

Editorial

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This issue of the *Journal* completes my second year as Editor in Chief. I am satisfied with the increased size of each issue and even more pleased that the quality of articles continues to match their heft. Anyone in a position such as mine should rejoice at such a trend. And I do. This issue spans such topics as spirituality and health issues having to do with HIV, spiritual crises in cardiac disease, the plight of families asking ultimate questions regarding children with cystic fibrosis, diabetes education in church communities, and a fascinating, if perhaps controversial, essay focusing upon the scope of the ways in which health issues are dealt with for those who practice Christian Science.

I have found myself thinking about what I have learned during these past two years regarding what I call the writing life, a life committed to a belief that words and ideas matter. During these past two years that belief has only been enhanced and enriched through my role as an editor. I occupied a similar position earlier in my career as a managing editor of a theological journal and have assisted numbers of colleagues over the years with copy editing and reviewing their work destined for publication. Together these activities constitute my apprenticeship for this position. The last two years have sharpened my awareness of the need for humility and clarity of thought as I became “referee in chief” who decides who reviews what article and what manuscripts are finally selected for print and online editions of the *Journal*.

These efforts have caused me to think back to lessons learned earlier on in my professional education in pastoral care and counseling training. I was at that time laboring to fulfill my initial career objective which was to become a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital and to employ that setting as a laboratory for learning, a base for clinical teaching and eventual writing for publication. In that period I read a good deal of the work of the American psychiatrist of the first half of the twentieth century Harry Stack Sullivan. Sullivan was a “hard read” in that much of what he said and taught about his interpersonal theory of psychiatry was based on terminology that he seems to have borrowed or more or less invented himself. His colleagues and students wrote much of it down and prepared it in an organized fashion for publication after his early and untimely death in 1949. My

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exposure to Sullivan made me think long and hard about his view that psychotherapy was “clarification” based on the art and science of “participant observation.” “Participant observation,” as I understood its meaning then and now, has to do with engaging at a depth level with a counselee or client so as to enter into their inner world to perceive relationships, strengths, and conflicts in a larger context and within a social and relational matrix. This dual focus requires a sympathetic identification with a patient in conjunction with a simultaneous detachment and objectivity maintained so as to not get swept up in the drama of any life narrative. I learned also that Sullivan developed his understanding of participant observation out of a dialog with anthropologist colleagues who saw this dual perspective as the instrument of choice for living with and understanding another culture, tribe, or society.

Authors, and here I include researchers, constitute a tribe of their own populated by idiosyncratic, curious individuals unified in vocation even if separated by geography, chronological age, social class, and gender. They spend considerable time and effort selecting a suitable topic, gathering material in research efforts that seem to best fit an overall objective, and testing these gestational efforts through knowledge, intuition, questions, images, and hypotheses. I recall, in this regard, the story told about the American humorist and essayist James Thurber who wrote for years for *The New Yorker* among other publications. His wife would accompany him to parties and would spy him standing at a bit of a distance from the throng or engaging in quizzical conversations with a guest with a certain look, an authorial gaze, on his face she knew well. His wife would then get him aside and say, “James, stop writing.” Ruefully, he would see her wisdom and relent if only for the time being. This is but one example of how serious writing receives its initial inspiration.

Thurber’s example is instructive. We all gather material wherever and whenever we can. The writing life requires scavenging from all we see, all we participate in, and all we observe whether in the clinic, in our reading, on the web, or in conversation with peers and mentors if we are fortunate enough to have them. Blind alleys may abound. Gaps and frustrations are intrinsic to the refinement of any material as it emerges into a discernible shape and order. The raw data of experience must then be carefully recorded and written up in a comprehensible form. This material is then revised, chewed over, and discussed so that the raw material may become whole. The finished product now can bask in the authorial light of day. The formal writing of the article, book, or paper is then submitted to an editor or other relatively anonymous authority. This may take maddeningly longer than one would hope or expect. When the computer button to submit is finally pushed and the article is sent on its electronic way, it all feels a little like sending a child off to college. You have done the best job possible and you anticipate positive results knowing that worrying about your progeny is not yet over.

I go on at length here because these thoughts reflect my now more intimate understanding of this process of creation and its necessary refinements as I have come to understand it. I believe it is a process common to the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. The boundaries between them seem to me to be less rigid and more fluid than ever. Creative imagination, solid thinking, and clear exposition are necessary components common to all these pursuits. I have come to believe this more fully as my pathways of editorial decision making have become clearer. As a member of the writer’s tribe I am a participant. Yet as an editor I must play the role of observer who judges, wills, and decides. I should add that I am fortunate to have able reviewers and editorial board members to assist me, keep me grounded, and assist me in maintaining my balance.

Participant observation cuts both ways for writers and editors. When I or anyone writes, we also edit and vice versa. If we are any good at it our empathic capacities increase and our judgment becomes gradually clearer, stronger, and more flexible. Writers and editors hold this dual perspective in common. They are reciprocal callings.

So here's to both these tribes, authors and editors. May they prosper in the year ahead.