Leftist Jewish Journalist Survives Evangelical Beat

Quiz: What do you get when you take one leftist Jewish journalist, assign him to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts, sprinkle in some fiery sermons and politically conservative speeches, mix thoroughly, and bake with the heat of fiercely contested national elections?

Note: This is not a joke.

Sound like a recipe for nitroglycerin shortcake? Maybe you'd expect mutual animosity: "Those wacko God-squaders are at it again, imposing their beliefs and politics on the rest of us sane people." "He's just another example of the biased secular humanist liberal media that's ruining America."

Yet this cake hides no explosives. The leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery on the road to meeting deadlines, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all.

He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends. His lesson has affected his writing in ways that have conservative evangelicals commending him for fairness and that provide useful illustrations for managing today's turbulent culture wars.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

Mark Pinsky's new book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Westminster John Knox), tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey" ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue. During his ten years covering

religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on leaders of major evangelical ministries and had little connection with local grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: In the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts, "I encountered evangelicals simply as people, rather than as subjects or sources of quotes for my stories."

Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, ""poor, uneducated and easy to command." They displayed surprising diversity on a range of issues including the Iraq war, environmentalism, tax policy, women in leadership, and immigration.

The Readable Radical

Disclaimer: Pinsky, whom I've known since our university days, is a personal friend, so I'm biased. But I've also observed a curious development here that merits wider consideration. His *Duke Chronicle* column was entitled "The Readable Radical" and he was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn't always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Pinsky is not without good natured humor as he highlights evangelical quirks. Example: the Orlando golf club that hyped its Easter sunrise service and "Easter Egg Scramble" golf tournament. And, perhaps-not-so-tongue-in-cheek, he admits he especially likes about evangelical Christians that "if you are sorry, they have to forgive you." He knows their boss said,

“When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against{1}.

Lessons for Life in the Larger World

His book draws lessons from his peculiar and unlikely journey for life in the larger world. His stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own.”

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Note

1. Mark 11:25 *New Living Translation*.

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Duke Lacrosse: Ethical Reflections

Written by Rusty Wright

The Duke lacrosse story has multiple ingredients for explosive media coverage: sex, race, politics, criminal charges, sports, class, a prestigious institution the list goes on.

Like many Duke alumni, I have personal convictions about the scandal. My Duke experience was and remains positive. So I'm biased. But I'm also realistic. Houston, we have a problem.

As much of the civilized world knows, a hired African-American stripper alleged some white players raped her at a lacrosse party. The accuser attended nearby North Carolina Central University. The accused maintain their innocence. The lacrosse coach resigned. Duke cancelled the season.

During basketball season, it was often "All Duke, all the time" on America's sports pages. Through much of the Spring, it became "All Duke, all the time" on the front pages.

Nowadays at Duke, quips one professor, historical calendars are not reckoned "BC" and "AD" but "BLC" and "ALC." "Before the Lacrosse Crisis" and "After the Lacrosse Crisis."

I'm glad Duke President Richard Broadhead emphasizes the presumption of innocence in criminal law. Travels in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have exposed me to chilling stories about presuming guilt.

At an April reunion, I found the campus buzzing with controversy. Some students conveyed deep personal pain about race and gender issues. At their national tournament in May, Duke women lacrosse players wore wristbands and headbands supporting the men's team.

Broadhead commissioned an ongoing Campus Culture Initiative emphasizing responsibility and respect. In my view, he's handled a difficult situation with exceptional grace, dignity, and transparency.

What ethical lessons might come from this episode? Of course, if rape occurred, punishment should ensue.

But setting aside the rape allegations, what about the ethics of hiring a stripper? What principles should determine how we

act in life?

When I was an undergraduate, a friend from the fraternity next door excitedly told me the dean had just given his fraternity permission to host a topless dancer at their Saturday night party in university housing.

Fast forward to 2006. On one television program, a woman argued that her own stripping had paid her college bills, and besides, it allowed her to exercise power over men.

Suppose you were a Duke student. Should you host or attend such a party? Hiring a stripper broke no laws. Both the players and the young woman could claim benefit. What's the harm?

A pragmatist might maintain, "In retrospect, it was more trouble than it was worth." A libertarian might assert, "Stripping's OK, if no one gets hurt." Some absolutists might say, "No. Never." Feminists could argue either side. Stripping exploits women as sex objects, a negative cultural influence. Yet a woman needs to earn a living.

Duke ethicist Elizabeth Kiss, soon to become Agnes Scott College president, recommends a starting point for answering the classic question, "How should I act?" She notes that the "Golden Rule" appears in various forms in different faith traditions.

Good point. Jesus said, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you."

The Jewish Talmud says, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Muhammad said, "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself."

On Duke's main quadrangle sits a plaque containing the first article of the university's bylaws. The statement promotes

truth, scholarship, freedom, tolerance, and service. It begins as follows:

“The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God….”

Hmmm. An ethical guideline worth considering?

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