

# THE CONNECTION

## *What We Investigate Is Linked to Who We Are*

BY FLORENCE GEORGE GRAVES



I can't remember which one of my stories about Senator Bob Packwood's sexual misconduct prompted Joan Valdina, a savvy octogenarian in my Unitarian Universalist church, to ask the question that would ignite — maybe "renew" is a better word — an investigation of my own psyche. I don't recall her exact words, but one Sunday after church, instead of offering a pat on the back for breaking the big story, she hollered something like, "I'd love to know what happened to you as a child that caused you to become an investigative reporter!"

*What happened to me as a child?*

It's hard for investigative reporters to know what really motivates them — their choice of stories, their determination to work day and night to nail down information. But given the sometimes awesome power invested in us to diminish some lives while enhancing others, occasional introspection doesn't seem too much to ask.

Had I repressed — as I feared my neighbor's question suggested — some dark childhood secret? I began torturing myself, almost methodically going through the file cabinet in my memory,

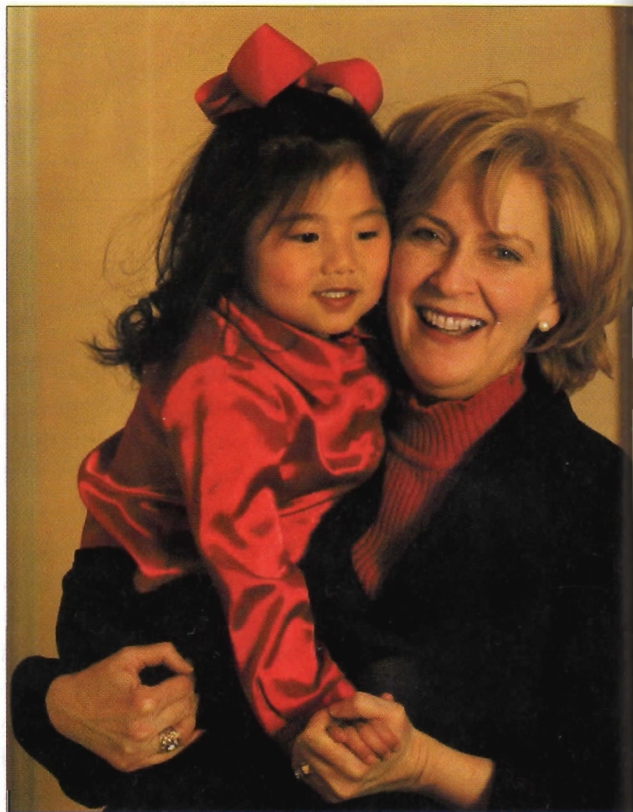
*Florence George Graves is a veteran investigative reporter and editor. In 1980 she founded Common Cause Magazine, which won a National Magazine Award for general excellence in 1987. With Charles E. Shepard, she broke the Senator Bob Packwood sexual misconduct story for The Washington Post, which led to his eventual resignation. She is a resident scholar at the Brandeis University Women's Studies Research Center.*

dredging up emotional hurts, but nothing too traumatic turned up. If something in fact did "happen" to me, I think it was subtle, a slow realization that things are not always as they seem.

The same kind of thing, apparently, "happened" to other investigative reporters, including some of the best of us, such as Bob Woodward and Katherine Boo, both of *The Washington Post*. Both learned as children that people operate on different levels of reality. Woodward recalls working as a janitor in his father's law office in Wheaton, Illinois, as a high school student in the 1950s when curiosity led him through his father's files. There he discovered some of the best-kept secrets of the town's citizens and realized that "a public world and a secret world" could exist simultaneously. "Vivid" is how he remembers the "disparity," the "concealment" and "hypocrisy,"

he found in those files. Then, much later, while a Navy officer stationed at the Pentagon, he "saw a lot of communications traffic." The man who voted for Richard Nixon in 1968 began to develop hostility toward the Vietnam war. He began to believe "that something was grievously off the track," that "the government had misapplied its power." He was reading *The Washington Post*, liked its "deeply skeptical" sense of inquiry, and began to realize that journalism was one way to help make institutions accountable.

Kate Boo, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning work disclosed neglect and abuse in Washington's group homes for the mentally ill, notes that her mother "grew up poor and smart and proud," and Boo



Author and daughter: 'What happened to me as a child?'

was "fascinated" by the way her mother's and her mother's siblings' choices in life were circumscribed by their economic circumstances. "Who knows what's inside us that makes us" choose certain stories, says Boo. But she acknowledges that "there's self-interest" in her focus on "the incredibly powerful stories in the lives of ordinary people." She says she gets "an enormous amount from the people I write about," including ideas about how to live a meaningful life.

Does that mean that Woodward and Boo aren't truly "objective" — journalism's supposed Holy Grail? Probably. In this matter I side with Jack Fuller, president of the Tribune Company's publishing operation, who wrote in his

RICK FRIEDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

1996 book, *News Values*: “No one has ever achieved objective journalism, and no one ever could.” Fuller reminds us that “the bias of the observer always enters the picture, if not coloring the details at least guiding the choice of them.” He then explains: “I don’t use bias here as a term of opprobrium. One might have an optimistic bias or a bias toward virtue. It is the inevitable consequence of the combination of one’s experience and inbred nature.” Our goal, instead, should be “work of genuine intellectual integrity.” This means journalists should link “the truth discipline in journalism with the highest standards in scientific and academic debate,” and then apply the “Golden Rule” — to play square.

In 1992, I took my evidence suggesting Senator Packwood’s pattern of misuse of senatorial power to *The Washington Post*. Woodward believes the *Post* “would have been remiss” if it had not taken on the story. Almost a year after the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, the *Post* understood why Packwood’s behavior was a public issue. Yet I can’t tell you how many people I have met who have assumed some personal partisanship on my part, asking me whether Packwood had ever made an improper advance to me or whether I had ever experienced serious sexual harassment. The answers are “no” and “no,” although certainly like so many women in the workplace, I occasionally had been subjected to obnoxious remarks. Does the fact that I am a woman make me more likely than a man to have recognized this particular kind of abuse of power? Of course. Should Woodward’s Navy service during the Vietnam war have disqualified him from reporting Watergate? Should Kate Boo’s observations about her mother’s poverty have prevented her from reporting on the economically disadvantaged? Personal experience should not be a disqualification in journalism.

**W**hat happened to me as a child? I write with some trepidation about Waco, Texas, where I grew up. I have seen how easily reporters — even if unintentionally — stereotyped my hometown of more than 100,000 people, and con-



## ROLE MODELS BOB WOODWARD

“There are a lot of people I admire. Lincoln Steffens. I was aware of the history of what Steffens and his colleagues had done in the early part of the twentieth century. And then of course there was Vietnam, before Watergate. I was in the Navy from 1965 to 1970 and saw it up close, and read the reporting on it. Of course, there was David Halberstam’s book. I guess if there’s a role model, it’s him.”

*Bob Woodward has been a reporter and editor at The Washington Post since 1971.*

*“Role Models” interviews with Neil Hickey.*



sequently how easy it would be for a reader to project those stereotypes onto what I am about to tell you. Waco — “the heart of Texas” — is halfway between Dallas and Austin and just a few minutes from President George W. Bush’s ranch in the tiny town of Crawford. Another tiny nearby community — Mount Carmel — was where David Koresh’s Branch Davidian compound exploded in flames in 1993. This tragic event became known in the press and the culture as simply “Waco,” leaving the town unfairly synonymous with weird people. I don’t know anyone in Waco other than some local journalists who had ever heard of Koresh before the standoff, and the truth is that Waco is far more diverse than most people outside of Texas imagine. Its accomplished citizens include Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, the early childhood specialist, Ann Richards, the salty and liberal former Texas governor, and Robert Fulghum, the minister and author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. So much for stereotypes.

And I am acutely aware of how dangerous it can be to focus on moments in time, to try to recall accurately childhood experiences through the lens of an adult. But sometimes that’s our only choice.

Over the years I have wondered, on occasion, why I had been so determined — since the time I was a young child — to pursue the path of an investigative reporter. In elementary school I remember reading biographies of famous

people and being especially taken by those of Ida Tarbell and Nellie Bly, two turn-of-the twentieth century muck-rakers. I remember thinking, “That’s what I want to do.”

But why had their lives resonated with me, a baby boomer from a relatively prosperous Texas family, growing up when most women didn’t consider professional careers? Looking back, I realize the extent to which growing up in Texas during the 1950s and 1960s shaped my future as a journalist. Negotiating life there helped me see just how skillfully people can operate on different, sometimes incongruent, levels, and how difficult it can be to figure out what is really going on.

I couldn’t stop wondering about certain aspects of life in Texas. Why were there separate drinking fountains for “whites” and “coloreds” in public places? Why did my close friend’s parents treat her decision to marry a Catholic as if there had been a death in the family? Why weren’t Jews allowed to join the country club? Why should girls bother to excel in school if they were not entitled to use their knowledge in the world beyond the home?

I had difficulty reconciling all this. Church was a huge part of our lives, and there was not the slightest doubt that Jesus taught we should love our neighbors as ourselves, and that *everyone* was our neighbor (remember the Good Samaritan?). Our teachers told us how lucky we were to live in America, because everyone in a democracy is created equal and has equal opportunities. But it was obvious to me that there was a huge disconnect between what we were told and what people seemed actually to believe and do. I was constantly confused.

We had a housekeeper named Genner (pronounced “Gina”) Hastings, a deeply religious black woman who worked at our home for many years, and I realize now that our relationship helped shape me. I loved Genner, and I believe she loved me — although I’m now open to the possibility that my perception of her love for me may have been mediated by the fact that she was paid by my parents to clean, cook, and help care for me and my four siblings.

But from my childhood perspective, Genner was a member of our family. She

was a great cook who prepared much of our food, including specialties such as homemade mayonnaise, biscuits, and individual apricot pies that my brother almost inhaled as they came out of the oven. I happily planted wet kisses on her and she on me. Genner and I were so close that I remember feeling comfortable probing more deeply about skin color, which I gradually learned — from observation — divided us. Why was hers black and mine white? What did it feel like to be black? She knew these questions were asked out of a child's need to understand, and she answered them all matter-of-factly: God made some people white, some black, she explained. She waved off my efforts to engage her in what we would now call political discussions.

Yet I recall becoming mystified, disturbed — and even embarrassed — that many businesses even had back entrances that “coloreds” were required to use. When I would ask why, no one ever gave me an answer that made any sense. I once stole a sip from a “colored” drinking fountain, as if to dare the powers that be. What would happen? Would I get spanked? Would someone call the police? Would I get sick or perhaps even turn black? Nothing happened.

True friendship requires reciprocity, and as I got older and realized that Genner had a separate and very different life, I remember feeling the pain I thought *she* should feel. She went home to her tiny house in a dilapidated neighborhood on Sixth Street, while we lived in a spacious Georgian colonial with big white columns in a beautiful park.

As it turns out, I was reading the biographies of Ida Tarbell and Nellie Bly about the same time Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat on the Birmingham bus. I realize now that during the early tumultuous years of that phase of the civil rights struggle, I was learning a profound lesson in how the personal can become political.

As time passed, the news was filled with stories about Selma and Little Rock and Martin Luther King. My heart went along on those walks for freedom. I was



## ROLE MODELS

# KATHERINE BOO

“I once was researching a nothing little story at the reading room of the FBI, which was empty except for me and a man who was hunched over, amid these enormous piles of papers. I recognized him as Taylor Branch, although I'd never met him. Just seeing him fascinated me. What was he doing? What makes it worth it — this lonely, difficult process of going through tens of thousands of documents? What's it for? He was researching his book *Parting the Waters*, a wonderful telling of the civil rights movement, a labor of love and passion. Just seeing him there in the reading room made a big impression on me.

“Jason DeParle of *The New York Times* also influenced me because he has devoted his career to writing about poverty in America in original, non-ideological ways, getting deeper in his pieces than the usual stereotypes. John Hersey was a reporter who could take something as inef-fable and difficult as the atomic bomb and cover it from a point of view that let the reader see what it really meant. What interests me is not necessarily the person who does one good investigative piece, but the people who do it over and over again. Bob Woodward, for example, finds it in himself to keep alive that intellectual curiosity, and to do the backbreaking labor.”

*Katherine Boo is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter for The Washington Post.*

told that actually blacks were very happy, but the ungodly communists were stirring things up so the Soviet Union could then take over a weakened America. I might have believed that, but I knew the spirit, the humanity, of “the other,” and I was sensitive to the inherent unfairness that flowed simply from the color of Genner's skin.

As I got older, I realized that I wasn't getting good answers to my many questions because there were no good answers, certainly none consistent with what I was taught at church and school. There seemed to be a tacit agreement to accept some things just as they are, what some writers call the “shared narrative,” which can turn into unquestioned story lines dictating our lives.

I have come to realize, too, that my journalistic questions about Washington have been a variation on my efforts to penetrate childhood mysteries, an almost biological imperative to question the status quo. In the case of Senator Packwood, for example, why wasn't any major news organization tackling an obvious follow-up

story of the Hill-Thomas hearings — the problem of sexual harassment on Capitol Hill? How had the Senator gotten away with behavior that had been rumored in Washington for almost two decades? As I reported the story, I began to realize that Packwood's exploitation of women fit into Washington's “shared narrative”: for some, such behavior was simply a perk of power.

By now I know some answers to my neighbor's question about what “happened” to me as a child: I learned that a measure of truth can be right in front of you; that to see it you sometimes have to shift your focus or imagine yourself in someone else's place; and that finding it involves many types of searches, some of which take a long time. I learned to question authority, appearances, the majority's view, and the way things are always done; to be aware of the dangers of generalizing and of adhering to any fixed ideology.

These lessons became especially poignant for me during the past year when I found another personal relationship

with a female of a different race sparking a whole new set of questions — personal, political, and journalistic. After many years of marriage, my husband and I traveled to China last year to adopt our daughter, Grace, now four. I think often about what is “happening” to Grace as she negotiates childhood. She asks “why” a million times a day. And I see more clearly how naturally children — who haven't yet learned the artifices of adults — can ask surprisingly penetrating questions about aspects of life we sometimes want to hide from or soften, or don't even see. Thanks to her, I have what seems like a million new questions of my own as I make plans to write about national and international issues that I previously was blind to. Sometimes my work may overlap with Grace's inevitable search for the truth of who she is and why she is here. Whatever she does in life, someday I'll tell her what I have learned: to be true to her own experience. To be guided not by some false idea of objectivity, but by intellectual honesty and the Golden Rule. ■