

From Ministry to Muckraking

A talk given by Marshall Allen at The King's College, March 21, 2016

More than a dozen years ago I got caught off guard in a job interview. I was applying for a reporting gig at The Pasadena Star News, a small daily newspaper in southern California. It would have been a big step up for me at the time. I had passed through the initial interviews with the main editors, but I had to get through this final interview with the top editor. They warned me about him: a hard-nosed, no nonsense, grump who would grill me. Intimidating. Cynical. Snide. So I braced myself, and he didn't disappoint. He picked up my resume and studied it. His lips curled into a sneer.

To be fair, my resume was a bit unusual. I had been in full time ministry for five years with Young Life International, a large evangelical Christian organization. Three of those years were in Kenya, where I had been a missionary. Then there was my master's degree in theology from Fuller Evangelical Seminary in Pasadena, California. There aren't a lot of church-going, Bible-believing, born-again Christians like me in the mainstream media. Sometimes journalists are confused when they find out about my faith, as if I wandered into the newsroom from a Sunday School convention. I've had reporters tell me they've never met someone like me. But they're usually polite about it. This editor didn't do polite. He just scowled and said: "So what makes you think that a Christian can be a good journalist?" He emphasized the word "Christian" like it was some kind of slur.

I hesitated: Was he questioning my ability because of my religious beliefs? That wouldn't go over well with his HR director. I decided not to ask.

I also hesitated because I appreciated that he spoke his mind. I was an unusual candidate and he wanted to know about my background. And I had a good answer – and that answer is the foundation of what I'm here to discuss tonight.

There are many reasons a person who's devoted to Christ can be an excellent journalist in the mainstream media, I told the editor. The Bible endorses telling the truth. Journalism is about telling the truth. A Christian is called to

be a person of good character and integrity, and in journalism your reputation is your calling card with sources. If they trust you they will call you back. Journalism is about courageously speaking the truth to power and that's also a Biblical value.

I summed it up for the grizzled editor by telling him that there are obviously many excellent journalists who are not Christians, but I think my faith makes me a better journalist. And also, even the journalists who are not Christians are still living out biblical values when they use the highest journalistic standards to tell their stories.

My heart got thumping as I explained myself to the editor. I wanted this guy to hire me. But he didn't give me any dramatic response – more of a grunt than anything else. But I did get the job.

Even though there aren't a lot of believers like me in the mainstream media, I include my ministry experience and my seminary background in my professional bio. Thus, it often becomes a topic of conversation. Most of my colleagues are positive. Some are antagonistic. I don't think most of my editors have cared. All they want me to do is to deliver great stories, and some even appreciate the diversity my mindset brings to the newsroom.

When people ask me how I went from ministry to investigative reporting, I like to ask if they want the spiritual or the secular version of my story. Tonight I'll give you the spiritual version. God used a bully on the playground and a childhood employment dispute to shape me. He showed me how I'd be more free to tell the truth in the mainstream media than the Christian media. And He helped me find my true calling in, of all places, Sin City.

THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN MCCANDLISH PHILLIPS

But before I go deeper with my story I want to talk about the ultimate example of a Christian journalist, John McCandlish

MARSHALL ALLEN



Marshall Allen covers patient safety for *ProPublica*. He is one of the creators of *ProPublica's* Surgeon Scorecard, which published the complication rates for about 17,000 surgeons who perform eight common elective procedures.

He also moderates the *ProPublica* Patient Safety Facebook group. Allen's work has been honored with several journalism awards, including the Harvard Kennedy School's 2011 Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting and coming in as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for local reporting for work at the *Las Vegas Sun*, where he worked before coming to *ProPublica* in 2011. Before he was in journalism, Allen spent five years in full-time ministry, including three years in Nairobi, Kenya. He has a Master's degree in Theology.

Phillips. We are coming together tonight and honoring him, in part. I feel self-conscious giving a lecture in his name because when people talk about the best reporters ever to work at The New York Times, they talk about McCandlish Phillips. I don't think anybody will ever say that about me.

People especially admired the beauty of his writing. The former New York Times managing editor Arthur Gelb once called Phillips "the most original stylist I've ever edited." Again, not to make this all about me but that's another thing I don't have in common with McCandlish Phillips.

I do have some more fundamental things in common with him: our faith, our love for journalism, and our desire to see more young believers like the students here tonight go into the media.

I heard about McCandlish Phillips soon after I became a reporter, through The World Journalism Institute. I read his "Faith in the Daily News Chase" monograph and admired his dedication to the craft and the way he lived out his testimony in a secular environment. He was so open about his faith he kept a Bible on his desk.

About a decade after I heard of him, in 2011, I started working in New York City. One of the first things I wanted to do was meet the legendary McCandlish Phillips. I emailed him, and he was extremely gracious. He was known for encouraging and mentoring younger Christian journalists. We had dinner one night at the home of a friend of his and had a great time. He treated you like you were his child – with kindness

"How did you go from ministry to muckraking?"

and encouragement. It's like he was proud of me when he had just met me. His gracious personality humbled me. We never had a close relationship, but every now and then he would send me an encouraging email.

That's the spirit I want to have tonight. I'm pleased this audience is made up of young people and students. And I presume that many of us share the same faith. I don't know what you're considering doing with your life. I know I never planned on going into journalism. What I think we all need to do is submit our will to God's will and say, "Lord I'll do whatever you need me to do, I'll go anywhere and I'll do anything." If journalism is something that you feel God is leading you to do,

I'd love to talk to you about it. One of my goals here is to destigmatize it a little bit. My main argument is that it's not just okay to be a Christian in the media. I say it's entirely consistent with our faith. We can be excellent journalists – even muckrakers – because of our faith.

ON MUCKRAKING

Some people are uncomfortable with the word muckraking. They think it's a bad word. We called this talk "From Ministry to Muckraking" even over the fears of my own mother, who thought it sounded too negative. Sorry mom! It can have some negative connotations, but here's how Merriam-Webster defines "muckrake." It's a verb that means, "to search out and publicly expose real or apparent misconduct of a prominent individual or business."

Now, does that sound like something a good Christian should be doing? It sounds controversial and don't Christians try to make nice and avoid controversy? Let's think about it.

The definition of muckraking sounds like the mission statement of my employer, the investigative reporting shop *ProPublica*. Here's *ProPublica's* mission: "To expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions using the moral force of investigative reporting to spur reform through the sustained spotlight of wrongdoing."

When I talk about muckraking, I mean fairly and accurately exposing wrongdoing. I do not mean sensationalizing facts or twisting information to fit an agenda. I mean the dogged pursuit of the truth and the willingness to publish whatever it says. And if the truth you find isn't consistent with what you thought you had as your story, then you adjust your story. And if there's no story you kill it. You don't slant things in a way that's not honest. These are the mainstream standards of today's best investigative reporting. And it's the type of muckraking that I endorse.

This type of muckraking happens to fit my personality. Looking back on my childhood I can see how God was shaping me and leading me toward investigative reporting. One of my favorite things to do when I write a profile of a person is ask them what experiences they had as a young person that, looking back, they see led them to where they are today.

THE BULLY

A few experiences from my own life come to mind. The first relates to me getting bullied when I was in seventh grade. I was a silly and skinny kid back then and we had this big eighth-grader at school who would roam the playground looking for someone to terrorize. He had his own method. He'd grab you, get you in a headlock, and spit on your head. So one Monday I'm standing out by the tennis courts with my buddy just minding my own business and this bully comes ambling over. He starts the ritual with me. It begins with some pushing and trash talk – not just the immediate launching of spit. So he starts picking on me, calling me names, asking if I want to fight, shoving me around. I don't resist him because I really don't want to fight him, and I'm flat-out afraid of him. It all escalates until he puts me in the headlock and spits on my head.

I did not like this bully, I can tell you that right now. But Tuesday came along, and here he came again, and it happened again. He pushes me around, starts calling me names, asks me if I want to fight.

“No, I don't want to fight.”

“Oh, come on you're afraid.”

“Yes, I'm afraid.”

You can predict what happened next on day two. Again, he put me in a headlock and spit in my hair. Just like the day before I went to the bathroom and toweled off my head.

Wednesday rolls around and, you guessed it, here comes the bully again. This kid isn't known for his improvisation. So he comes up and starts the dance, calling me names and pushing me and I don't know what it was that welled up inside me but it happened before I could think about it. I stood my ground.

“Let me tell you something,” I said. “I don't care if you beat me up, I don't care if you show your friends and everyone else that you're tougher than I am, and you're going to beat up a seventh grader, you're the big eighth grader and you're going to show everyone how weak I am and how strong you are. That's great. So if that's what you want to do then do it: beat me up...But DO NOT spit on my head.”

I winced, ready for him to lay into me. But you may have guessed what he actually did. He turned around and walked away. He lost interest. And I realized in that moment a lesson I have carried with me for the rest of my life:

bullies want to control people with their fear. So you render them powerless if you refuse to be controlled by them, or stand up to them.

I've carried this over to my job as a journalist. Sometimes I describe what I do as standing up to bullies. I do journalism that's in the public interest. My goal is find people who are getting abused or exploited by a powerful person or entity. Then I document it and expose it. I name the oppressing person or force or institution. Putting the facts together and exposing the behavior often brings about change. It's empowering.

THE OPERA HOUSE

Let me share another childhood story that's shaped my mindset. When I



Members of the audience ask questions after Marshall Allen's talk at The King's College in New York City. (Photo/Media Lab)

was about 15 I worked at The Heritage Square Opera House, a dinner theater where they served people a meal and then showed them a vaudeville style theater show. I worked on the restaurant side. My job was to stand at the end of the buffet line, wearing an apron and a tall thin paper hat, holding a sharp knife and prongs and carving a giant roast beef. I looked ridiculous but I loved this job and the heaps of free rare roast beef and horseradish that came with it. Well, one day I show up for work and they sent us home. They shut the place down without giving us any notice. And it turns out – they also owed us all three weeks of pay.

A guy named G. William Oakley owned the Opera House. He is actually a legendary figure in the community theater scene in Colorado. He wrote all

these vaudeville style productions – the type of funny shows with singing and dancing where the audience gets involved by cheering the hero and booing and hissing at the villain. Funny enough, he looked like one of those villains from his own productions. I'm not trying to be mean, but the dude was rotund, and wore a vest and top hat and had a goatee. We all knew him as "Bill," but he was more a mythic figure to me than a reality. I was a lowly teenager that carved roast beef so I hadn't ever met him. I'd just see him drinking in the bar every night when I went home after my shift.

They told us Bill didn't have the money to pay us. That didn't sound right to us. The Opera House had recently opened a new location across town, and that one was still running. It was owned by the same umbrella organization. If that one could be open then he could pay us. We were young but we weren't stupid.

So we were a bunch of angry kids, maybe two dozen of us. We all demanded our money but the company didn't care. Some of the kids started picketing outside the other theater, carrying signs that said he didn't pay us.

Then my mom gave me a great idea: "You should sue him."

I was like, "Sue him? I'm not even old enough to drive!"

She told me about small claims court, and I loved the idea. So she shuttled me and a buddy to the courthouse and we filled out the small claims paperwork. I took the time to write the whole story so my argument would be clear. I think he owed me about \$340. I paid about 10 bucks to file it and sort of forgot about it. I wasn't expecting much.

A few weeks later, I got a notice in the mail saying we had a court date. That alone surprised me. The wheels of justice were turning. As the date approached I knew I needed to be ready. I prepped for a Perry Mason moment, where I'd dramatically argue the case in front of the judge.

Finally the big day arrived. At first it felt anticlimactic because it was just an administrative judge in a conference room. No fancy courtroom setting. But when we entered the room with my mom something else stunned me: I saw none other than G. William Oakley sitting at a table. The villain himself, in the flesh. Boo! Hiss! Wow – I'm 15-years-old and he had to show up because I filed this case.

Bill wasn't alone. Sitting beside him in a suit was his attorney. My adrenaline surged. I pictured going head-to-head with the attorney but the reality, again, wasn't dramatic. The judge read my write-up of the case in the paperwork I filed and looked at Bill and his attorney and asked a simple question: "Is this true? You closed one branch of the business but you kept the other one open and you didn't pay them their money?"

Bill and his attorney said, "Yeah."

"Well then you need to give these kids their money," The judge said. I don't even think he banged a gavel.

Bill pulled out his checkbook and we walked out the door with our money.

The whole experience stunned me. The legal system had allowed me and my friend – a couple of kids – to stand up to a powerful businessman.

The story of David and Goliath is so great because most of the time in life the giant stomps the little guy. I saw from standing up to G. William Oakley that sometimes the little guy can win and have his voice heard. I've carried that into my journalism. Sometimes the power of one person's story has so much moral force behind it that it can bring about reform. Even one story can have a huge ripple effect.

One last story – about how I really committed myself to my faith. My parents were sincere Christians and they raised me to follow Jesus. I accepted Christ when I was about 7. But I didn't have a mature understanding of my faith at that age, and I didn't fully embrace it. So for years I was a two-faced Christian: a sincere believer around my church friends but afraid to admit I followed Jesus when it came to my friends at school. I was your run of the mill hypocrite. If Peter denied



Members of the audience ask questions after Marshall Allen's talk at The King's College in New York City. (Photo/Media Lab)

Christ three times before the rooster crowed, I denied Christ three times before the lunch bell rang. I felt insecure about my faith and ashamed of it.

I never felt good about being a hypocrite and felt aware of it. I knew I wasn't living up to what I believed and that it wasn't right. I knew it didn't please God to be a lukewarm Christian and had been that way for long enough to know it also didn't please me. I had reached a point where I could see I needed to be more honest and consistent about myself. I needed to put my security in the Lord instead of placing it in what other people thought of me. This is a step that every believer I've ever known has had to make and it's easier for some than others. Once I put my security in Christ alone it transformed my attitude. I became bold about my faith and felt a sense of peace and comfort when it came to what others thought about me.

My years of hiding my faith has led me to be open about my faith in the journalism world. The counterintuitive thing is that it's never been a problem. There are always some antagonists who feel they need to poke at me about my faith, but that's rare. Most of the time people are cool with it and some people are even interested. It's never been something that has held back my career. If anybody were to say that Christians are somehow discriminated against in the media, I would disagree, based on my experience.

JOURNEY TO JOURNALISM

So how did I get to journalism? I had no journalism experience, I had no journalism training, and I had no career plan. I knew I wanted to be a dad, but now how I would provide for my family. I grew up in Colorado. I got my degree from the University of Colorado in English because frankly that was just the easiest degree for me to get, and then I met and married my wife, Sonja. We were married when I was 22 and she was 23. Her parents were on staff with a Christian organization called The Navigators. She had been a missionary kid, and had been born in Norway and then she lived in Kenya for ten years. She had always envisioned living overseas. I had only envisioned marrying her.

We looked into overseas opportunities and found a position with a Christian organization called Young Life, doing ministry at the International School of Kenya. I served

as a coach, we substitute taught, and we ran a Young Life ministry, which included a Bible study and doing lots of fun events with the students. Looking back on it now it's funny because I really liked writing the newsletters. Most missionaries who raise their own support dread the newsletters.

After three years in Kenya we moved back and I got a job at Young Life headquarters in Colorado Springs, and that's when I started attending a satellite campus of Fuller Seminary. That's also where I started freelance writing. A friend of mine was writing on the side for small Christian magazines and he connected me with editors. I started calling myself a freelance writer and pitching stories. Editors don't know who you are and how much experience you have. Sometimes they're desperate enough to give you the assignment, and then all you have to do is figure out how to do the story.

I enjoyed the freelance hustle and wrote for a lot of small Christian magazines, moving up the ladder until I got published in *Christianity Today*, the best known evangelical magazine. I did so much of this freelancing we left Young Life staff and moved out to Pasadena so I could finish full time at Fuller's main campus. My wife is the one who suggested I become a full-time journalist. And when I graduated I came to a crossroads. Should I enter the Christian media or go into the mainstream media? The mainstream media seemed the best direction for me for several reasons. First, I wanted to reach my potential in journalism and the best journalism is being done in the mainstream media. It was true then and it's true today. I was reading the *LA Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*. I aspired to do the best possible work. I wanted to reach my full potential.

Also, if I changed my mind I could always go from the mainstream media to the Christian media. But it would be harder to go from the Christian media to the mainstream media. The Christian media is seen as advocacy media in a lot of ways so there's bias against it.

My third reason for choosing the mainstream media is probably the most important to me. I had some experiences in the Christian media that made me uncomfortable. I saw some ethical problems when I freelanced for Christian publications. They almost had a fear of muckraking. They were reticent to tell stories that might make a Christian leader look bad. To me, the truth sometimes will make someone look bad, but that's no reason to avoid it. If the story is in the public interest I

think it's a story that should be done. That attitude of mine didn't fit with the Christian media. It was as if the Christian media wanted to do PR for God. But God doesn't need us to do PR for him. God can handle himself. What God needs us to do is tell the truth.

I've found there's something in our Christian subculture that makes us uncomfortable with the idea of muckraking. You don't hear Christian leaders encouraging young people to become investigative journalists. It's not something discussed in a positive way in our churches. This reality may contribute to the lack of Bible-believing, born again Christians in the media.

I would argue this failure to embrace muckraking, or the suspicion of it, is a flawed aspect of our Christian culture. We are supposed to be people who live in a way that's consistent with what the Bible teaches. My view is the same as what I argued to that grizzled editor years ago during my job interview: Journalism and muckraking are entirely consistent with what the Bible teaches. Allow me to explain.

First, it's important to have a clear understanding of journalism. As I've said, when I started in journalism I knew surprisingly little about how to be a reporter. And around that time I read a book called "The Elements of Journalism" by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. The book lays out nine elements of journalism:

9 ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.
- When anyone asks, "What is journalism?" these nine elements sum it up.

Source: "The Elements of Journalism" by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel.

Now that we have an understanding of journalism, let's take a look at the Bible. When God inspired the writers of the Bible He didn't have them avoid controversies. We could look almost anywhere in the Bible to see this, but let's just look at the Gospel of Luke. Put yourself in Luke's shoes. Here's how he describes his mission in the first few verses of the book: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of things that have been fulfilled among us. Just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too have written an account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty the things you have been taught."

I'm not saying Luke is a journalist, but he is fulfilling some of the elements of journalism. He's going to investigate carefully everything that happened, he's going to write down an account so that Theophilus and others – I'm sure he knew that this was going to be publicly displayed and shared – so that others would know the certainty of what they've been taught. So he has set out to do a lot of things that we as journalists also set out to do. Verify the truth; publish it.

Now let's think about what Luke actually published. There is some upsetting stuff in the book of Luke. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he praises the Samaritans, who were widely despised, and holds them up as an example of what it means to love your neighbor. In the process he insults the religious leaders.

The book of Luke is filled with controversy. Jesus tells a man who wants to bury his father to come follow him to let the dead bury their own dead. In chapter 11 Jesus verbally smacks down the religious leaders and Pharisees and teachers of the law. He talks about the cost of following Jesus in chapter 14, saying anyone who does not hate his father and mother is not worthy of being a disciple. He talks about the exclusivity of Christ, he says many will not be able to enter through the narrow door. He shows Jesus driving the sellers and moneychangers out of the temple.

Luke tells the story of Judas betraying Jesus. Judas wasn't a run of the mill leader. He was one of Jesus' main followers. Luke shows how he is a total scoundrel who betrays Jesus unto death and sells him out. Luke dares to

document this story and then has the audacity to publish the thing.

How about this pathetic example of Christian leadership: In Luke 22, after the Last Supper, the disciples dispute with one another over who will be the greatest. These are the people who are the Founding Fathers of our faith. Some of them very influential, and after the Last Supper, they're arguing about who is going to be the greatest. Luke is showing them to be some incredibly petty people – just like many of us, by the way.

And then there's the shameful story in Luke 22 where Peter denies Jesus three times. This is Peter, the rock upon which the Church is built. Luke published a story that shows he is a coward and a hypocrite – again, just like many of us.

By reporting out these facts and writing and publishing this book Luke made the followers of Jesus look like complete idiots. He also made prominent and respected people of that day look like conniving and corrupt murderers. He didn't avoid controversy, he named names. He didn't just say, "One of the disciples denied Christ," he said, "Peter, it was Peter denying Christ." He seemed to go where the story led him. He verified the facts, and then he reported them truthfully in a straightforward manner.

I'm not saying again that Luke was a journalist, or that anything we do as journalists is anything like scripture. But there are characteristics and principles that we can take from this type of reporting and that we can apply to our work. Does this kind of reporting make people uncomfortable? Yes, it does. It makes people very uncomfortable. Journalists question authority, they don't back down, they don't fall into line, they create controversy. It makes people uncomfortable – especially people in power. And yet, for me, that type of truth-telling fits my personality and beliefs and also my understanding of what it means to be a faithful Christian. I hope it appeals to you, too.

I need to add that this type of truth-telling is often discouraged, even in our churches. We shouldn't run away from the truth. We need more fearless reporting of the truth and rooting out of corruption in our churches. We should embrace it because it's entirely consistent with what the Bible teaches. It's going to take courageous young people like yourselves to be willing and be bold enough to tell those kinds of truths, whether it's in your personal lives or through your journalism.

Once I decided to enter the mainstream media, I had to find a job. I finished at Fuller Seminary in May 2001 and I was about as green as a journalist can be. I read the *LA Times* every day at that point in time so I said, "Okay, I'll call the *LA Times*. Who knows, maybe they've got a spot for me." So I called the recruiter at the *LA Times* and quickly learned I wasn't qualified.

The recruiter pointed me to the *LA Times*-owned, twice-weekly community paper called *The Foothill Leader*, which was in the town next to mine. I applied and they hired me but later I learned I hadn't been their first choice. I had been in the job for two weeks before I found out they had actually hired another woman for my position. But she failed her background check so they had to let her go. So I was the runner up. But hey, whatever it takes! You just need to get your foot in the door.

There's great value to starting at the bottom and working your way up. Few people have the prodigious talent to start at the top and thrive. You learn this craft by repetition. It takes years to master. I've been doing it for about 15 and feel like I'm still getting started.

After about five years at these three different papers in LA I went to work at the *Las Vegas Sun*. If there's one thing funnier than being a morally conservative Christian in journalism it's being a morally conservative Christian in journalism in Las Vegas. It's called Sin City for good reason. I would not have chosen or aspired to work in Las Vegas. But no one else would hire me. I applied for dozens of jobs everywhere, but the openings were scarce. Meanwhile, they were having a hard time getting reporters to come to Vegas because it's not the most appealing place. That made it the perfect marriage. I was desperate and so were they, so we fell into each other's arms.

The amazing thing is, God put me in the perfect place at the perfect time. The paper had recently revamped to focus on investigative reporting and narrative storytelling. They hired some amazing editors so it was perfect for me. I was at a key point in my development.

While I was there, my editor asked me to cover healthcare. The first words out of my mouth were: "I can't imagine anything more boring than writing about healthcare." That's honestly how I felt because I had read so many lame health care stories. But I was so wrong. I quickly realized healthcare is deeply

important to people's lives. I also saw the dysfunction and corruption in our health care system in this country. They estimate more than 200,000 people a year die in hospitals because of substandard care. They estimate the health care system wastes about 25 percent of every dollar spent – and we are paying for it! The beat was ripe for an investigative approach.

DO NO HARM

I wrote scores of investigative health care stories in Vegas. My work there culminated with a project called “Do No Harm” that I did with a colleague named Alex Richards, who is an expert in data analysis. We analyzed publicly available data from the state of Nevada to identify injuries and infections and deaths that occurred to patients in Las Vegas hospitals. Then we published each hospital's numbers of these types of problems in a way that had never been done before, so you could quantify the amount of harm that was taking place at each facility. I also featured the stories of dozens of patients who had been harmed while undergoing medical care. The project won several national journalism awards.

I came to *ProPublica* in 2011. I continue to cover healthcare with an emphasis on why we pay so much for medical care and too often get so little in return. *ProPublica* is funded by philanthropy, it's been around for about eight years. The mission is to do watchdog reporting. We have about two dozen people like me, what I would call traditional reporters, and we have about a dozen reporters who are focused more on data and programming, and if that is something that interests you at all, if you have any leaning toward that,

ProPublica allows me to use some creative methods in investigative reporting. We started a Facebook group for patients who have been harmed while undergoing medical care. This is a public group on Facebook, it's got 5,500 members now. I moderate the group every day. The group gives people a chance to comfort each other, share advice and resources. We can also get ideas from the group for stories, or even feature patients we meet in the group in our stories. We learn so much by listening to this group.

Our Patient Harm Questionnaire is another form of our crowdsourcing. We have about 1,500 patients who have told us their stories in a way that allows us to quantify trends about how patients have been treated after being harmed.

Last year we put out a big project that helps guide patients to the safest places to have select elective operations, like knee and hip replacements. My colleague Olga Pierce did the data analysis for the project, which we called the “Surgeon Scorecard.” To create the Scorecard we obtained data that detailed every hospital visit for every patient covered by Medicare, the government's insurance plan for people over age 65. We worked with dozens of experts, including surgeons and researchers, to develop a method to analyze the data to identify cases where someone went into a hospital for a common elective surgery and suffered some type of injury or death. We tabulated the cases and published a risk-adjusted complication rate for about 17,000 surgeons in hospitals throughout the country. Showing which doctors had the lowest and highest complication rates gives them motivation and information to improve, and also informs patients, so they can choose the safest places to get care.

quality control. In order to improve something you have to measure it, and unfortunately our medical industry has not prioritized measuring the quality of care.

As you might expect, the Scorecard hasn't been popular with everyone in the medical community. We got some criticism but we've been more encouraged by the positive response. The site has been used millions of times. I hear medical insiders talking about how they're focused on reducing patient injuries like they never have before because now this information is public.

I hope I've been able to help you see the biblical basis for muckraking. In some ways being a Bible-believing born again Christian is like being a fish out of water in journalism. But in other ways it's the same as being a believer in any other industry. I try to do my work with excellence unto the Lord. I strive to be a person of integrity. I do make mistakes and I try to admit them and apologize for them, when necessary. These are things that I think a Christian in any field would do. I try to be receptive to criticism when my editors correct me and guide me, tell me to do something that they want me to do I try to be receptive to that and learn from them and others around me. I'm being stretched and growing, and that's an important part of the Christian life.

I feel blessed to do this work. But I hope you can see that being in this place was never part of my plan. When we got married, my wife and I prayed that God would show us what He wanted us to do and help us to be obedient. I never thought I'd work in Kenya, Los Angeles, Las Vegas or New York City. And I never thought God would lead me into journalism. But somehow He led me to a job that's a perfect fit for my personality and skillset. I hope there are some other young believers here who will be led in the same direction.



“In some ways being a Bible believing Christian is like being a fish out of water in journalism.”

there is a huge market right now for journalists with data skills. *ProPublica* has won two Pulitzers since it started and one of my favorite things about working there is seeing the great work around me. It's like a lab for investigative reporting. My colleagues are publishing interesting, groundbreaking reports every day that remind me I need to bring my A game.

I think the biggest surprise of our analysis was the variation. There are often surgeons with extremely low and extremely high complication rates doing the same type of operations in the same hospitals. We also found it's uncommon for hospitals to carefully track their complications by individual surgeon, and even less common to share the information with the doctors themselves. Our health care system is like a giant assembly line with very little

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