

## The Ladder of Abstraction

ROY PETER CLARK

The ladder of abstraction is one of the more useful tools for a narrative journalist, though it's not the easiest to understand. It took me about fifteen years to figure out how to apply it well.

S. I. Hayakawa, who was a linguist before he became a U.S. senator, first described this concept in his book *Language in Action*, published in 1939. Hayakawa wrote that all language exists on a ladder. The most general or abstract language and ideas are at the top of the ladder. The most concrete, specific words are at the bottom of the ladder.

In storytelling we create meaning at the top of the ladder and exemplify that meaning at the bottom of the ladder. Journalists are more comfortable toward the bottom of the ladder. Still, the problem is that we don't reach high enough, nor do we come right down to the bottom—where the goats can eat it, to use an old Alabama expression. Journalism tends to live in the middle, the danger zone—a lesson I learned from writing coach Carolyn Matalene.

The world of education offers good examples of the middle of the ladder of abstraction. Participants at school board meetings never discuss critical issues such as literacy or the development of young citizens who can participate in democratic life—ideas at the top of the ladder. Nor is there discussion about the children trying with difficulty to decode the reading in Miss Gallagher's first grade classroom—the bottom of the ladder. Instead, it's a world where teachers are referred to as "instructional units," while the conversation is about the "scope and sequencing of the language arts curriculum"—the middle of the ladder.

Writing at the top of the ladder is *telling*, presenting a summary. Writing at the bottom of the ladder is *showing*, presenting detail. The ladder of abstraction helps writers figure out how to express meaning at the top, how to specify it at the bottom, and how to avoid the muddle of the middle. When you include detail in a well-crafted narrative, it leads the reader up the ladder, in his or her own mind, to derive meaning from the story. If you show me a scene in which a fourteen-year-old girl gives away her down jacket on a chilly day to a homeless person, you don't have to tell me she's compassionate. Her act exemplifies it.

## Every Profile Is an Epic Story

TOMAS ALEX TIZON

I grew up in a Filipino Catholic family. In the Philippines, Catholicism has melded with indigenous religion, creating a faith with elements of animism. I grew up with the belief that powers and principalities are at work everywhere. Neither my own best efforts nor anything I learned in school has pounded that belief out of me.

When I was about seventeen, I thought about becoming a minister. I said this to my younger sister, the smart one in the family. She said, "You'd make a great minister if you weren't such a slut." We both laughed, but she had a point. She wasn't saying I was actually a slut but that I had worldly appetites that would make it difficult. She was absolutely right. If someone had written a profile of Tomas Tizon at age seventeen, that would have been in the nutgraf—the core message.

Her incisive statement answered the basic question that any character profile must answer: *Who is this person?* For any subject that question could be answered in several ways. It is okay to be creative. For example, *Vanity Fair* in May 2004 profiled Timothy Treadwell, an activist who spent his entire life working to protect bears in Alaska and then was killed by a bear. Ingeniously, the first section of the profile, by Ned Zeman, is written from the point of view of the bear.

The way writers approach profiles grows naturally from our own personalities and interests. Still, we must stay focused on the subject. When I begin working on a profile, I remind myself of four things.

*One: Your subject is as complicated as you are.*

It's very easy for journalists to create one-dimensional characters in their stories, especially when they consider only the person's official role as soldier, mayor, victim, robber. To avoid that, I think about the mass of contradictions that I am and try to remember that others are, too. This helps me guard against sentimentality and simplicity.

Each person has a dark side. Glimmers of that dark side give profiles their complexity. It might not be appropriate to explore that dark side of the individual, but often I can explore the situation's



dark side. I wrote a profile of a U.S. soldier who had died in Iraq. That profile was not the place for me to explore, say, his pornography addiction, but I explored the dark side through his family. They were against the war and hated that he was hailed as a hero, but they loved their son. The profile's tension revolved around the family, not the dead soldier.

*Two: Your subject carries a burden as heavy as yours.*

What is the one thing that gnaws at you when it's quiet and you are alone, driving to work at 7:30 in the morning? Every time you meet a person you might profile, remember that that person faces something similar. It may not end up in the profile, but the writer must look for that person's pain to understand him or her.

*Three: Your subject wants something.*

Every story has a protagonist who wants something, and must work through a series of obstacles to obtain it. Every good story, and every great profile, is a quest. The quest can be simple: to escape boredom, to get the girl, to win the money, to redeem oneself, to avenge something.

I recently wrote a profile of a twenty-five-year-old soldier. He had grown up watching war movies, wanting to be a soldier and serve his country. He was sent to Iraq, but as soon as he got there, a bomb hit his tank. Injured, he was sent back to his little town in Montana. His entire battlefield experience lasted seven minutes. I had planned to write about him as an unsung hero. I sat in his living room, and he showed me sketches he had done of the scene in Iraq: his tank blown up at a bridge and the soldiers crawling out and awaiting rescue. Through those drawings I could see his pain. He had prepared his whole life to be a warrior, but he didn't fire a single shot. He felt like a complete failure. That was his pain.

What was his quest? To come to terms with that strange turn of events. Somewhere in the tangle of the subject's burden and the subject's desire is your story.

*Four: Your subject is living an epic story.*

That epic story is the larger narrative within which your subject's life fits. I firmly believe that within two hours of talking to anyone I could develop an idea of that person's epic story. (I'll admit that this conviction might come from that Catholic-animist upbringing.) All those Greek legends we learned in school *do* translate into our contemporary lives.

Sisyphus was condemned to roll a rock up a hill forever. Modern translation: *His life was constant, painful, endless exertion.*

Prometheus, the god of fire, angered Zeus and ended up chained to a rock with an eagle pecking out his liver—forever. Translation: *His was a life of constantly trying to retrieve something lost, only to have it taken away again.*

Midas got his wish: Everything he touched turned to gold. But that included *everything*, even his family. Translation: *Your deepest desire has the capacity to destroy you.*

Every person lives multiple stories, but no writer can render all those stories. We do the best we can, using everything we have—all our senses, intellect, and intuition—to choose the right story.

## The Limits of Profiles

MALCOLM GLADWELL

Though I write profiles all the time, I believe some of the assumptions that guide profile-writing need to be reexamined. The idea that drives standard reportorial profiles is that we read and write them to learn about individuals in great depth. When I look back at the profiles I've written, I can safely say that none came close to describing who the individual subject really was. That was never my intent.

The standard method for reporting a profile is to find someone and follow that person around. At *The New Yorker*, famously, some writers spend much of their adult lives following their subjects around. That's how you get to the subject's core—or so the idea goes.

I have never called anyone and said, "I would like to follow you around." Often, I can get what I need in the first few hours I spend with the subject. Anything more than that is unnecessary and could even be harmful. I write ten-thousand-word profiles of people with whom I've spent only a few hours.

Why so little time? Because I'm not so interested in reporting about the individual. One reason I don't write profiles of people is that I believe we are incapable of truly describing a person's core. As writers we must acknowledge the limitations of our craft. People are more complicated than our profiles of them reflect.

We tend to focus too much on psychological explanations. Classic profiles devote a great deal of time to the subject's childhood, yet psy-



chologists cannot find a relationship between what happens in childhood and how a person turns out. Profiles are a form of psychological analysis and should be written with respect for the limitations of psychological work.

Psychologists talk a lot about the difference between *samples* and *signatures*. For example, you would need only about five seconds of a Beatles' song to identify it. Their music has a *signature*. With a very small slice you can know something profound about it.

Other things are only samples. If I ask you to walk outside at three in the morning and try to predict the weather for the following afternoon, you would have a difficult time doing it. Walking outside for two minutes does not provide you with a signature of the weather but only a *sample*.

Even when you spend a lot of time with people with your recorder or notebook out, you see them during only a few of the thousands and thousands of hours that make up their adult lives. We pretend that we're getting a signature, but we're not. When I write a profile of a person, I've usually also done interviews with twenty people in the subject's life. The best material comes from them, not the subject.

Though we are incapable of getting all of a person's essence, I do believe we can get at pieces of someone's personality. That's enough. In the profiles that I write, it allows me to explain the aspects of the person that bear on the topic or idea that really interests me.

I write profiles about *ideas* because I'm deeply skeptical of the legitimacy of writing only about the person. Profiles need to be more sociological and much less psychological. Many profiles that are written about individuals ought to be about subcultures. The individual is a means to examine another world—the world in which that person lives. When we limit ourselves to the individual's personality, we miss the opportunity to consider larger questions about society and subcultures.

## Travel Writing: Inner and Outer Journeys

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

Travel writing is one of the oldest forms of our craft. The story of going to a strange place and then returning home is an archetype going back at least to Homer's *Odyssey*, written (or spoken) some 2,800 years ago. In this form the author tells of a geographical journey that parallels an inner journey—from illusion to understanding, from ignorance to knowledge. Two of my favorite modern books exemplify