

VENTURING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

Zach Dundas*

Ever felt like a clueless lightweight? Completely out of your depth? Tragically under-schooled and unfit for public consumption?

Not, I would humbly submit, until you have taken part in a panel discussion alongside a Buddhist monk, several fully accredited theologians and professors, a respected radio personality, the director of your state's most prominent humanities non-profit, and a senior minister of one of the West Coast's most historic Unitarian congregations. Throw in an audience of bright-eyed, intelligent college students, and you have a scenario custom-designed to reduce one to blabbering incoherence. At least in my case.

Such were the circumstances I faced as a participant in the day-long "Building Beloved Community" symposium, organized by Multnomah Biblical Seminary's innovative New Wine, New Wineskins Institute. As a mere tabloid news reporter, kindly invited along to explain my coverage of Portland's evangelical Christian communities for a newspaper better known as a conduit for euphemism-laden "escort" ads, I could not help but think of The Beatles' first tour.

In their early days, see, the Fab Four hit the road with magicians and dog acts. It was a strange moment in the history of mass entertainment, when a dying vaudeville culture intersected with modern pop music. The dog acts and magicians were soon cut from the team.

That morning I felt distinctly like a sleight-of-hand artist fronting a troupe of performing hounds, some shaggy Liverpudlians impatiently pacing in the wings. I tried to tell myself that was perfectly appropriate, since the tale I had come to tell—how a secular-humanist reporter for a Godless liberal rag came to write about, and even like some, evangelicals—was above all a story about venturing out of my comfort zone.

My passport to that day's unknown realm (a Bible college?) came in the form of a front-page story for *Willamette Week*, Portland's leading alternative weekly newspaper and my employer for seven years. Titled "The J-Crew" and featuring a grinning cartoon Jesus sporting a "Hello, My Name Is . . ." lapel sticker as its introductory art, the story attempted a flippant (but respectful!) pop-sociological introduction to the city's evangelical world. Now, it was time to tell the story

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behind the story, in hopes of shedding a little light on how the media makes decisions; why its coverage of religion is so often riddled with generalization and lacking in nuance; just what I, given a resume singularly lacking in religious expertise, was thinking; and most importantly, what larger lessons I divined.

Two salient pieces of background are necessary. First, a capsule history of *Willamette Week*, a locally owned example of a nationwide species of weekly papers: The “alternative weekly” emerged as a newspaper genre in the ’70s and ’80s, as a crop of papers roughly modeled on New York’s iconic *Village Voice* separated themselves from the waning hippie underground press. In the ’90s, in Portland and elsewhere, those papers hit their commercial and demographic stride, serving a mix of local news and entertainment coverage to well-educated urban liberals. In *Willamette Week*’s case, the long transition from underground struggle to mainstream success yielded a very healthy readership—about 250,000 a week—that’s also relatively homogenous both politically and socially. The paper’s audience includes a lot of Volvo-driving, latte-drinking, organic-eating liberals, and relatively few . . . well, pick any other demographic.

Salient fact number two: My “J-Crew” story appeared on December 1, 2004, when the psychological rubble from that year’s general election was still settling. Ordinarily, *Willamette Week* prides itself on torturing, hounding, investigating, mocking, and working to drive from power plenty of liberal politicians. But that fall’s tense campaign saw the paper shift into partisan overdrive. I personally wrote a 3,000-word feature explaining just why George W. Bush needed to be turfed out of office without delay. The paper also dove headlong into the fray over Measure 36, a statewide initiative to ban gay marriage. Suffice it to say, we were not winning many new fans among Portland’s conservative churchgoers, which in any case are something of an off-the-radar anomaly in this overwhelmingly lefty city.

So November 3, 2004 found our newsroom in the grip of quick-onset post-traumatic stress disorder. For one, we collectively felt an emotion that journalists should theoretically never feel: that *our* side had lost. And recall, too, the snap diagnosis making the rounds: that the Republicans (and by extension, Oregon’s victorious anti-gay-marriage campaigners) triumphed on the strength of their “moral values.”

It is no fun to be informed that Tom DeLay’s side hews to values superior to your own, but there it was. My editor called me into his office a couple days after the election. My role within the paper, it should be noted, was that of the specialist-in-nothing jack-of-all-trades. I wrote about pro wrestling, raw-foods enthusiasts, whatever. And so when it came time to learn something about these weird evangelical types—you know, do some actual reporting—I was the man.

Of course, I did not know anything about “values voters,” “conservative Christians,” “evangelicals”—I had never met one. So I did the only thing a reporter can do: I got on the phone and started begging people I had never met (and who, in some

cases, the paper had personally excoriated for their part in the Measure 36 campaign) for help.

Caveat emptor, media consumers! That is how it works—how it really works—inside the monolithic Journalistic-Industrial Complex. In messy, imperfect reality, almost all newsroom decisions are taken on an ad hoc basis, for reasons that are far from calculated, rational, or part of any larger design other than the daily chore of hitting deadline with half-decent copy. Synapses fire in an editor's overworked brain, saying, *This is a story . . . but we don't have anyone who knows anything about that subject . . . Dundas isn't doing anything . . . look, he's surfing the Web on company time . . . he wrote that raw food article, and that came out okay . . . Dundas! My office! Now!*

To my immense good fortune, I quickly stumbled my way to sources willing to help a feckless reporter find his way though an alien world. In fact, through my stumbling, I talked to some big names such as Jim Wallis from Sojourners and historian Mark Noll from Wheaton College. Mostly, though, I spoke to ordinary Christians from Portland, some of whom happened to be connected with Multnomah Bible College and its graduate Seminary. I went to a fired-up youth service at City Bible College and a swinging Sunday at Mount Olivet Baptist Church, a mostly black congregation. I strolled the aisles at Christian Supply, a massive bookstore/record store/biblical book shop deep in Portland's outer East Side. There, I discovered Bibleman, a locally produced Christian superhero series featuring villains such as Primordius Drool and Wacky Protestor. (For all who think the media's treatment of evangelical culture tends to focus on superficial things, know this: stuff like Bibleman will always make it into print before thoughtful nuance does.)

And I wrote my article, a reasonably ambition-free recount of what I had learned. The response floored me. Readers—*Willamette Week's* church-shy readers—generally loved the story. Evangelicals generally thought I had given them a fair, if unabashedly skin-deep, gloss. And I had discovered an incredibly rich vein of drama, issues, human passions, intellectual ferment, and cultural dynamism that had previously been completely invisible to me.

It is, in fact, amazing what happens to a journalist when he/she actually does his/her job. In my case, this instance taught me: A) There's lots of good stuff to write about in Jesusland; B) Sitting down with someone like Daniel Lockwood, the president of Multnomah, is much different than stereotype would lead me to believe; C) Bibleman exists!

I came away firmly convinced that every working reporter should spend some time covering religion, one of a precious few beats that strips people down to who they really are, deep inside, beyond what they like to do on Saturday night or what kind of car they drive. My brief foray not only clued me in on a number of very good stories, but it also reminded me that every individual journalist's job is to learn about people who are different than the said journalist, and come

back and tell the rest of the world about it. We do not often, as a profession, do a very good job of this revelatory telling—journalists as a class are frequently far too proud of what they already know, or think they know—but it is humbling and energizing to try.

Did I learn anything as a citizen? As a—not to stretch a point—human being? I think so. All Americans now exist in a crazily diverse society full of segmented pods of special interest, with a perpetual invitation to cocoon ourselves with others who share our values, interests, and tastes. That is okay—as long as we remember there are other worlds out there, just as valid and rich as our own. We should all, every one of us, make periodic efforts to learn a little bit about people who are not like us.

In my case, doing just that led to a couple really fun stories—and to a day spent with some theologians, a Buddhist monk, a radio host, and a lady preacher. It may sound like the set-up to an incredibly complicated barstool joke, but it served as an enriching, very real reminder that what I know only has value if I always remember how much I do not know.