

**What Would We Have Done?  
Moral Imagination in News and Public Memory  
by  
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**Introduction**

As my title suggests, the subject of my lecture, and indeed the field in which I work, is journalism, although I hope to focus not only on the content of news but also on the connections that audiences make with that content. Tonight I'm going to talk about a variety of events that may seem very strange put together in one presentation, and I'm going to travel back and forth through time: the oldest example I'll discuss is from 123 years ago, and the most recent is from three months ago. But they all have, I hope, something in common.

All of these stories—as *stories* known by a broader public—began in journalism; we came to know about them, first, through news media. Therefore, much of my talk will focus on news coverage, and at the very end I'll come back to questions about the nature of journalism. But I also want to discuss other kinds of communication and to examine how they work together, with news, to create cultural stories that last over time. Finally, I want to consider how certain events become prominent in news and in public memory because they inspire audiences'

imaginative connection with the people involved in those events—a form of engagement in which news media, and then other kinds of public communication, convey feeling as well as fact.

### **Imaginative Connection**

This phenomenon was described many years ago by Freeman Tilden, a journalist who during the 1950s became interested in public history. In 1957, he wrote a book about public communication in America's National Parks and National Historic Sites. In this book, he argued that park rangers needed to engage the imagination of visitors, to urge them to think their way into the past, to “provoke in the mind of the hearer the questions, ‘What would *I* have done under similar circumstances? What would have been *my* fate?’”<sup>1</sup>

Sure enough, half a century later, I heard those very questions asked at a site that is now run by the National Park Service: Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where United Flight 93 crashed on September 11, 2001. “What would we have done?” the interpreter asked my group. “Would we have been heroes, too?”<sup>2</sup> Every weekend, still, visitors gather in this windy field to hear Park Rangers and local volunteers tell what they call “The Story of Flight 93.” We all know this story by now: a tale of people, presumably just like us, who, in the face of seemingly certain death, courageously took action. Just two days after the attacks, an article in *The New York Times* provided the basic narrative: “They told the people they loved that they would die fighting. ... they vowed to try to thwart the enemy, to prevent others from dying even if they could not save themselves.”<sup>3</sup> This story subsequently has been told in other forms of popular media, including a film and several books.<sup>4</sup>

In the intervening years, the field where the plane crashed became, itself, a medium, a site of pilgrimage and a shrine of material-culture tributes. A fence was put up (later, shelves were added), and quickly this filled with objects that people brought—baseball caps, T-shirts,

firehouse and local-police insignia patches, ribbons, teddy bears, and pictures. Some people simply wrote messages, most of them addressed directly to the passengers, on whatever surfaces



In the field where Flight 93 crashed on September 11, a fence was built and visitors filled the space with objects and messages to remember the victims.

were available, including the metal rails that had ringed the makeshift parking area. These visitors were participating in the kind of civil-religious behavior that occurs not only after disasters, but also at the sites of war memorials, a gesture that historian John Bodnar calls “an expression of comradeship with and sorrow for the dead.”<sup>5</sup> The elements and size of this shrine grew over the

years. Then, in the summer of 2010, it was taken down to make way for the new memorial, which is still only partly built. This removal of the “temporary memorial,” which had been there for nine years, upset and confused visitors who had driven hundreds of miles with things they wanted to leave there.

Cultural geographer Kenneth Foote describes four kinds of transformation of landscapes where tragic events occurred. One is “obliteration,” the removal of all traces of “shameful events people would prefer to forget.” Another is “rectification,” an act of “removing the signs of violence and tragedy and returning a site to use, implying no lasting positive or negative meaning”; this is a process of moving on. A third is “designation,” in which case “the marking of a site simply denotes that something ‘important’ has happened here.” Finally, there is “sanctification,” in cases “when events are seen to hold some lasting positive meaning that people wish to remember—a lesson in heroism or perhaps a sacrifice for community.” This last process requires a permanent memorial that tells a story containing “ethical or moral lessons that

transcend the toll of lives” and that celebrates the dead not as victims, but as martyrs or heroes.<sup>6</sup> In all cases, Foote writes, landscapes function as a form of communication, “a system of signs and symbols”; the land is, he writes, a “durable, visual representation” that is “like writing.”<sup>7</sup>

People’s behavior at sites of tragedy add another level of communication; they also “write” the story, and when their gestures become news, the story is again imaginatively extended back to us. When Osama bin Laden was killed in May of 2011, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and other news organizations featured photographs of people who had gone to the Flight 93 crash site. Dressed in scarves designed to look like the American flag, they held a poster containing many signatures and, in large lettering made with red paint, the statement “I did not forget.”<sup>8</sup> Four months later, on the 10th anniversary of the attacks, this site was back in news coverage when a “Wall of Heroes”—a series of stone slabs, each bearing the name of a passenger, that comprise the first portion of the permanent memorial—was dedicated in a ceremony that shifted the site’s status from designation to sanctification.

The story of Flight 93 is a prime example of what Dolores Hayden, a scholar of architecture and urban studies, calls “moral imagination.”<sup>9</sup> In my own use of this term, I mean a sense of judgment based on feelings of injustice on behalf of the people who experienced a major event, as well as a commitment to publicly acknowledge and then to remember the event, to remember what those people did and went through.

### **News and Imagination**

There are a number of levels on which audiences make imaginative connections with stories that we first learn from the news. This is not always a matter of tragedy or disaster. Some such news stories are positive ones, stories in which an obstacle or injustice seems to have been, finally, overcome. These may be momentous national milestones, such as the inauguration

of the country's first African American President, which many news commentators reported as the culmination of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream," an achievement that *Newsweek* described as "redemption for our anguished racial history."<sup>10</sup> Or the story may be a thrilling achievement that we cannot imagine ourselves doing and yet feel a strong sense of ownership of, a connection in which the news and the newsmakers represent "us." The world of sports often provides such happy examples, especially when a victory is understood to be about something more than just a game, such as the Cold-War-era "Miracle on Ice" Olympic gold medal won in 1980 by the U.S. men's ice hockey team, who defeated the mighty Soviets along the way. Another example of Americans' sense of ownership of an unlikely achievement can be seen in news coverage of the 1969 moon landing, an emotional moment millions shared with CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite as much as with the astronauts; that memory returned to news coverage again in August of 2012 when astronaut Neil Armstrong died. So, sometimes, the imagination stirred by a news event is proud and positive in nature.

More often, though, it is shameful and negative, a collective reaction to an event that happens locally but resonates nationally, as a broad audience expresses shock or outrage. One such story is a kind of crime that is consistently reported as "unthinkable," even though it's now fairly regular: what seem to be random killings of many people in the kinds of places where we've all been and have felt safe in—a church, a college classroom, a shopping mall, a movie theater. These stories have included, in recent years, two mass shootings in Colorado, one at Columbine High School in 1999 and one at a movie theater in the town of Aurora in 2012, as well as the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre. They are powerfully engaging news stories not only because we feel outrage and sorrow for the victims, but also because they could have happened to any of us, and therefore we think that same question: *What would I have done?*

These kinds of news stories have several inevitable components: the profile of the killer; profiles of the dead; the community's ritual responses, usually conveyed through visual images; and, in words, eyewitness, minute-by-minute accounts of the event itself. Each of these elements inspires its own kind of imaginative connection to the story. The profile of the killer requires us to speculate as we search for a motive and condemn his actions. This story is partly a logistical one—how did he plan it?—but mainly a moral and almost mythic one: how could such a monster live among us? What made him become evil? In *their* profiles, the victims are praised as heroes—we learn about selfless behavior amid the chaos—and yet their life stories are full of ordinary details, relationships, occupations, pastimes, idiosyncrasies, and dreams, that remind us of ourselves and our family members and our friends. The local community's response usually includes photographs of spontaneous memorials erected on or near the site of the event, as well as of public ceremonies, images through which we can feel a sense of participation in the processes of mourning and memorial.

Finally, the first-person accounts of terror put us inside the awful event itself, which, given the fact the event is over, actually is a narrative matter of going back in time. Cultural-studies scholar Marita Sturken uses the word “fantasy” to describe this psychological process of reenactment, in which we mentally replay the story with ourselves in it.<sup>11</sup> Journalism scholar Barbie Zelizer notes that this phenomenon engenders the narrative element of “contingency,” the possibility that things might have turned out differently.<sup>12</sup> In an interview, filmmaker Ken Burns referred to the same phenomenon while describing the production of the moment in his *Civil War* series when Lincoln is assassinated, a scene that is enacted with images of the theater, music and voices from the play, the sound of the crowd, and then, suddenly, a gunshot. When the

editing team got to laying the gunshot into the soundtrack, Burns recalled, “we just looked at each other, [and] we just stopped .... And for a moment ... we kept Abraham Lincoln alive.”<sup>13</sup>

We are indeed imaginatively drawn into stories in which we wish we could have intervened, because we feel that morally someone *should have*. We wish that we could have stopped time, stepped in, and changed the outcome, that we could have kept Lincoln from getting shot. These stories include not only murders, but also scandals. One recent example has played out over the past year in my home state of Pennsylvania.

### **The Penn State Scandal and Moral Narrative**

While the initial news event at Penn State had to do with one man’s heinous crimes against children—certainly a moral as well as a criminal transgression—the main moral narrative has come to be about the moral failures of other people, chiefly the one person who once presumably stood for all that was right and good about American college football, coach Joe Paterno. My local newspaper, the Harrisburg *Patriot-News*, won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of this scandal. They covered it in two journalistically different ways. In one sense, the newspaper reiterated the typical kind of language used to describe the perpetrator of moral-outrage stories, describing “Sandusky’s fall from a saint to a monster.”<sup>14</sup> But in a front-page statement in November of 2011, the paper’s editorial board distinguished between criminal behavior and moral responsibility, making the argument that this story was about more than Jerry Sandusky. “There are the obligations we all have to uphold the law,” it began. “Then there are the obligations we all have to do what is right.” Concluding that “[t]he most famous living coach in college football history must be held to a higher standard,” it called for Paterno to step down at the end of the season.<sup>15</sup> The university’s Board of Trustees took swifter action, firing him in November; Paterno died soon afterward, in early 2012.

Photojournalistic coverage of these events included images of thousands of students holding candles in the night or huddled together in the football stands, the same kinds of images we are used to seeing in coverage of disasters and shootings. In mid-July, just two days after the Freeh Report was released assessing the level of Paterno's responsibility, I happened to be on the Penn State campus for a book event. Afterward, I went up to the stadium to see his statue, which stood surrounded by plaques listing the records of his teams over decades. At the statue's feet were flowers and handwritten notes, one of which said: "JoePa, We don't believe Freeh's propaganda. We do believe in you."<sup>16</sup> As in Shanksville, here again were people speaking directly to the dead at a symbolic site. A week later the plaques were taken off the wall—



At Joe Paterno's statue on The Penn State's campus were flowers and handwritten notes in support of Paterno.

decades of football seasons disappearing into thin air—and the statue was carted away. Both moves were, in Kenneth Foote's terms, acts of obliteration of memory. So was the painting-over of Sandusky's likeness in a campus mural the month earlier. That event was depicted in a *Los Angeles Times* online photograph that also showed a young woman holding a sign with which she spoke not to the dead but to the broader world of the living: "They ALL knew," it said. The accompanying article compared the Penn State situation to the sex scandals in the Catholic Church.<sup>17</sup>

Both are stories in which, even though individuals were featured and demonized, they stood, ultimately, for the moral failure of American institutions. Scandals occurring in institutions we believe to be culturally and morally good, even sacred, such as college athletics



and the church, are especially shocking. And yet, as sociologist Herbert Gans has written, Americans tend to have a basic faith in other major societal institutions as well, assuming that they will not act in criminally negligent ways; we may expect them to act in self-interest but not to actually break the law.<sup>18</sup> So when they do, we are always shocked, and it becomes not only a criminal story, but also a moral one. Headlines detailing the past decade's many instances of corporate fraud tell of evil hucksters whose greed and hubris were of theatrical proportions: Bernie Madoff was called a "monster" and a "supervillain" on a 2009 cover of *New York* magazine that depicted him, in makeup, as The Joker<sup>19</sup>; the 2001 Enron scandal became a Broadway play. Like the devastating 1989 oil spill from the Exxon Valdez tanker, the BP oil spill off the coast of Louisiana more than two decades later began as a report of an industrial accident but became, instead, a moral drama about corporate carelessness, arrogance, and disregard for people, wildlife, and the environment.

### **Disorder in News**

Noting that news is fundamentally about the disruption of order, Herbert Gans lists four kinds of disorder in news: natural, technological, social, and moral.<sup>20</sup> I'd like to suggest that the most memorable stories, and the ones that are best suited to dramatic telling, are ones that combine all or most of these kinds of disorder. The last three can be found in most sagas of corporate recklessness as well as mass-murder. And some incredibly memorable stories have contained all four. I'll mention three such events, all of them involving water. One is fairly recent; the other two stories are from long ago, yet are well-remembered and often revisited.

In fact, one was back in the news just this past spring, on its 100th anniversary. The story of the Titanic was, and still is, a spectacular drama, widely reported in news media when it occurred, recalled and dissected for years afterward, and made into several popular films. This

story had a compelling *social* dimension in the quite literal separation of the social classes on board and during the rescue. It was a *natural* disaster because, well, there was an iceberg, not to mention the ocean. But primarily it was a *technological* disaster with a strong *moral* component, the arrogance of the White Star Line in not having enough lifeboats and its over-reaching ambition to go faster. These plotlines and the broader melodrama were captured with rhetorical flair in the headlines of one contemporary newspaper: “Band Played Till End! Titanic Sacrifice to Speed God – Hurlled through Water ....”<sup>21</sup>

The other historical event is one of the most compelling moral tales of the American 19th century, the 1889 Johnstown Flood. This story was told and retold in all sorts of public communication, not only journalistic media but also songs, poems, plays, books, eventually movies, and even boardwalk attractions at Coney Island and Atlantic City. Soon after the disaster, and ever since, it has been prominently memorialized in the town cemetery, where the “Plot of the Unknowns” contains more than 700 unidentified victims. There were a total of more than 2,200 victims of this disaster, in which soil erosion due to careless over-industrialization (moral and technological disorder) plus three days of rain (natural disorder) caused a deluge that destroyed this town, wrecking its massive ironworks and blocking a main route of the Pennsylvania Railroad (technological disorder), causing widespread panic (social disorder), and killing mostly working-class people who had the misfortune of living in the valley and not on the hill (social and moral disorder).

Within days, this event, which drew worldwide attention, was being explained in news as a cautionary tale of the greedy rich, the deserving poor, and the wrath of wounded nature. Hundreds of photographers came to Johnstown to document the destruction, although in 1889 their images circulated in the form of stereograph cards and postcards rather than in newspapers.

Most newspapers instead featured illustrations that recreated scenes of destruction and terror. The two local historic sites that still tell this story sell reproductions of coverage from both *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. In those pictures, bodies floated in water and spilled out of a toppled railway car; people clung to tree branches and rooftops; and a windswept young woman with outstretched arms cried out as her husband and child were swept away in the raging water. That image is reproduced on a historical marker that sits at the National Park Service historic site just above Johnstown where the dam burst.

One might be tempted to understand this coverage as just Victorian melodrama. Yet **its 21st-century public presentation appeals to the fantasy of present-day tourists fascinated with the number-filled trivia of disaster.** “Imagine trying to escape through a torrent of 150 million gallons of water unleashed towards you at 70 mph!” screams one tourism brochure. “Imagine being trapped by that water for 3 days, 248 feet underground at a four-foot height with no food, warmth or light. What would your emotional and psychological state be?”<sup>22</sup> What’s more, the central themes of the hundreds of Johnstown Flood images, the scenes and dilemmas they represent, remain typical in news coverage of disasters, especially when the larger story is one about human nature. All of these kinds of images reappeared in news coverage of my third example of a catastrophe with all four kinds of disorder: Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In the beginning, that story seemed to be simply news of very bad natural disorder, made worse by technological disorder when the levees broke. Initially it had the same narrative pull that natural disasters do in general: we mentally put ourselves in the victims’ situation. We imagine how we would feel if our home or our belongings were ruined, if we couldn’t communicate with our relatives, if we weren’t sure if help would come. We make that imaginative connection with victims of natural disasters because we feel sorry for the social

disorder they find themselves in, and perhaps we can even empathize with it, but our connection is not necessarily a moral one. After all, having read and seen this kind of story repeatedly in news over time, we know how it's supposed to go: help *does* come, because Americans pull together and take care of each other in times of crisis. News teaches us that. We assume that this kind of situation will be, as Fox News titled its early coverage, "America's Challenge."

But help did not come—at any rate, not soon enough, and then not for long. Therefore, in news, the story changed, as "America's Challenge" became "An American Tragedy," the coverline *Time* magazine used just a week after the storm.<sup>23</sup> This newer tale of remarkable moral failure featured images of desperate and angry people, as well as the universally recognizable symbol of vulnerability and moral responsibility, babies. Reporting became an act of witnessing and overtly passing judgment, as Anderson Cooper did quite famously during CNN's coverage from the scene; *Newsweek* made an editorial statement with a full-page photograph, captioned "Left Behind," of an elderly, African-American woman, head bowed, wrapped in an American flag for comfort.<sup>24</sup> That judgment also was expressed in documentary films including Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: An American Tragedy*, released in 2006, a year after the storm.

Also in 2006, a more hopeful public gesture was made when the New Orleans Saints football team returned to the rebuilt Superdome, an outcome Kenneth Foote would call rectification, "removing the signs of violence and tragedy and returning a site to use." That game, complete with musical and other tributes, was widely covered in news media beyond the world of sports, and was reported as a story of recovery and resilience. That closure was premature, however, and over the following years it became clear that Katrina remained an unfinished story. To mark the five-year anniversary in 2010, PBS created a slideshow revealing that, in the Ninth Ward, many people still had not been able to rebuild or even to come back at

all. Meanwhile, critics in journalism and other forms of popular culture, such as films and books,<sup>25</sup> have pursued a longer-term understanding of Hurricane Katrina not as a natural disaster but as a chapter in an ongoing story about race in America—as a reminder that, despite the election of an African-American President, the struggle for Civil Rights is, in fact, not yet over.

### **National Memory and Imaginative Connection**

All of my examples so far have been of events that happened at a particular historic moment and that quickly inspired a widespread moral response. Yet we also make more gradual imaginative connections to phenomena that unfold across time and place. And sometimes it does take time, even decades, for a national audience to make a moral commitment to what once seemed like only a local story of social disorder. The American Civil Rights movement is such a case. It is an illustration of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' definition of collective memory as a painting that is constantly redone, so that "new images overlay the old"<sup>26</sup>; it is a broad canvas onto which other, time-specific and place-specific stories are overlaid, gaining communicative power from that bigger narrative. In the past several decades, such stories have included not only Hurricane Katrina and Barack Obama's election, but also stories ranging from the Rodney King beating to the testimony of Anita Hill during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to the deaths of Ray Charles and Michael Jackson. Every one of those stories was to some extent told, across various forms of communication, as a parable about the legacies of race and slavery and about the victories or failures of the Civil Rights movement.

In national memory, that movement is routinely recalled in terms of visual images, and they are *news* images. Some were first seen in television-news coverage, though many of the most powerful images of the Civil Rights movement appeared as still photographs that were published in newspapers and magazines. Their subjects and poses, extensively circulated at the

time, are now iconic: four young black men sitting at a lunch counter; striking Memphis sanitation workers, wearing placards declaring “I Am A Man,” stoically filing past National Guardsmen brandishing bayonets; the long ribbon of marchers, highlighted against a stormy sky, marching from Selma to Montgomery; teenaged boys and girls being pinned against buildings by water from fire hoses or lunged at by police dogs; and, of course, Rosa Parks seated on a bus, looking out the window. For many Americans, news is the memory itself, not only the trace of the real event but also the way the broader audience, across the country and around the world, “experienced” those events. That news coverage is part of the moral act of witnessing injustice and calling for its resolution, and these images now are widely credited with having helped to bring about change.

And they’ve traveled across forms of public memory. The 54-mile route between Selma and Montgomery is now a National Historic Trail maintained by the National Park Service, and its interpretive center contains models of the marchers (one carrying an American flag) alongside a large reproduction of the 1965 news photograph showing the real marchers. The same photographic authentication of a staged tableau can be seen in the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, where a sculpted recreation of young people engaged in a lunch-counter sit-in appears in front of a television screen showing historical footage of a real sit-in. Elsewhere in that museum are figures of the Memphis garbage workers, wearing their signs and marching by figures of soldiers with bayonets, a near-exact replication of the familiar news photograph.

The National Civil Rights Museum occupies the former Lorraine Motel where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. It is one of a number of several examples of public memory and commemoration on what once were sites of moral outrage. Another is the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where four young girls were killed when the church

was bombed in 1963. The church contains a small museum that uses, among other artifacts, news images to tell the story of that tragedy and its broader context, a series of protests that took place there that year, including one that resulted in the violent treatment of protesters that was captured on camera by photojournalist Charles Moore. The public park across the street from the church contains several sculptures depicting those events—or, more specifically, *the news photographs of them* through which a broader public (tourists) will instantly “recognize” the



A park by the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham features sculptures depicting the painful events surrounding the Civil Rights movement.

events. Two of Moore’s most famous photographs are faithfully recreated: in one statue, a policeman clutches the torn shirt of a young black man as a snarling police dog leaps toward the youth; in another, figures of a boy and girl huddle against a wall, cowering from the force of water.

Although the “media” in this park are sculptures, **here news images are absolutely central to moral imagination, inextricable from the broader public memory.** In fact, among the statuary scattered throughout the Memphis museum are figures of a

photographer and a television cameraman; their presence as witnesses and documenters of the movement’s pivotal moments has made them actors in history, too.

Of all the figures in that museum, one sits alone, and she sits inside a bus. Within the broader story of the Civil Rights movement, Rosa Parks is the figure who perhaps best illustrates the phenomenon of moral imagination. A recent article on the web site of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* laments the state of her replica after years of public interaction with it: visitors put children on her lap, try to sit down beside her, hold her hand, and sometimes talk to her.<sup>27</sup> Across the country, sculptures of her sit in public parks near bus stations, and people bring

her flowers. Her 1955 gesture of protest strikes a chord with many Americans, including President Barack Obama: during a reelection campaign stop in Michigan, he visited the Henry Ford Museum, which now owns the actual bus Parks rode in. Like thousands of other visitors, he sat down and looked out the window. Photographs of that moment—of Obama’s imaginative connection with the Civil Rights movement that made it possible for him to become President—appeared widely across journalism. Having made news 57 years ago, Rosa Parks, so well-traveled through national memory, was back in the news in 2012.<sup>28</sup>

Her representational journey is a good illustration of how moral stories flow through public communication. These stories begin somewhere in the culture itself, they are first broadcast to a wide audience through journalism, and then they travel into other media and other kinds of public communication, such as markers, memorials, landscape, and tourism. Over time, those stories are revised or enlarged, memorialized and retold across cultural forms, and at some point they flow back through



In another statue at a park in Birmingham, a policeman clutches the torn shirt of a young black man as a police dog leaps toward him.

journalism again. Cultural scholar James Carey argued that **journalism should function not as a series of single reports but rather as what he called a “curriculum” through which we understand multiple perspectives on a particular subject over time.**<sup>29</sup> I believe that we can see something similar at work here: a curriculum of public memory, of which journalism is one part.

### **Toward a Curriculum of Public Memory**

If we accept this model, then we need to think about studying journalism differently than we often tend to, as if it were an independent channel in and of itself and as if news stories were



self-contained messages. Nor can we accept the traditional notion that news flows from journalists to audiences in a linear fashion. Nor can we embrace the supposedly ideal model in which journalists exist apart from culture, merely reflecting it or offering a window onto it. Finally, we must realize that much news is not really new at all; we *recognize* these stories even though their specifics vary. We feel as if, in the words of Susan Moeller, “we’ve seen the same pictures, heard about the same victims, heroes and villains, read the same morality play.”<sup>30</sup>

While Moeller argues that such repetition may diminish the moral power of news, the stories we’ve considered tonight suggest the opposite—that cultural narratives grow even more powerful as they recur in news, circulate through other forms of culture, and are revisited over time. Anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird and journalism scholar Robert Dardenne contend that our most meaningful news narratives “are derived from culture and ... feed back into it”; “to continue to have power,” they write, those stories “must be constantly retold.”<sup>31</sup> In their retellings, they become explanatory, offering lessons bigger than their original elements.

It’s commonly assumed that journalism is about facts, detached from judgment. This is “little-t” truth, the lead of the inverted pyramid, the business of who did what to whom, when and where. Yet the stories I’ve discussed tonight are cultural *narratives* that, ultimately, are less about facts, less about specific people in specific circumstances, and more about values—order and disorder, disgrace and redemption, right and wrong, good and evil. They are about big-T Truth, which is quite *connected* to judgment. One kind of truth is about fact; the other is about feeling. Indeed, many people might describe some of these stories as “sensational,” and they are, although they illustrate the actual meanings of that word: they invite us to imagine the sensory experiences of being inside the event itself, while they also arouse our senses of sympathy, outrage, and injustice, demanding moral resolution.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the National Civil Rights Museum sponsored a four-year traveling exhibit, which it promoted with images of the boycotters including Rosa Parks. Over the picture of her police mug shot, one advertisement asked: “Would you have moved?” Here is the question, again. And here is the key to the lasting appeal of the story of Rosa Parks and the other stories I’ve discussed tonight: they are not so much about *what they did* as they are about *what we might have done*. Engaging or enraging, intriguing or inspiring, these stories grab hold of us as they unfold in news and keep our attention as they circulate through the broader culture, all the while reminding us that news is woven into a broader tapestry of public narratives. Our fascination with this kind of question—*Would you have moved? Would we have been heroes, too?*—keeps these stories alive, shapes their ultimate meanings, and helps to determine what tales prevail in public imagery and public memory.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977; originally published in 1957), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s visit to Flight 93 Memorial near Shanksville, PA, on September 28, 2007. The description of the site itself is based on that and four other visits between 2005 and 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Jodi Wilgoren and Edward Wong, “On Doomed Flight, Passengers Vowed to Perish Fighting,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2001, pp. A1, A21.

<sup>4</sup> The film was: Paul Greengrass, writer, prod., and dir., *United 93* (Universal, 2006). Among the books was: Lisa Beamer, *Let’s Roll: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage* (Colorado Springs, CO: Tyndale House, 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003; originally published in 1997), 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Len Barcoucky, "Visitors Mark bin Laden's Death at Flight 93 Site," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 2, 2011, accessed on November 5, 2012 at <<http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/breaking/visitors-mark-bin-ladens-death-at-flight-93-site-295953/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 245.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Meacham, "The American Soul," *Newsweek: Special Commemorative Issue: Obama's American Dream* (2008-2009), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 36. Sturken poses precisely the same questions as did Freeman Tilden, although in a more prurient way, describing audiences' engagement with the newsmakers' psychological drama: "The question *How did they react to imminent death?* becomes *How would I react in the face of death?*" she writes (p. 36).

<sup>12</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Burns, prod., "Special Features: A Conversation with Ken Burns," in *Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns* (American Lives Film Project, 1996; the Public Broadcasting Service, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Frantz, "Sandusky's Fall: From a Saint to a Monster," *The Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA), June 23, 2012, pp. A1, A8.

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- <sup>15</sup> The *Patriot-News* Editorial Board, “A *Patriot-News* Editorial,” *The Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA), November 8, 2001, p. A1.
- <sup>16</sup> Author’s visit to University Park, PA on July 14, 2012.
- <sup>17</sup> Steve Lopez, “Shades of Catholic Church in Penn State Scandal,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2011, accessed on November 5, 2012 at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/11/steve-lopez-penn-state-feels-a-lot-like-catholic-church-scandal.html>.
- <sup>18</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 46.
- <sup>19</sup> Cover, *New York*, March 7, 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> Gans, *Deciding What’s News*, 52.
- <sup>21</sup> “Band Played Till End!” *Newburyport (MA) Morning-Herald*, April 19, 1912, p. 1.
- <sup>22</sup> *Johnstown, PA Heritage Attractions* [tourism brochure], 2007, n.p.
- <sup>23</sup> Cover, *Time*, September 12, 2005.
- <sup>24</sup> Jonathan Alter, “The Other America,” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005, 42-48.
- <sup>25</sup> Examples include, for instance: Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds., *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright, eds., *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009); and another film by Spike Lee done for the fifth anniversary, *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don’t Rise* (2010).
- <sup>26</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 72.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Lollar, “Hands-On Hazards: Popular Museum Exhibits Bear Brunt of Affection with Parts Broken,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 5, 2009, accessed on November 10, 2012 at <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2009/may/05/hands-on-hazards/>.

<sup>28</sup> For instance: “Obama Sits Inside Rosa Parks Bus” [photo], *The Huffington Post*, April 19, 2012, accessed on November 10, 2012 at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/19/obama-rosa-parks-bus-michigan-fundraiser\\_n\\_1438329.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/19/obama-rosa-parks-bus-michigan-fundraiser_n_1438329.html).

<sup>29</sup> James W. Carey, “The Dark Continent of American Journalism,” in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 148-149.

<sup>30</sup> Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 13.

<sup>31</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, “Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News,” in *Social Meanings of News*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (ed.) *Social Meaning of News* (Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage, 1997), 337.