

Cover Page

Title: My Virtue of Choice is Empathy

Brooke L. Williams

CUNY Graduate School of Journalism

November 5, 2015

Length - 1,041 words

Educator and author Addison Gayle, Jr., once said, "Power comes not from the barrel of a gun, but from one's awareness of his or her own cultural strength and the unlimited capacity to empathize with, feel for, care, and love one's brothers and sisters."<sup>i</sup>

In my study of journalism, I have been taught to seek the truth and to be objective. I have been taught to observe and to report events as they unfold, without inserting myself into those events. I have been taught to remain neutral and removed from the situation. But these are not the most important things that I have learned.

The greatest virtue I have learned as a journalist is empathy.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines empathy as "the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings."<sup>ii</sup>

Through my experiences as a journalist, I have reached the conclusion that I cannot be completely detached and removed from situations, but rather, I must understand the situations and events I am reporting. The only way to do this is to understand those about whom I report and, in essence, to share their feelings.

The greatest example of journalistic empathy I ever remember witnessing occurred before I was even born. Obviously, I did not witness the event firsthand. I witnessed it

Educator and author Addison Gayle, Jr., once said, "Power comes not from the barrel of a gun, but from one's awareness of his or her own cultural strength and the unlimited capacity to empathize with, feel for, care, and love one's brothers and sisters."<sup>i</sup>

In my study of journalism, I have been taught to seek the truth and to be objective. I have been taught to observe and to report events as they unfold, without inserting myself into those events. I have been taught to remain neutral and removed from the situation. But these are not the most important things that I have learned.

The greatest virtue I have learned as a journalist is empathy.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines empathy as "the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings."<sup>ii</sup>

Through my experiences as a journalist, I have reached the conclusion that I cannot be completely detached and removed from situations, but rather, I must understand the situations and events I am reporting. The only way to do this is to understand those about whom I report and, in essence, to share their feelings.

The greatest example of journalistic empathy I ever remember witnessing occurred before I was even born. Obviously, I did not witness the event firsthand. I witnessed it years later, when the moment still resonated with those who watched it unfold in real time.

When Ed Bradley was reporting on the Vietnamese “boat people” for *60 Minutes* in 1979, he did not distance himself from what he was witnessing.<sup>iii</sup> He did not remove himself from the situation. Instead, he became an active part of it.

Seeing that the refugees were emotionally and physically drained, Bradley waded into the water to assist those who did not have the strength to go any further. He supported their tired bodies that were ravaged from the long journey from Vietnam to Malaysia and he helped them to shore. Holding one woman by the arm, he asks her, “Are you ok?” Then he leaves her side to help the next person.

Ed Bradley had empathy. That is the kind of journalist and person I aspire to be.

When Herb Morrison reported on the Hindenburg disaster, he memorably cried out “Oh, the humanity,” in reference to those who died aboard the German carrier.<sup>iv</sup> Morrison’s thoughts were not on remaining an impartial, objective observer, but rather, his thoughts were focused on the lives lost-the humanity.

Whether I am interviewing a person with a disability, as I did for a story about how the visually impaired use iPhone apps, or speaking with a woman whose brother was murdered the day before, I always seek to have empathy for what that person is feeling and experiencing.

Despite my attempts to be empathetic, I have faced many challenges. I have been yelled at and cursed when one side has seen me speaking to an individual with an opposing view and has

assumed I sympathize with that individual. I do not share or impose my own beliefs. Rather, I continue to do my job and get all sides of the issue.

Sometimes that means not doing my job at all. As was the case when I approached the woman whose brother had been murdered.

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics states that one should "show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage."<sup>v</sup> That is a principle I have done my best to adhere to in my own work.

The woman whose brother was murdered did not want to speak to me. She was still hurt by what happened and another reporter she spoke with earlier in the day left her upset and angry. I respected her decision. I had empathy for what she was going through and left her alone.

That often means having professors or editors question how far I am willing to go. Sometimes it means having to defend my decision and explain why I didn't get the story at any cost. But to me, in order to report on anything, you have to understand the issue. And you will only understand the issue if you empathize with the individuals most affected by it.

The reason I wanted to pursue journalism in the first place was because I felt drawn to people and their individual journeys. I felt compelled to tell and share their stories. I wanted a window inside the world through experiences that were different from my own and individuals who are different from myself.

This past summer, I had the fortune of experiencing a Tibetan sound-healing session as part of a news story. This is something I likely would have never done on my own. But I learned that when you empathize with another individual and open yourself up to their world, you are awakened to unique perceptions and life experiences.

Empathy, therefore, better enables us to practice many more virtues. Empathy allows us to seek truth and justice. It enables us to have awareness of another person's point of view, thereby strengthening our own cultural strength to which Gayle, Jr. alluded. When we understand an individual unlike ourselves, we understand more about the world we live in and how to change it for the greater good.

The struggles and experiences of others shape all of us, individually and collectively. Our lives are enriched when we are able to look outside of our own narrow experience and look at the world through someone else's eyes. If knowledge is power, empathy is the bridge to that knowledge. Quite simply, empathy makes me feel like a better individual.

Yes, I am a journalist. But I am also a human being. And I am a human being who will always aspire to have empathy. I am a human being who will derive my power, as Gayle, Jr. said, not from the barrel of a gun, but from the cultural strength of knowing that I share a bond, a connection, an understanding with another individual.

---

i Power Verbs: The Complete Collection by Michael Lawrence Faulkner and Michelle Faulkner-Lunsford:

[https://books.google.com/books?id=sTQkAQAQAQBAI&pg=PT151&lpg=PT151&dq="Power+comes+not+from+the+barrel+of+a+gun,+but+from+one%27s+awareness+of+his+or+her+own+cultural+strength+and+the+unlimited+capacity+to+empathize+with,+feel+for,+care,+and+love+one%27s](https://books.google.com/books?id=sTQkAQAQAQBAI&pg=PT151&lpg=PT151&dq=)

ii Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>

iii CBS News Report, June 24, 1979:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/june-24-1979-boat-people/>

iv The National Archives, Hindenburg Disaster, 1937:

<https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=5>

v Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics:

<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>