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Curiosity, Courage Keys to Diverse Journalism

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Commentary by



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Curiosity, courage keys to diverse journalism

Curiosity and courage, I said, are essential characteristics for being a great journalist and producing great journalism.

That comment apparently struck two aspiring journalists because they approached me following a recent panel discussion about diversity at Colorado State University. They wanted more.

Curiosity, I explained, allows journalists to ponder the reality of the world around them.

By putting aside assumptions of knowing how life is, great journalists can spark their desires to learn or know more about people and their circumstances.

Courage enables journalists to ask about all the things they are curious about without fear. Or, to borrow somewhat from *Star Trek*, to go places no one has gone before. Courage enables people to move outside of their comfort zones to talk with people they might not otherwise interview or to broach subjects that may be sensitive or challenging. That combination of curiosity and courage is what produces great journalism.

My comments were made as a panelist discussing the importance of diversity in media coverage. How can we be great journalists and produce great journalism if we exclude the thoughts and opinions of those unlike ourselves? We cannot, plain and simple.

I argue that the diversity question lies squarely in the hands of white journalists. Why? White journalists make up the majority of reporters on the streets, and editors making the decisions — both coverage and hiring. Therefore, the impact that white journalists have on the diversity, or lack thereof, in media coverage is immense.

Journalists who allow curiosity and courage to inspire the generation of story ideas, the selection of sources and the choice of questions could solve the absence of diversity in media coverage in no time flat.

I use diversity in the broadest of terms: race, religion, income, age, gender, education, sexual orientation, disabilities and more. When journalists tackle the world by looking at life through the lenses of others, in all their manifestations, the world simply becomes more interesting.

After that panel discussion, I decided that curiosity and courage would cure a number of ills facing the industry.

At the American Association of Sunday and Features Editors conference, I listened to *Sports Illustrated* writer Rick Reilly and author Patricia

Raybon talk about journalism.

Reilly talked about coming up with story ideas he pitches to his *SI* editors. Behind each story idea, I saw his curiosity. For example, what would it be like to be a guy working in the pit at race car events?

Raybon talked about the feeling of having nothing to lose when she wrote an essay about race. Courage to tackle the sensitive. Then, as the subject of an article featuring Raybon and her

daughter, she said the article never mentioned race, but the article tackled another form of diversity: interfaith families. With the nation's demographics evolving, countless stories are there to be told if we simply become curious and then have the courage to pursue them.

On recent trips to California, I saw curiosity and courage at work again in the pages of various newspapers. *San Francisco Chronicle* writer Michael Cabanatuan wrote a story about getting more bang for

the buck in gas mileage. I'm certain a journalist asked: What would happen if I simply drove the speed limit? Cabanatuan did and wrote about the experience, including "being flipped off by a 12-year-old in another car."

In the *Los Angeles Times*, columnist Steve Lopez spent a week on skid row and wrote a five-day series about life there. One day's installment featured 10 vignettes about people using wheelchairs on skid row, who they were, how they got there, what life is like for them and why they stay.

In the *San Jose Mercury News*, two pieces stood out because I knew curious journalists were behind them. One piece looked at how demographic changes affected the names chosen for boys and girls born in a particular county. For the first time, names of Hispanic or Asian heritage were beginning to crack the top 10 reported to the vital statistics bureau. Then, there was the story about the disappearing shopping carts and the people who depend on them.

If it has been awhile since you exercised curiosity, start asking yourself questions that begin like this: I wonder. What if? Why? How? Who? What does it really mean to ...?

And if it's been awhile since you acted courageously, just take a deep breath and act like you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Step into the shoes of Jane Q. or John Q. Public who will never be able to go the places or ask the questions you can, and then just ask. —

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