Questions to Ask About a Career and a Calling

A Report on the International Dialogue
for Thought Leaders in Journalism
2008-2011

> When we slow down to reflect, we give the mind an opening to pause, to breathe, to consider the layers of accumulated experience. We naturally sort through these things as we drive or walk in the evening, but it is sometimes helpful to offer the mind a bigger space, a stretch of time, a period of silence explicitly for reflection.[1]
>
> –Gayatri Naraine and Judy Rodgers

> Every reporter with a brain—which is a subset of the profession and by no means the majority—knows that writing is seventy-five per cent thinking fifteen percent typing, and ten percent caffeine.[2]
>
> –Molly Ivins

> We fell in love with one another right away. It was a sign that something was happening.[3]
>
> -Eric Le Reste

By Jon Funabiki

In troubling times, the journalist's most-trusted tool for covering a crisis is the question. What happened? How did it get this way? How can it be fixed? But what happens when the journalists themselves are the troubled, the ones reeling from rapid change, knocked loose from their professional moorings or sucker-punched by unexpected personal crises? Who steps in on their behalf to pose the wise questions and to offer a way forward?

One group of journalists participating in a rare experiment has discovered that it's still up to them. But the discovery required a dramatic turnabout in practice. They couldn't grill the usual suspects—the politician in Congress, the military general on the battlefield, the cop at the crime scene or the family whose house has just burned down. Instead, the questions had to be directed inward and to one another. Most significantly, the thrust of the question

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[1] From "The Role of Reflection in the Thought Leaders Dialogue," Images & Voices of Hope website.

[2] "Red Hot Patriot: The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins," a one-woman play based on the writings of journalist Molly Ivins, by Margaret Engel and Allison Engel, 2009.

[3] Remarks, IVOH Dialogue, 2011.

changed and the "I" lurched to the foreground: Why am I troubled? What do I believe in? What are my choices? What does my heart tell me to do? When the group of 34 prominent journalists, filmmakers and other accomplished media professionals[4] did this, the results were dramatic. "Life changing," said one. "Transforming," echoed another. The process, they said, helped them to clarify their core values, to cope with daunting workplace problems and to muster the courage needed to tackle new professional challenges and personal demons. For many of the participants, this space for personal reflection allowed them to realign what they do with what they believe. This was not business as usual for these professionals, whose jobs most often require that they observe rather than participate and that they blanket over their personal passions and opinions, all the while sprinting from one deadline to the next. To achieve this breakthrough they needed the one luxury they seldom get—time. This was the magic that took place during the International Dialogue for Thought Leaders in Journalism, which was convened by Images & Voices of Hope (IVOH) in partnership with the Fetzer Institute.

Why does this matter? IVOH[5] was founded in 1999 with the belief that the people who create media not only chronicle the world's events, they shape them. This applies equally to the poet, the artist, the musician and the journalist. Society is influenced in some way by every decision made by journalists, from what story they choose to expose, to how they decide to write, film or tweet it. Moreover, the daily grind of the journalistic process leaves little time to think back, much less forwards, and the shift to the digital cycle exacerbates this problem. IVOH's mission is to help journalists and other media professionals to clarify their personal missions, to expand awareness of the ways that their work impacts societies, and to prod the best in the business to do their best. It has done this largely through more than 50 dialogues, usually a day or so in length, held in local communities in North America, South America, Central America, Asia, Africa and Europe. "The media does not put much emphasis on reflection," said Judy Rogers, founder and executive director of IVOH. "The people who generate the important stories of the world need a place to check inside. The inside is not necessarily a nice place. It can be filled

[4] As used in this paper, the term "participants" includes all "thought leaders"—both the invited professionals and the project planners/facilitators, who themselves are leading practitioners and educators in journalism, film and other forms of nonfiction media. In some cases, a journalist who attended a dialogue would be asked to serve on the planning team or as facilitator in an ensuing year. A typical gathering included 20 or 22 participants, with five to seven serving in a planner or facilitator role. There were a total of 34 participants over the course of the four years of dialogues. In addition, Gayatri Naraine, the Brahma Kumaris' representative to the United Nations, served as spiritual adviser.

[5] The organization's website is www.ivoh.org.

with anger and fear. When people talk about the spiritual life, they often talk about cultivation: you have to cultivate that space."[6]

The goal of the IVOH Dialogues was to take this idea to the next stage: The organization hoped to groom a "cohort of thoughtful, courageous leaders" who would "begin to move the influential field of journalism towards a constructive approach to meaning-making in the world."[7] The idea was simple: What might happen if IVOH brought together, over a period of time, a group of top media professionals to talk about what they do, why they do it, and what they hope to do going forward. No pre-conditions or expectations were placed on the participants.

The process starts with a circle. A circle enables all the participants to be equal, to listen and to watch each other and to contribute and take in as much as they wish. Unlike many other journalism conferences that offer training in practical skills or briefings on story topics, the IVOH process included facilitated dialogues, journaling, meditation and even sing-a-longs, all part of a careful attempt to maintain the spirit of reflection, openness and sharing. These elements, dubbed the "DNA" of the dialogues, reflect the influence of IVOH's original founding partners: Strength-based dialogue practices of the Institute for Advances in Appreciative Inquiry at Case Western Reserve University; reflection and self-awareness practices of the Brahma Kumaris spiritual group; and the Visions of a Better World Foundation's belief that all individuals have the capacity to construct a better world. The planning team included individuals connected to the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, so the dialogues also borrowed from the intense discussion, social interaction and one-on-one conversation practices espoused by that organization.

The group met annually for four years (three times at the Fetzer Intitute's Seasons convening center and once at DePauw University's Janet Pringle Institute for Ethics). Much of the core group remained intact, though new participants were added when scheduling conflicts made it impossible for some to attend. Most of the participants were seasoned veterans with many years of experience. At the midpoint of the project, IVOH made an effort to invite a few younger participants. The continuity of the dialogues and the generosity of the participants combined to create a sense of community and intimacy. On the first day of the final IVOH Dialogue, participant Connie Schultz of the Plain

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[6] Remarks, IVOH Dialogue, July 28, 2011

[7] From IVOH's proposal to the Fetzer Institute.

Dealer likened the gathering to a family reunion. "This year, I walked into this room, and I was home."

The first circle gathered in 2008. IVOH dialogue brought together 22 participants from the U.S. and abroad. Each member of this first group (and of each succeeding group) was highly accomplished and respected in his/her fields. They included journalists and filmmakers who have broken important investigative stories, covered wars, produced acclaimed films, founded news outlets to serve voiceless communities, created innovative organizations and won their profession's most celebrated honors— the Pulitzer Prize, the Emmy, the Peabody and so on. Some had survived personal tragedy or crisis—fleeing Vietnam as a refugee, being the target of an assassination attempt or getting caught in a bruising conflict with an employer. As the participants would discover through discussion and the sharing of personal experiences, the timing was propitious. As individuals, as a group and as proxies for their professional colleagues, these participants came to recognize that they all were coping, if not struggling, with three huge forces. First, the magnitude and complexity of the crises and problems that journalists were dealing with—from natural disasters and climate change to political battles and wars—seemed to be growing exponentially. Second, rapid and dramatic changes in technology and business had upended the business model for journalism, threatening the future of legacy news outlets and the jobs of their staff member. Third, the journalists, mostly veterans with decades of experience and a variety of battle scars, were experiencing great changes in their personal lives. Some hinted of burn-out, while others seemed poised for growth and change. These three forces—volatility in history, in journalism and in the participants' personal lives —formed a "perfect storm" that battered the journalists.[8] The tone of the discussions sometimes bordered on despair. They joked about the appearance of a vulture atop that could be seen through the glass skylight of the Seasons center. These forces did not ebb during the ensuing three years of the dialogues. The world would experience disasters in Haiti and Japan, the Arab Spring and the global economic meltdown; journalism saw the rise of the tweet and the shrinking of more news organizations; and IVOH participants experienced job changes, layoffs, family grief and cancer. But they took on ambitious journalistic assignments, often crediting their dialogue friends for giving them the courage and confidence to do so. One of the youngest participants, a woman from Puerto Rico, married and shared photos from her wedding during the final gathering. "The dialogue was a safe harbor in a very storm time in our profession—journalism—and in our lives—such as dealing with aging family members," commented one participant.

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[8] See "What Am I For?" by Jon Funabiki, an account of the 2008 dialogue. This report offers a bookend.

Question: What do you believe in?

A plan for provoking conversation was created for each gathering, covering such topics as personal mission, courage, inspiration and a "sense of place." These helped to trigger many insights. In the beginning, the journalists were most comfortable discussing the stories that they had covered—their exploits—such as the genocide in Rwanda, questionable strip searches of women of color at O'Hare International Airport, child labor abuses in Pakistan or the plight of a man falsely convicted of rape. Then, sometimes unexpectedly, a participant might open up with a matter closer to the heart, perhaps a life-changing experience, a particularly bruising newsroom argument or a family crisis. Instinctively, the circle would draw tighter.

A writing assignment launched in the second year pushed the participants to articulate a particular journalistic value that had special meaning to them. The format is loosely based on the popular "This I Believe" series of commentaries. In writing about the ideals that they hold most dear, the journalists revealed a lot about what has driven them to be the accomplished professionals that they are—and at what cost.

- Roberta Baskin, a distinguished former investigative television reporter and now director of media communications for the Office of the Inspector General for Health and Human Services, chose to talk about the value of **tenacity**. Tenacity enabled her to walk past guards with shotguns to show how factories in Pakistan abused child laborers, and tenacity helped her to expose how a chain of dental clinics subjected impoverished children to unnecessary baby root canals in order to collect fraudulent Medicaid reimbursements. "Tenacity is sometimes maddening," she wrote. "It can ignore reason and common sense. It can make you unpopular."

- Ryland Fisher, a veteran journalist and community leader in Cape Town, South Africa, talked about his struggle to balance journalistic ethics with his political and personal values. During the apartheid years, he worked for a community newspaper that unabashedly supported the campaign led by the African National Congress to abolish apartheid. Now that democracy is in place, and the ANC is in power, he sometimes finds himself in disagreement with the ANC and its leaders, forcing him to take a more critical stance as a journalist. Fisher was writing about the value of **independence**. "With hindsight, I have no regrets about being 'embedded' during the struggle years," he wrote. "Now I value my

independence more and, if I follow my values, I am confident it will make me a stronger and better journalist."

- Maud Beelman, a former war correspondent and now a deputy managing editor at the Dallas Morning News, described an early professional experience when she was covering a college football game. In order to match the post-game angles that all her male competitors were getting in the athletes' locker room, she barged in, breaking the gender barrier. In reaction, the team ousted all of the reporters. Instead of supporting her, all the male sports reporters labeled her a troublemaker. Beelman was writing about the value of **courage**. "It was the first time, I think, I fully understood that having the courage of your convictions comes with consequences."

- Connie Schultz, a Pulitzer-prize winning columnist for the Plain Dealer in Cleveland, revealed how her father toiled for 36 years at a grimy factory job, which he hated, in order that she could go to college. This explains in part why she is attracted to the conditions of working class people and the poor and why she will go to bat for a group of waitresses whose boss was stealing their tips. "It is a privilege to advocate for people who are entitled to the same rights as those who exploit them," she wrote. "It is an honor to tell the stories of regular people leading heroic lives of struggle and hard work. Schultz was explaining her love for the value of **journalism**. Period.

- Bob Steele, a professor of journalism and director of the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University, wrote about the value of **questions**, which is what he does often as one of the nation's leading ethicists in journalism. Steele, who uses the "This I Believe" process to teach ethics, says that journalists need to hold themselves accountable for every decision and action that they take—asking themselves, for example, will someone be needlessly harmed by the way I have reported a story? "Good questions can challenge our minds, open our eyes and even touch our hearts," he wrote. "No question about it."[9]

- Vu Thanh Thuy, described how she and her family escaped from Vietnam in 1965 by boat, only to be captured by sea pirates. Praying for rescue, Vu vowe that if she survived, she would make something of her life. Ultimately, she and her family were rescued by the crew of a passing ship. After a difficult time resettling in the United States, Vu co-founded with her husband Radio Saigon Houston, and it has emerged as an

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[9] Steele's essay provided the inspiration for the beginning of this report.

important voice for the Vietnamese American community in Texas. She is also a philanthropist. She was writing about the value of **belief**. "I believe in dreams, in hopes and in people."

The remaining contributors focused on the values of shared experiences, relevance, character, role models, bearing witness, doubt, truth-telling, spirituality, duty, faith, hope, ethics, happiness, voice, community, money (on discovering new ways to to sustain journalism) and "the work" (referring to the drive to promote diversity within journalism). The 23-set collection, called "Voices and Values of Journalism," is available on IVOH's website and used by some participants for teaching. It has become one way for the group to push out their thoughts beyond the circle.

Question: What keeps you awake at night?

Taken together, the essays give testimony to the deep sense of public service or purpose that motivates the best journalists. It explains why so many in the profession think of journalism both as a career and a calling. The essays also reveal the many ways in which these journalists see a direct connection between their personal lives and experiences and the work they do. This tight fusion also can be the source of tension for journalists. Because their strong values and personal experiences are so intertwined, journalists are passionate about their work. When attacked or denied the ability to cover a story, their instinct is to push back—even if it means (as seen in the football locker story) incurring the wrath of their own colleagues or own community. In today's politically charged environment, journalists are frequently attacked for being biased or of having a hidden agenda. As alluded to earlier, the canons of modern journalism call on journalists to be objective and impartial in order to maintain their credibility. And yet, they do have feelings, opinions and a sense of purpose.

From dialogue to dialogue, many of the participants revealed the problems—personal and professional—that weighed heavily on their lives. Oftentimes, these were the same kinds of problems that people in other professions must face— a health crisis affecting them or a close family member; economic survival following the loss of employment; or conflict with a boss or underling. One woman was diagnosed with cancer shortly after attending her first IVOH Dialogue. Following treatment, she returned the next year to the hugs of her fellow participants.

But the participants also wrestled with other kinds of dilemmas, often philosophical and lingering, that were more unique to journalism. Following one period of meditation, Michael Skoler, a former foreign affairs

correspondent, told a moving anecdote about how he wanted watch over an orphaned girl whom he discovered in a refugee camp in Rwanda in 1994. He feared that she would die with no one to watch out for her. But Skoler couldn't stay because of his work. He described it as a conflict between two values: "love" and "truth." (Three or four weeks after he finished his assignment, he returned to the refugee camp to do volunteer work, but could not find the girl.) "In this morning's reflection, I thought about how we've often been called on in our profession to forget the love side in order to seek the truth," said Skoler, who is now vice president of Interactive at Public Radio International. "We often find that to find the truth, we have to be detached."

Skoler's story prompted David B. Green, an editor at Haaretz newspaper in Jerusalem, to describe a similar conflict that gnaws on him daily. He moved from the United States to Jerusalem because of his support for Israel, and one of his functions is to edit opinion articles submitted by others. Noting that all issues related to Israel, the Middle East, Jews and Palestinians are highly politically charged, he said that some submissions are offensive and not based on facts. "I always want to hear another point of view, and I want to be even-handed," he said. "But it's exasperating, because I don't know where to bring in my judgment. I can't just say, 'What you're doing is wrong.' Where do I say, 'I don't want to publish your opinion because your opinion is offensive to me and should be offensive to all people?'" Green described the conflict as the ultimate balancing of "love, compassion and empathy with the desire for truth, justice and outrage."

Maud Beelman talked about the strains caused when you cover difficult stories within your own hometown. During the period of the IVOH Dialogue, she and her team worked on a particularly sensitive investigative story into patient safety at a local hospital. "The people who I'm accusing of criminal acts are in my world, or even in the bosses' office," she said. "The way I serve our community, in some people's eyes, is by tearing it down, which of course is not how I see it. So it's just this epiphany that I'm just now having."

Former reporter Margaret Engel, now director of the Alicia Patterson Journalism Foundation, decried—with her own confession—the news media's tendency to drop an important issue once the story is published. As a reporter at the Des Moines Register, she helped produce a exposé about how people with mental disabilities were being put to work in poultry factories and paid only a paltry sum. The newspaper played the story on Page 1, but then never returned to it. The practice continues. "Nobody had done anything about it, including my newspaper," she said. "I've always felt tragically responsible."

Darren Gersh, the Washington DC Bureau Chief for the Nightly Business Report, echoed Engels' complaint about the constraints of journalism. He was moved to speak after viewing an interview with the late New York Times photographer Dith Pran, which was videotaped before his death in 2008 from an illness. Pran, who survived the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and was the inspiration for the feature film "The Killing Fields," had dedicated his life to educating the public about the genocide so that it might not happen again. The video was shown to prompt the journalists to explore the concept of personal mission. Gersh praised Pran for taking on a cause "for the rest of your life," and then he wondered whether he should do the same. "Journalists are episodic," he said. "I think that I'm at the time in my life that (this) is becoming increasingly frustrating. Beyond reporting, there's not an intention. I guess I'm struggling—should journalists have a cause that you identify with? Is having a cause and a long-term intention different than practicing traditional journalism?"

The comments above reflect some recurring themes that emerged during the four years of conversations. One important one, alluded to earlier: Can journalists have a mission—or is that advocacy? Dejan Anastasijevic, the Belgrade-based reporter for VREME weekly who was targeted for assassination by hand grenades, took a bright-line stance: "Just tell people what is wrong. Nobody likes preaching." On the other side was investigative reporter Renee Ferguson of NBC5 News in Chicago. "I will tell you unabashedly that I am an advocate for people who can't speak, who are poor or who can't get through any other way," she said. Ryland Fisher, the South African, said he is opposed to racism, sexism and other 'isms. "It would be nice to believe in objectivity, but you can't be objective," he said. "Rather, you can be fair." Roberta Baskin, the former investigative reporter, noted that she was fired from one job because she was considered an advocate. "I've always felt I was righting wrongs when I do a story," she said. "I was always looking at corporate wrongdoing, and I would do things as a journalist that some might think inappropriate, like talking to congressional types who are having hearings or connecting somebody to pro-bono legal help."

Following the 2008 IVOH Dialogue, both Ferguson and Baskin were laid off from their television stations, casualties of the recession and restructuring that all news media industries were experiencing. Baskin's experience was particularly cruel: she collected a prestigious journalism award on the same day she received her pink slip. Another award-winning journalist arrived at an IVOH Dialogue with $11 in his wallet because all of his professional gigs had suddenly vanished into the recession. Joyce Delhi, vice president for news at Lee Enterprises, expressed the fears of many journalists who worry about the future of the news industry in a market economy. "Without being disparaging, I don't think that we can count on the marketplace," she said. Some worried

whether professional journalism would survive the collision with the untrained "citizens' journalists" who were running with blogs, tweets and other forms of social media. Others—such as Michael Skoler at Public Radio International, Patrice Barat at Paris-based madmundo.tv, Georgia Popplewell at Global Voices and journalist/consultant Michele McLellan—championed these new tools as ways to strengthen journalism.

A related recurring question was whether it was time for some journalists to "move on." Some expressed disenchantment with the directions in which journalism was headed because of shrinking newsrooms, declining standards or the public's sagging interest in serious reporting. Fred de Sam Lazaro, director of the Project for Under-Told Stories at St. John's University, said that journalists are sometimes forced to skirt important stories: "Today, journalism's pivotal concern seems to have shifted from relevance to tolerance. What will viewing audiences bear?" In other cases, it was because the individual sought new kinds of creative challenges or a way to express something that can't be accomplished through journalism. Margaret Engel, for example, co-authored a play: "Red Hot Patriot: The Kick-Ass Wit of Molly Ivins," based on the life of the sharp-tongued newspaper columnist, who passed away in 2007. To the delight of the group, she performed a reading of the script at one of the sessions. Joyce Delhi, the executive who confronted cancer, said she was terrified by the experience she went through, and it forced her to confront the uncertainty of life. During the time she received treatments, Delhi spent many hours sitting quietly at home in a favorite chair. She now wants to chuck her 12-hour workdays so that she can have the time to tell her story in hopes that others might find it helpful. "I want to move from my strategic job in journalism to be a storyteller," she explained. "I want to, I need to, write it out myself. It seems narcissistic. I really want a voice that expresses something within me."

Delhi's story spoke to another recurring theme of the IVOH Dialogue: spirituality, humanity and the desire to strike a better balance between the demands of the newsroom, which often seem cold as steel, with the individual's desire to feel a sense of connection and intimacy. Some confessed that journalism allowed them to mask their true feelings and escape "duty." Others described journalists as "nomads." Raul Ramirez, executive director for news and public affairs at KQED Public Radio in San Francisco, said this realization compelled him to start knocking on doors to get to know his neighbors. A surprising discovery: "the not very nice man" across the street actually admired Ramirez for being in the radio profession, but had been too shy to wave hello. The neighbor came over to fix Ramirez' front door after it was kicked in during a burglary. "I realized how much prejudice and assumptions there had been about the neighbors," Ramirez confessed.

A compelling lesson about spirituality came from Siok Sian Pek-Dorji, the director of Bhutan's Center for Media and Democracy. Bhutan is a small South Asian nation where democratic practices, television and western culture have only recently taken root. Siok Sian was struck by the cultural differences between Bhutan and Singapore, where she used to be an investigative journalist. Most Bhutanese are Buddhist and believe in the concept of the Bodhisattva, an enlightened being whose duty is to contribute to society. The concept is so ingrained in society that the king of Bhutan declared that the nation's economic goal should be to achieve "gross national happiness"—an economy based on Buddhist spiritual values. "It's like the compass in life," explained Siok Sian. "So that is a very strong value and a very strong value system that I think made a lot of sense to me and personally influenced me a lot."

Eric Le Reste, senior producer for Canadian Public Television's daily show Le Téléjournal, introduced the metaphor of "braiding" to describe how to intertwine the personal and the professional. An advocate of meditation and active with the Brahma Kumaris, he became known for his use of the hug as a management tool. It came from a story he told about the trouble he had with an employee under his supervision. Their strained relationship culminated in a terrific argument. At that point, Le Reste walked over and gave the employee a huge, long hug, which led both of them to start crying. "Sometimes you have to 'love' your colleagues," said Le Reste. "My work may be professional, but it is spiritual as well."

A number of participants noted that the IVOH Dialogues were unique because of the emphasis on personal reflection and issues of spirituality and values. "Values, spirituality and reflection are never a part of the journalism conferences or convenings that I've attended," said Dan Grech, radio news director of WLRN Miami Herald News.

Question: Does It Matter?

The participants' comments quoted in this paper, which were harvested at different points during the four annual IVOH Dialogues, illustrate the depth and breadth of the issues discussed during the gatherings. Some of the issues might rear up in any profession, others have a particular twist due to the mission of journalism. Annette Sofía Ruiz Morales, assistant director of the Center for the Freedom of the Press in Puerto Rico, said the journalist's power to transmit news makes them different. "That's the difference from other professions, like being an accountant or a doctor," said Morales, a former community reporter. "The power of words and images can change the whole world. That's the reason many journalists are killed. How many doctors and

accountants are killed?" The IVOH Dialogues also showed that the participants had a number of issues in common and that when given the opportunity, they were eager to talk about them. But did talking make a difference? Resoundingly, the participants say yes. By their own accounting, the impact can be counted in three ways: they gained new insights and sources of support, they learned new skills and coping strategies and they mustered the courage to tackle bold ventures.

Insights and Support

In comments and through questionnaires, the participants said that entering the circle created a "safe space" and support network that helped them to clarify their own goals and analyze problems. The emphasis on reflection was unique.

Michelle McLellan noted that the IVOH Dialogues came as journalism and "many sources of stability" were rocked with change. "This was particularly true in journalism—as the traditional news industry was forced to downsize and accept that it was no longer the lone pillar of authority that it had been. I was able to observe how my colleagues in thought Leaders dealt with their grief over this… Discussion with those Thought Leaders helped me articulate and prioritize my mission of helping new news organizations sprout and grow."

"This is a nurturing space," said Roberta Baskin. "I appreciate this group because it helps me navigate this inner place. I am a very slow learner."

Annette Sofía Ruiz Morales said she had learned from journalists who have more experience than she has and that she had benefited from the networking. After being invited to one of the IVOH Dialogues, she met Dean Miller, who invited her to a workshop at the Center for News Literacy. This experience helped her get her new job with Puerto Rico's Center for Freedom of the Press, where she develops news literacy programs.

Eric Le Reste credited the discussions for helping him come up with a fresh approach to how to handle his station's news coverage of the 10th anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC. He said that while other stations might focus on the death and destruction that occurred 10 years ago, he wanted to send a different message. His plan was to have the program start with an image of the shadow of an airplane with light glowing in the picture and the words "10 years later" and "where is hope?" Le Reste said that the discussions encouraged him to present that kind of an idea. "I suggested that it be about 'hope,'" he said. "Let's create hope."

“We talk about the important things in the media industry—not sales or readership or viewership—but how do we report in a way that will enhance the lives of others who do not have access to the media,” said Ryland Fisher of South Africa. “Some of the discussions we have had have really forced us to dig deep inside ourselves.”

Skills and Strategies

Participants said that the dialogues helped them to improve their skills in leadership and facilitation and to develop strategies for addressing sticky problems.

Dan Grech, a quick apostle of Eric Le Reste’s “hug” philosophy of management, credited the discussions with influencing the stories he covers and the way he treats his staff members. “It has given me an incredibly clear sense of personal mission and core values, which has a huge impact on my personal and professional life.” Grech was inspired to organize similar discussions among journalists in his home town.

Siok Sian Pek-Dorji planned to use the values essay-writing exercise and some of the thought-provoking questions utilized during the dialogues in her own work at the director of Bhutan’s Center for Media and Democracy, where she helps train a new generation of media professionals. “We can do this in Bhutan,” she said. “Without this, we will fall into the pit of following old practices and methods.” Another example of the networking power of the program came when Pek-Dorji invited Sanjeev Chatterjee, a filmmaker and executive director of the Knight Center for International Media at the University of Miami, to Bhutan to address a group of journalists at a seminar she organized.

“The trust and skills we develop here helps me when I’m alone at night and I have to make an ethical decision,” said Maud Beelman. “These aren’t skills I get to develop elsewhere.”

New Ventures

In the most tangible outcomes, several participants credited the emotional and moral support that they received from their colleagues for giving them the "courage" to complete ambitious projects. One was Maud Beelman, whose investigative reporting team at the Dallas Morning News published "First, Do No Harm," a probe into patient safety and medical training at a local hospital. In one case, a former employee of the hospital had a leg amputated after a resident botched her knee replacement surgery. "My involvement in this group has emboldened me and strengthened me to continue to do this kind of work, which I might not have stuck with," she said. Another example came from Connie Schultz, who made her first trip to Vietnam to report on how the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War has resulted in horrific health problem, birth defects and environmental hazards. She faced many roadblocks along the way and sought advice from other participants. In 2011, she was happy to bring to the final gathering copies of the eight-page special section, "Unfinished Business," that was published by the Plain Dealer. "I went to Vietnam scared out of my mind," said Schultz. "I didn't want to come to this group and say that I had quit." But that's not all: a publisher has asked her to stretch even further by tackling her first novel.

Ryland Fisher used the final session of the IVOH Dialogues to help him sort out the pros and cons of a new job offer that presented him with a particularly troubling dilemma. With his friends seated around the circle, he explained that the owner of a fledgling newspaper in Johannesburg had just offered him an attractive job offer as top editor. For some, the process evoked comparisons to the Quaker practice called the "clearness committee," which Parker J. Palmer described as "a process in which the group refrains from giving you advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own inner truth."[10]

Fisher explained that the job, though demanding, would offer financial security and great stature. But it would mean moving his family from Cape Town and giving up a successful cultural project that he had created—the Cape Town Festival, "One City Many Voices." He described other issues that were pertinent, but meant to be kept confidential to the circle of friends. In a slow, somber voice, Fisher called it a choice between "head and heart." The other dialogue participants asked Fisher questions about how he was weighing different aspects of the dilemma—the impact on family, the differences between the two

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[10]"Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation," Parker J. Palmer, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2000.

cities, the demands on his personal energy and so on. No one told Fisher what to do. They just asked questions. Many questions.

As the final IVOH Dialogue came to a close, Fisher promised to keep his colleagues apprised. A few days later, he announced in a Facebook message to the group that he had accepted the Johannesburg job. "Hope to see you all sooner, than later," he messaged.

One Last Question: What's next?

By the end of the three-year experiment, most of the 34 participants—and certainly all of those who returned for more than one gathering—proclaimed that the experience had positively, and sometimes profoundly, affected them as individuals. This was by no means an accident, said Judy Rodgers, founder and executive director of IVOH.

"There was a high quality of connection in the dialogues—a kind of 'magic'—but it wasn't just serendipity," said Rodgers. A number of elements contributed to the high quality of connection, such as the intimate size of the group, the residential nature of the program, the emphasis on "sense-making" through intense dialogue and reflection and even the impromptu sing-alongs. "These are elements that can be replicated in various configurations to expand on the work that we started with this dialogue series."

The final question then is, can the experience be replicated in a way that can have a large-scale impact on journalism beyond the immediate circle?

Raul Ramirez of KQED Public Radio eloquently articulated the challenge in the final hours of the program. "You have brought together remarkable journalists and helped us to clarify the connection between the journalists and the community," said Ramirez. "One development is specific relationships between members."

The experience, he said, also enabled the participants to appreciate the importance of discussing values—something not often done in the "isolation" of the newsroom—and a method and a language for doing so. Others agreed. Dean Miller described it as "the weirdness" of talking about values, while Connie Schultz called it the "permission to flap a bit—to spread our wings."

"But IVOH will fail if journalism doesn't get more reflection of the type discussed," said Ramirez. "How can we share this beyond the boundaries of these walls?"

The participants offered numerous ideas for how IVOH could have this kind of impact. Among them, IVOH could:

- Foster more IVOH dialogues, especially in local communities, where it may be easier for intimate circles to take root and to be sustained.

- To ignite a larger conversation among journalists, launch a national campaign asking journalists to write essays about the values that underpin their work.

- To influence journalists at the start of their careers, inject more discussion about values and the types of issues raised during the IVOH dialogues into journalism school curricula.

- Train teams of facilitators to conduct "mini-dialogues" at the major professional conferences where top journalists, their bosses and other influential leaders go to seek ideas and inspiration.

- Tap into the power of social media and the web to enable journalists to participate in generative conversations.

The ideas can be modified and combined, of course. Rodgers favors a strategy with a "one-two punch," one that engages journalists early on when they are in school and then, through one mechanism or another, catches up with them again as they progress through the profession. At present, the IVOH board is simultaneously weighing the options for this program as it works to shape a strategic vision for the organization and to hire staff to replace its volunteer structure.

"The future of IVOH is inextricably connected with the future of the Thought Leader Dialogues," said Rodgers. "I think a key to the future of the organization is finding the best ways to leverage the relationship with those in the Thought Leader Dialogues to expand our offer to the many different kinds of journalists — traditional print and broadcast journalists as well as the rapidly expanding number of journalists in digital media."

(Jon Funabiki, a board member of IVOH, is a professor of journalism and executive director of the Renaissance Journalism Center at San Francisco State University.)

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