

Lessons Learned

BY KATE STANLEY

Here's a secret the journalism professors don't tell you: Writing—especially editorial writing—is a spiritual endeavor.

It may seem to be about crafting clever arguments to nudge the doltish to do the right thing, and surely it is that. But if you hack away at it long enough, you come to see that it isn't just about arranging words in the proper persuasive order. It isn't just about hectoring society toward betterment. In the end—or do I mean in the beginning?—editorial writing entails paying attention to deeper human stuff. You know the stuff I mean: Death. Love. Loneliness. Cruelty. Weather. Gardening. Beauty.

It sounds sort of mushy. It isn't, not if you take the task seriously. Acquiring tactical skill is the easy part. More daunting—and more delightful—is venturing into the uncharted territory of reflection. You can't say much about how life ought to be lived—how society ought to be organized—if you haven't considered the matter. Writing thoughtfully requires looking out—and looking in. It entails cultivating consciousness, conviction, wonderment.

This is where the magnolia tree comes in—the one sitting in my back yard. In the 16 years since I planted it as an elfin shrub, it has worked its way into my mind as a sort of talisman—an emblem of all that is right, and not right, with the world. It's one of Minnesota's most delicate trees and earliest bloomers, and when I see it preparing to do its spring thing, I gear up to write my annual magnolia editorial.

I can't say why I do it, exactly, except that I must. It forces me to undertake an annual conversation with my readers. It's a chat of a special sort—about matters too elemental to address without the aid of metaphor. I've written four of these annual essays now, and I have it in mind to write one every year so long as the tree and I are on speaking terms.

The magnolia editorial has become a springtime mainstay at the *Star Tribune*: It always carries the same

headline and the same first sentence—and then launches into some sort of philosophical banter about the world's odd ways. It's partly about Mother Nature, partly about her silly and brave human offspring. How it turns out depends largely on what's in my head when the blossoms burst. I will admit to occasional moments of panic as the day draws near—and was utterly terrified the one time it seemed I might be out of town on the fateful day. But it all tends to work out. The magnolia always finds its way into words.

It's a weird kind of thing to put on an editorial page, I suppose—speaking as it does so generally and whimsically about the human heart. But readers seem to like it well enough, and my editors are tolerant, and I can't really imagine not writing about the magnolia.

In truth, I think it is essential that I do. These pieces are the sort editorial pages ought to publish more often—and not because they are “light” or “offbeat” or offer a “change of pace” from the conventional editorial onslaught. (The magnolia, I can report, takes umbrage at such demeaning justifications.) They are essential because they speak fundamentally about the human quest—the yearning for beauty, for justice, for good, for transcendence.

These evanescences are tricky to write about well. It's easy to fall into a vat of rhetorical syrup somewhere in the first paragraph and then be sorry you ever started. Somehow the magnolia helps keep me out of the syrup and on the straight and narrow. Its blooming spurs me to mull the matters that preoccupy thinking people but that nevertheless seem “too big” to talk about. But they must be discussed now and then, for no matter what Madonna says, we don't live in a merely material world.

Thus the editorial voice can't just argue about the brass tacks of economics and foreign affairs and social policy. It can't just lament what is wrong and cheer what is going right in the “public sphere.”

If the voice is to resonate with readers, it must also wonder and weep and sing. It must acknowledge in subtle and poetic terms what every writer, and every reader, cannot help but notice in rare moments: that the mere fact of existence is amazing, bewildering, and worth dwelling upon.