

HUMANITAS LUNCHEON 1991

CONFESSIONS OF A WRITER

by Christopher Knopf

My journey to this podium started one spring day in Egypt, seven years ago.

I was with my wife, Lorraine, travelling with an American tour from Alexandria to Cairo, when a flat tire put us beside a canal. It was poor farm country. The water in that canal was rank, and women were washing their clothes and kitchen utensils in it. Yoked oxen were pumping it into the fields.

...when across the road we saw a dozen boys approaching. They were twelve to fourteen years old. They were carrying books. It was noon and school was out for mid-day.

"You Inglis or you Ruskie," one asked.

I looked at him. He was lanky, about five foot three, wide mouth, lots of teeth, filthy clothes. A couple of inches taller than the others, he was less shy, had straight-on eyes, and a strength you don't often see in anyone, especially one that young.

I was curious that he spoke some English, learned that they all... these Egyptian farm children... were learning two languages beside their own.

And, well... we just got into it. What the kinship was, I still don't know. But there was a hunger he seemed to have, a need to make a connection with Lorraine and me. Questions poured out of him, as though he was trying to crowd a whole relationship into those several minutes, while his friends, less forward than he, timidly tested the waters with some of the others in our group.

As I listened, it seemed the viral genes of five thousand years of a once glorious history was in that boy, yearning for rebirth. You simply can't imagine his intensity, his need to absorb information, to know.

Across that same road suddenly a man came running. He was flailing his arms in the air, as though scattering crows. He must have had some authority, because the boys backed away. They were scared. All but this one who was talking to Lorraine and me. He never wavered, nor stopped plying us with questions, wanting to know everything about us we were willing to tell him.

The petty official... which is what he must have been... turned to him, shouted at him, telling him with a wave of his hand to get away from us. Still the boy did not acknowledge him. The official approached, jabbed three fingers hard into the boy's chest, accosted him verbally.

The boy's head turned, turned on its neck. A full head shorter, he stared up into the man's eyes. His own were angry, black with anger, with what seemed to be generations of rage against tyranny and control. And they seemed to say, "I am not afraid of anything. Not of any human, not anything." The official saw that look. It frightened him. I could see that. He was twenty years, fifty pounds, six inches greater. He was of no mind to take this further. He lowered his finger from the boy's chest and went back to scattering the others again.

As we returned to our seats on the bus, the boy lingered. He gestured me to lower my window, and on impulse, it seemed, he handed me his ball point pen. I was so startled, I didn't give him my own in return.

For the rest of the trip, that scene haunted me. And I didn't yet know why. In the Army I'd seen two men shot to death. I'd watched two race riots. Nothing impacted me as much as that one moment by that Egyptian canal.

When I returned home, I did what any writer worth his salt will do first, with parents and children and friends he hasn't seen for weeks... I called my agent. I learned there was an assignment awaiting me, if I was interested. It dealt with teenage drug abuse. Something about a drug center in Florida, basically run by kids who'd formerly been drug dependent, counseling kids who still are. I remember heaving a heavy sigh. It didn't sound terribly original, nothing much in the way of a new idea. I was told there was tape of the center's meetings and activities. Take a look at them. I did. I remember telling the agent I'd like to think about it. But I wasn't outwardly very enthusiastic. In fact, at the moment, I didn't want a thing to do with it, and it had nothing to do with what I'd told my agent. The auspices were the best. Marian Brayton's CBS Specials Department, a marvelous new producer, Beth Polson. The idea scared the hell out of me.

I found out why pretty fast.

I'd been teaching writing to a graduate class at a university here in town, fifteen students who thought, based upon what they'd seen on television, it couldn't be very difficult to do. The only problem they were willing to acknowledge was they didn't know what to write about. I told them to write about themselves, that they were, as themselves, totally unique. That their view of the world and life in it was separate from anyone else's. Their own special view. And it didn't matter if that view would change with maturity. What it was today was what they should commit themselves to.

Most were very uncomfortable with that idea. Exposing themselves in public, is the way one of them put it, was not exactly the goal of a lifetime. Most of them were much more comfortable undertaking stories they knew nothing about: wars and executions.

But there was a sixteenth member of that class. And she saved the day for me.

She was not a student at the university. She was a woman, married, with children, a Eurasian, half Japanese, half English. Her husband, whom I knew, had come to me, asked if she might audit the class. She had cancer, and was dying. He thought it would be good therapy for her.

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She was a beautiful woman, with a unique history. Born in England, her father, a Japanese diplomat, attached to his contry's mission in London, was returned to Japan at the outbreak of war. That was her background. And now, forty-five years later, she sat in that room, terribly shy, in fact sat wordlessly, class after class. When it was finally her turn to speak out, to tell the story she wanted to write, she said she'd been writing it, could she read it.

She knocked our socks off.

It was the story of a helpless mother, well-meaning, but a child, who was being raised by her twelve-year-old daughter, the father having been taken away. Though the mother worked, the child got her up in the morning, fed her, sent her on her way, fought with the butcher over the wartime price of meat, fought with the nuns at school over over-bearing authority. The welfare authorities finally come to the mother and tell her: be a mother to that child or she'll be taken away. Which the mother tries to do... totally threatening the girl's position in life. Dilemma. Become a mother, lose the child. Do not become a mother, lose the child.

It was a wonderfully moving story. And it was her own. She had exposed herself, her guilt and fears and angers, her love-contempt for her own mother, and presented them in full view for all to see. She had taken the chance to stand up and say, this is me, this is who I am... just as that young Egyptian boy had done that day beside that canal. Which is why he had so affected me. Which is what I had to do, and had been avoiding.

That night I called my agent and told him I'd like to do the story about the teenage drug center. Which I did. Writing a story about a professional man who knew, absolutely, he could handle his own teenage child's drug abuse once he discovered it. In this he failed. Miserably. It was my own story. Painful to recall and tell. Humiliating in some ways, because of my failure to deal with my son's cocaine and God knows everything else addiction. I wrote it, inspired by what I'd seen two other people do.

You graciously awarded it with a Humanitas nomination.

Frank Pierson, who is one of the industry's most eloquent spokesmen, once told you from this rostrum, "The writer for TV who takes the chance to dig into his own soul, to write of love, trust, honor, duty, decency, loyalty, and fidelity, and generosity of spirit is tackling stuff that is hard not just because he is vulnerable, but because we tend to defend these areas ourselves, as private and secret."

I say it's the best we have to give the audience who will not easily accept this, but regard it as an invasion of their private domain. But if it's truth they hear it.

You nominees today have achieved this. You are the best of us. Thank you for your gifts.