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PADDLEFISH

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Authentic Journalism

by Bill Conroy

We now live in a world where too many journalists seek fame over substance, made possible by global access to social media and the influencer game. It's a pursuit measured in mouse clicks, with the stories told confined to the rules of that empty game. But fame doesn't make journalism, or writing generally, better. Arguably, it's a great distraction that makes worse the work of the anointed journalists and hurts the substance of the work — or better put, its purpose.

Journalism pursued authentically serves the readers, it walks with the people, which often puts it at odds with those who have great power over the people. It's not the easiest path, but it is the only one that leads forward. In my case, it has led me down the path of what I call "picaresque reporting." It's episodic in nature, develops as the story is reported and written, with the writer narrating the story from his or her point of view without sacrificing the facts. It is often focused on social justice themes and involves immersing yourself in the story being pursued, occasionally for years, and applying all the tools of investigative journalism.



Objectivity in journalism is a delusion that has been thrust onto readers. It's a ruse used to promote the point of view of the corporate players, shareholders and billionaires who control the agenda-setting media — which produce much of the content fodder amplified and distorted by social media companies. The latter are also controlled by large

corporations and billionaires. Stay inside the frame of objectivity, and you don't shake the system designed to keep you in that place.

It's a place where truth and lies share the same stage across news coverage and the deep catacombs of social media, where partisan influencers deposit a vast body of content and related distortions to be further mediated and distorted by lesser partisan influencers. It's also a place where you court career suicide whenever your journalism, your writing, threatens the powerful, including media owners — who ultimately value cash-flow over truth-telling.

It's a broken system. Readers are smart. They can smell a rat. And that's a big part of why mainstream commercial media agenda-setters are no longer respected, why lies have been so successful in opening the door to authoritarianism.

Lies are empowered inside the frame of objectivity. Journalists and writers who fall into that trap in the pursuit of recognition and fame, who fear straying outside that frame, are ironically seeking recognition from the very forces that set the trap for them: The media gatekeepers who "mediate fame and success." Consequently, there are stories that are never told.

The late Mario Menéndez, founder and editor of Mexico's *Por Esto!* newspaper, practiced a journalism that sought to empower and tell the stories of those facing injustice, that walked the same streets with them. He coined a term for it: "authentic journalism." In a 2007 interview with the Dallas Observer, *Narco News* founder and publisher Al Giordano, whom Menéndez influenced, described authentic journalism as "a calling, as our way of participating in our society and its struggles."

"We don't seek to reform the Big Media or make it less bad," Giordano added. "We seek to replace it by doing better and more honest work, divorced from the profit motive and its inherent corruption."

Filmmaker Greg Berger, also a key player in the *Narco News* project and one of Giordano's closest colleagues, adds:

"Al was right. Big media was replaceable and has been largely dethroned by an ecosystem made up of powerful online influencers and podcasters and their echo chamber of thousands of lesser figures in the labyrinth that is contemporary social media. But as the public begins to see through this new mirage, the need for authentic journalism is greater than ever."

As I see it, authentic journalists own their point of view, and they don't punch down. Point of view exists in every story, even if disguised with the fig leaf of objectivity. The facts included or excluded from any story, and its framing, are proof of the fallacy of human objectivity. The facts matter, always, but learning to own my point of view has focused me on human rights, picaresque reporting and greater self-awareness in the process. It's a course that involves honest self-reflection and often risk. Authentic journalism leaves skin on the pavement. It draws blood.



High-Altitude Risks

by Bill Conroy

I literally have flashbacks to this period in my life, which included threats over the phone warning me to back off my pursuit of various stories, none of which I saw as potentially life-threatening. That is until a strange hit-and-run accident nearly seriously injured me and one of my teenage sons at the time, around 2008 – when I was knee-deep in the reporting that led to this book.

It happened after we left a fast-food taco place in San Antonio, Texas, sometime around noon – as the sun burned hot in a blue Texas sky. After leaving the restaurant, I drove my four-door Nissan sedan across one side of a busy two-way boulevard headed toward a designated U-turn lane located at the center of the boulevard, with my son seated next to me – both of us with seatbelts engaged. There were long approach lanes on each side of the U-turn lane for cars to wait safely in line away from the speeding main boulevard traffic.

My son and I were still sipping on Cokes from the fast-food place. At this point, the hood of my car was in the center U-turn lane but the balance of the vehicle was still overhanging the approach lane as I waited for the car ahead of me to clear. I had just edged my car forward slightly when suddenly, bam! I heard metal crushing against metal as we were flung sideways hard by the slam of gravity.

I saw nothing other than a bulky late-model SUV out of the corner of my eye that then sped away from the scene. My son noticed more. The driver had raced down the then-empty



approach lane, reaching peak speed just as he plowed into my car, crushing the driver's side rear-passenger door. The impact pushed my car sideways, allowing the driver to pull onto the main boulevard road for his getaway.

Luckily, the vehicle that rammed us without warning hit the car door behind me, instead of my door, where it appeared to be aimed had I not rolled the car forward a bit – just in the nick of time and with no idea the collision was imminent. Thanks to that stroke of fortune and seatbelts, other than being shaken up, neither my son nor I were hurt. Just the car – and the sodas now sprayed all over the front windshield and dash.

Providing further evidence that the universe does have its angels, the wife of a San Antonio police detective happened to be driving past the scene and saw the hit-and-run occur, and she tailed the driver to his home, not far away, and spied his huge SUV in the driveway. She returned to report what she had found to the police now at the scene. I recall her saying to me that it looked to her like the driver hit my car intentionally.

The driver, knowing he was made, returned to the scene of the crime (expecting, I suspect, to talk his way out of his dilemma). The cops were there still, questioning me, my son, and

the detective's wife about the accident. My son said he was pretty sure the driver, in his 30s, had switched the license plates on his SUV before returning to the scene. That's an odd fact if his observation was on the mark. I never really made sense of it, though – other than maybe the original plates were expired or phony. Or the driver thought an alternate set of plates would somehow fool the cops. The fact that he had two sets of plates to begin with, however, indicates to me he was up to something shady.

It turns out, after running the driver's name, the cops discovered he had outstanding warrants. No talking his way out of that reality, even with new plates. The cops arrested him on the spot.

Earlier on in my career while working for an alternative newspaper in Milwaukee, our news office was firebombed – technically a garage near the office containing newly acquired newspaper street boxes. Years later in San Antonio, while covering a money-laundering story for a business weekly, our newsroom meeting room was sprayed with bullets (luckily when the office was empty).

I've even had a gun held to my head while pursuing a story about a series of violent muggings in a Milwaukee neighborhood. For some unknown reason, the gunman (one of two involved) hesitated after threatening "to blow my head off," and chose not to pull the trigger – or you wouldn't be reading this. The mugging duo stole my ring and the few dollars I had on me, and they ran off into the darkness. They later became part of the story I wrote. The muggings stopped shortly after that. The publicity likely helped.

In Juarez, Mexico, after visiting several known narcofosas [mass graves] in 2008 with a filmmaker and driver (as the city was crawling with heavily armed Mexican troops), we were tailed by a Mexican cop down a desolate canyon road – passing a small phalanx of his fellow cops along the way. We escaped a stop, but the warning was clear.

At the time, Juarez was awash in bloodshed as street gangs aligned with the Juarez Cartel or the competing Sinaloa Cartel then invading their market battled in the streets. Corrupted law enforcers, military and politicians were part of the fray as well. All were embroiled in a war for drugs in that key border town across the river from El Paso, Texas.

Maybe it was those traumatic memories kicking in, but this strange hit-and-run with my son sitting next to me was the first time I ever felt in my bones that maybe my family (not just me) was at risk due to my investigative journalism. Or was I just being paranoid?

Only three years earlier, in 2005, while chasing a narco-trafficking story for *Narco News* involving an ICE informant participating in mass murder in Juarez, my paranoia was triggered in another way. ICE agents made threatening visits to my home and workplace – another newspaper that had nothing to do with *Narco News* or its coverage. They were attempting to strong-arm me into revealing my sources – and to generally mess with my job and life. I freelanced for the nonprofit *Narco News*, with the permission of my newspaper employer at the time.

Then there was the Department of Justice's threat via the courts to

seize my computer before that, in 2003, which was an effort to suppress already public court records I had brought to light in covering the Lok Lau spy case. So, my cat whiskers were still tingling from all those experiences.

But those prior threats targeted my job and livelihood, or my own life. Digging into the role of intelligence agencies in the drug world, however, raises the risks to another level. The intelligence agencies, both domestic and foreign, are not infrequently immersed in the criminal underworld and cultivate as assets many unsavory but skilled characters who don't appreciate publicity about their clandestine activities.

At the time, I did ask a good law enforcement source about my concerns. He quipped, "You're not paranoid, if they are after you." It's a line I had heard from law enforcement sources many times before because they endure similar paranoia due to their jobs. The source also pointed out that the only way such a hit-and-run could be staged is if I was being tailed by the driver and likely others, who knew my location in real time.

I thought that would require a lot of work, conspiracy and risk just to target me, so I decided it was improbable, though not impossible. I just chalked up the telephone threats and subsequent hit-and-run to a coincidence of timing. It's easier that way – and far more likely.

But it was a sobering experience, regardless. It did affect my resolve for a time, even realizing the various threats and the hit-and-run weren't likely connected. The risk was still there. It's always present. Journalism worth pursuing isn't accomplished without risk, even if it is only heightened stress and paranoia.

Still, my wife insisted I push forward. She has always supported my work and is fearless, too. If she had my back, what excuse did I have? Plenty still, chief among them our kids. But I was already too far down this road to fear predators lurking in the shadows, or the phantoms of my past experiences.

I had to shake it off and move forward. I told myself I take a risk each time I step off a street corner distracted by what's not in front of me.

An excerpt from *The Great Pretense: A Tour Through the Boneyard of the CIA's War for Drugs [TheGreatPretense.org]*