

The Passing of a Consummate Newspaperman

My father was a storyteller. One of his stories was about his first job after college. He was hired by the old New York Daily Mirror. My grandfather had driven him to the interview and Dad was told that he could start “immediately.” Who would turn down that opportunity during economic hard times? Grandpa Leo was a serious man, usually seen wearing his 3-piece brown tweed suit, and did not like being left outside in the car while his young son, Herbert, started his first job. “I was afraid of the people who ran the newspaper, and I was afraid of my father.”

My dad was assigned the race track beat. “So exciting and interesting was writing stories about the track, that I was sure I would sooner or later become a tout.” My father moved on to other things, and “besides, newspapers paid so little money in those days.”

I was always imbued with the importance of newspapers, writing, and what it meant to be a good reporter. “Always respect reporters; newspapers stand between tyranny and freedom in a democracy.” As the years have slid by, I have come to appreciate my father’s words of wisdom.

My first law job was working for the great Henry Rothblatt in New York City. Rothblatt loved the newspapers and advised, “Don’t see them as intrusive or your enemies, but rather as your friend; they want to know the news and you may have it.” Henry taught always treat the newspapermen with respect, give them the correct information, and return their calls or see them promptly. More good advice from a man whose book series with Lee Bailey made him an icon in the criminal law field.

One of my favorite newspapermen was of course the venerable team of Woodward and Bernstein, who “broke” the Watergate case. At that time, I was working for Henry Rothblatt in Washington, DC, carrying his briefcase, while he prepared for trial and jury selection. The buzz in the newspaper world was that the four Miami men represented by Rothblatt were going to plead guilty because they were being paid “hush money.” CREEP, the Campaign to Reelect the President, was concerned that if the four men testified, they would reveal that they were paid by higher-ups to perform the “plumbers job” at the Watergate. There was no way that Henry Rothblatt was going to permit any client of his to be silenced with money.

One day, Carl Bernstein cornered me in the hallway of the federal building in DC and asked me if the Newsday stories about “hush money” were true. I explained to him my job with Rothblatt and that I did not really know. He proceeded to say, “Oh, come on. I see you every day by Henry Rothblatt’s side; he seems to have confidence in you and I understand you work for him in New York City. I am sure you know.” In spite of my protests that I knew nothing, the eager young newspaperman persisted, “Look, Cliff, if you refuse to say anything, I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’” At that, I almost jumped out of my skin.

The rest is history. Henry Rothblatt refused to be an attorney who would plead his clients guilty in order to aid a cover-up. He resigned from the case, and the rest of the legal profession proceeded to besmirch itself. I moved on to Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Judge Muir was a different kind of guy. He was not crazy about publicity, although he knew that I enjoyed talking to reporters. "You can't be a publicity hound in this job," Muir admonished. Of course he was correct, and my typical reply to reporters when they called was "It's on the docket."

As a lawyer who has been very involved in the public realm over the years, I have run into many newspapermen, including R.A. Walker. Rick not only talked, walked and spoke like a newspaperman, he even looked like one. Rick's method of questioning was slow, deliberate and detailed. He knew his facts before he asked the questions. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette reporter did not waste a lot of time with introductions, did not argue, and was there "just for the facts ma'am."

Perhaps the most frequent dealings I had with Rick Walker were over the Kohl's project. There were many rumors in the public. As with any large downtown redevelopment project, there were differing opinions and a healthy clash of political egos. Navigation through all of the personalities was doubtless difficult. Rick did not ever hesitate to call me, and I did not hesitate to give it to him straight. Rick understood that if something was in negotiation or confidential from an attorney-client point of view, I simply could not discuss it with him. Thanks to Rick's experience and integrity, he knew when I could give him information and he understood the limits.

For young people coming up the ranks, Rick Walker would be an excellent example to model oneself by. All one has to do today is read a well-known paper like The New York Times to appreciate that a news article, an op-ed, and a "news analysis" are very little different. That is not the way it always was. From the time of the founding of the Republic, when newspapers were propaganda sheets for the candidates, we have evolved to the point where the news was news, and opinions were strictly kept to the opinion page. That barrier has begun to break down, and we can see throughout the media a return to the early days of journalism when it is very difficult to distinguish between a news story and "push" opinion writing. Newspaper people, after all, have their own politics and point of view. To be a professional like Rick Walker means excluding one's own point of view and having a very disciplined approach to the news and the interviewee. We need to encourage that demarcation between facts and opinion. We need to look at examples like Rick Walker, who followed the story where it led him without malice or lucre.

Those of us who deal with newspapers on a regular basis will miss Rick Walker, and we hope that his memory will serve as a positive example to other aspiring young newspaper reporters. My father would be proud to know that I have recognized the accomplishments of Rick Walker.

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