "Loretta?"

"Yes. Stephen has sent for you."

I walk slowly to the limousine and climb in. Loretta looks amused. "What is going on? Where are we going?"

"Just sit back and relax," she says.

Ten minutes later, Loretta pulls up in front of our Starbucks. She opens the door for me, and I step out. She motions for me to go in. It's almost 4. There's a good crowd. To the left, out of the corner of my eye, I see Stephen -- at the table where we talked for two hours more

than two years before. Wearing that suit.

I know what today is now. I begin to sob uncontrollably. He stands up and asks me to come over. He tries to console me. He wipes my tears and tells me it will be all right. I can't stop crying. I know what today is.

Appendix 3

Dispatch From Iraq: Chris Hondros Witnesses A Shooting After
Nightfall January 20, 2005

By Chris Hondros

The following is an account by Getty Images photographer Chris Hondros of an incident on Jan. 18, 2005 in Tal Afar, Iraq, that left two civilians dead.

A routine foot patrol -- a dozen or so men from a platoon, carefully walking the dusky streets of Tal Afar, Iraq, just after sundown.

Usually little more happens than finding someone out after curfew, patting him down, and then sending him home. On daylight patrols, sometimes, troops stop to briefly play with children or even drink tea. On evening patrols - past curfew - no one is on the streets, and the men are extravigilant and professional.

Tal Afar is an ethnically mixed town -- though primarily Turkoman, and had only days before been the scene of a gun battle between U.S. forces and local insurgents.

On the evening of Jan. 18, as we made our way up a broad boulevard, I could see car making its way toward us. As a defense against potential car bombs, it is now standard practice for foot patrols to stop oncoming vehicles, particularly after dark. "We have a car coming," someone called out, as we entered an intersection. We could see the car about 100 meters away. The car continued coming; I couldn't see it anymore from my perch but could hear its engine now, a high whine that sounded more like acceleration than slowing down. It was maybe 50 yards away now.

"Stop that car!" someone shouted out, seemingly simultaneously with someone firing what sounded like warning shots -- a staccato, measured burst. The car continued coming. And then perhaps less than a second later a cacophony of fire, shots rattling off in a chaotic overlapping din. The car entered the intersection on its momentum and still shots were penetrating it and slicing it. Finally the shooting stopped, the car drifted listlessly, clearly no longer being steered, and came to a rest on a curb. Soldiers began to approach it warily.

The sound of children crying came from the car. I walked up to the car and a teenage girl with her head covered emerged from the back, wailing and gesturing wildly. After her came a boy, tumbling onto the ground from the seat, already leaving a pool of blood.

"Civilians!" someone shouted, and soldiers ran up. More children -- it ended up being six all told -started emerging, crying, their faces mottled with blood in long streaks. The troops carried them all off to a nearby sidewalk.

It was by now almost completely dark. There, working only by lights mounted on ends of their rifles, an Army medic began assessing the children's injuries, running his hands up and down their bodies, looking for wounds. Incredibly, the only injuries were a girl with a cut hand and a boy with a superficial gash in the small of his back that was bleeding heavily but

wasn't life-threatening. The medic immediately began to bind it, while the boy crouched against a wall.

From the sidewalk I could see into the bullet-mottled windshield more clearly. The driver of the car, a man, was penetrated by so many bullets that his skull had collapsed, leaving his body grotesquely disfigured. A woman also lay dead in the front, still covered in her Muslim clothing and harder to see.

Meanwhile, the children continued to wail and scream, huddled against a wall, sandwiched between soldiers either binding their wounds or trying to comfort them. The Army's translator later told me that this was a Turkoman family and that the teenaged girl kept shouting, "Why did they shoot us? We have no weapons! We were just going home!"

There was a small delay in getting the armored vehicles lined up and ready, and soon the convoy moved to the main Tal Afar hospital. It was fairly large and surprisingly well outfitted, with soberlooking doctors in white coats ambling about its sea-green halls. The young children were carried in by soldiers and by their teenaged sister. Only the boy with the gash on his back needed any further medical attention, and the Army medic and an Iraqi doctor quickly chatted over his prognosis, deciding that his wound would be easily repaired.

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