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 Vaidina, 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.

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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 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

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

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CJR May/June 2001
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.
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 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, with 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.