

# The Growth Of A Reporter

Morton Mintz

Louis Lyons was manifestly dedicated to helping reporters grow toward deserved autonomy.

Shortly after Louis' death, Bob Healy of *The Boston Globe* asked a few Nieman to write a few paragraphs about him, each from a different vantage point, and this is what I wrote at that time.

Like no one else, Louis lives in me as he does in many who came under his spell. He asks imagined questions, pointed, simple, stark, necessary. Is it right to do this? Fair? Is this why we have the First Amendment?

By reason of age, I was chairman of the Nieman Class of 1964. We were the last Nieman privileged to have Louis as our Curator. As such, we realized we had a unique opportunity to honor the mentor we had come to revere and love, as had so many before us. The problem was how to act on the opportunity, and after much thought and discussion we created the Louis M. Lyons Award. It was no problem to decide what an award bearing his name would honor. It was, of course, conscience and integrity in journalism. Louis radiated these qualities. His presence, and now his memory, touch us forever with this benign radiation.

I owe to Louis Lyons the marvelous experience of a Nieman year. I was educated; I wrote a book; without his encouragement and that of his friends and Nieman advisors — particularly the late Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and John Kenneth Galbraith — I doubt that I would have persevered. Louis inspired me and gave me a feeling of pride in being a reporter that he alone could give. He is my hero. He made a magnificent and unmatched contribution to the Nieman Fellows, to journalism, and ultimately to his country. I will revere and love him always. That's a story, to use a cliché of the trade, I stand by. I will expand on it only briefly.

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My perspective is that of a person who was a reporter in the 17 years before he arrived in Cambridge, who has remained one in the 19 years since he left, and hopes to continue to be one. I will use two aphorisms as vehicles for much of what I want to say. One comes from Murray Kempton, the columnist, the other from Peter Keyes, who retired from *The New York Times* in 1982 after 49 years as a reporter. Kempton said, "The growth of the reporter is a struggle toward autonomy; the success of the editor lies in the suppression of that struggle." Keyes said, "An editor is someone who separates the wheat from the chaff and sees to it that the chaff gets printed." Well, those of us who may not be wholly free of bias in this matter laugh and relish cracks like that. Of course we do. But we do not laugh from the belly. We cannot, if only because what Louis taught us and made almost reflexive in us is much subtler and certainly truer than either of those statements. He might have rewritten Kempton this way: "The growth of the reporter is the struggle toward a deserved autonomy. The success of the editor is the just suppression of undeserved struggles toward autonomy." I do not believe it presumptuous to speculate about how Louis might have reformulated Kempton or Keyes, because he was so manifestly dedicated to helping reporters grow toward deserved autonomy, which they do partly by trying always to produce more wheat and less chaff.

He had such growth in mind when, for example, he wrote in 1965 of the endless and unanswerable question that has occupied considerable space in *Nieman Reports*: Is journalism a profession? "I've always cut through this," he said, "to say that the responsible journalist acts as though it were, that the reader is his client and his only client." That was talk about a deserved autonomy. He was urging reporters to act as if professionals, although they are in fact employees.

On the same occasion in 1965, Louis wrote about interpretive reporting, which may be routine today, but which had been long and stoutly resisted. It was Senator Joe McCarthy, Louis recalled, who had forced the press to come to interpretive reporting, to look beneath the surface of the demagogue's claims as to the facts. He went on to say that if this led to inclusion at times of a reporter's judgment as to the facts, "I for one welcome this aid. If the reader disagreed with the judgment," Louis continued, "he could discount it and still welcome the fuller report." He pointed out that newspapering was throughout this period loosening up; the reporter given his head more. In and out of *Nieman Reports*, I had been pushing for this, cheering for it. To me, that was talk about a deserved autonomy: pithy, blunt, no chaff, a pure one hundred percent Louis Lyons "Wheatie."

The book that Louis encouraged me to write was mainly about the pharmaceutical industry, the Food and Drug Administration, and the American Medical Association. When I arrived in Cambridge, I had no thought of doing a book, but once the opportunity arose, Louis in his shy but uniquely warm and wonderful way encouraged me. At the time, I think, I was not quite sure why he was doing that. But it became clear afterward when I read a speech he had made in 1958, a quarter

of a century ago. As usual, he was incisive, way ahead of the pack, and evocative. He said that as the role of modern government inescapably grows greater, its functions more complicated, the penetration of these forests of our public affairs becomes an increasing challenge to the talent, energy, and manpower of the press. He also said that too few reporters take up what he termed "the lonely search of the less publicized, more impenetrable corners of the public domain. Their tribe must be increased." By nurturing and motivating Nieman students with serious books in them, such as books that cut close to concerns about life, health, and pocketbook, he helped greatly to increase that tribe.

These thoughts were greatly in my mind a year ago when I wrote that Louis inspired me and gave me a feeling of pride in being a reporter that he alone could give. Louis inspired partly because he was, and we all knew he was, a truly great reporter. The autonomy he had, he earned. He has our love because he tried to help us to try to earn it, too. John Taylor of *The Boston Globe* has said that back in the 1920's and 1930's, Louis was the best reporter he had, and maybe the best reporter anybody had. Not that his wheat was never treated as chaff: Taylor once told of a time in the middle 1930's when the textile industry was evacuating New England, and Louis was on the train with Vice President Henry Wallace. By Taylor's account, Wallace said, "I'll tell you what's wrong with New England's textiles. Your textile families are into the third and fourth generation. They have run out of brains, ability, and guts." Louis, of course, got off the train and filed about two and a half columns for the *Globe*. In those days it was a very big story indeed; his story ran on page 27, and at that time, 28 pages was a big paper, so I thought that was a marvelous example of how he had suffered what some of us think we have suffered, anyway.

The Nieman Class of 1982 chose Joe Alex Morris, Jr. of *The Los Angeles Times* to receive the Lyons Award posthumously. A moving presentation was made to his widow at the Nieman reunion two years ago. Louis was 83 then, and it is, I think, reasonable to believe that he wanted his remarks blunt, laconic, and doubtless jarring to some, to underscore values that remained utterly precious to him toward the end of his life. Under the seal of *Veritas* and commitment to responsible journalism, he said at one point, "Our present group of Nieman Fellows has made an appropriate award, for the work of a newspaperman of notable honesty, and courage, and skill, and unflagging devotion to fact. In honoring the work of Joe Alex Morris, Jr., the Fellows of this group expressed their own standard of what is worthy to emulate." At the end, Louis offered a pointed warning. It was against what he termed the "desensitizing effects of bureaucracy" on an institution which by its nature must be the "most sensitive of institutions."

And this brings me full circle to the story I was standing by tonight. It is Louis Lyons, sensitive and sensitizing in our memories, as he was in life, who always raised what I called a year ago "imagined questions" — pointed, simple, stark, and necessary. Is it right to do this? Fair? Is this why we have the First Amendment? □



CLASS OF 1940



CLASS OF 1941



CLASS OF 1942