



Ellen Goodman, photograph courtesy of The Boston Globe.

INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN GOODMAN

Victoria Carlson

TWICE A WEEK, in a column that appears in close to 400 newspapers across the country, Ellen Goodman of the *Boston Globe* presents our public dilemmas in a distinctly personal context. Her topics range from national politics to our evolving roles in family and personal relationships. In 1980 Goodman won a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary. Her collections of columns include *Close to Home*, *At Large*, and *Keeping in Touch*. She is also the author of *Turning Points*, an extended work of nonfiction. In the following interview, conducted at the University of Iowa in the spring of 1987, Ellen Goodman discusses her approach to writing.

What is it like to write a column twice a week?

There are very severe constraints of deadlines. It's different than other kinds of writing. I think it's nice to tell students that it's like having two papers a week with no possibility of an extension. [Laughter] No "the dog ate the homework," or the computer, that's it now—"I couldn't get printout."

But your own essays cover such a wide range of approaches and topics. You have columns that are personal essays as well as columns that are. . . .

That's true, but they're all written under the same time and space constraints.

What do you typically do when you start to work on a column? Where do you start?

Well generally, I start by reading. You start by ingesting something, anything. You start by reading something, and I start by reading

newspapers—just in a general normal day that’s how I live, because I’ve been in newspaper journalism for almost twenty-four years. So I start reading newspapers.

And then you sort of sift out and try to think about what you’re going to write about. And hopefully you’ve already done the reporting by the time you sit down to write, but maybe not. Maybe it’s a reporting day. And you start doing that and then you find a place to begin, and that’s always—it’s indescribable, but that’s always the hardest thing.

So how do you really know when you’re ready to write about a particular subject?

You know when you’re ready to write about it by how much time you have left before deadline. What I’m giving you is a very unaesthetic, unliterary response.

That’s all right. . . .

But there’s a point, there’s a journalistic expression which is “you’ve got to go with what you’ve got.” And that’s somewhat less true of column writing, but not much.

Do you ever get writer’s block?

No.

What do you think writer’s block is? Why do some people experience it?

People who go into journalism, or *stay* in journalism, don’t get writer’s block. Except for, you know, an hour. You know what I mean, two hours—you get up, you walk around, you think you’re desperate, you think you’re never going to do it, but you know you don’t have the option of writer’s block, and people who do get it, and it is a serious problem, just don’t stay in newspapers. You can’t. You’re out of work—real fast.

And also I find that you write *about* something. It’s easier to get writer’s block, I think, if you’re writing fiction. I’ve never done it, but my image would be—because it’s *so* heady, and in journalism, at the worst, you’re writing about something.

When you write a type of column such as “Living off the Land,” that’s in

Keeping in Touch, a more personal essay, is your approach different? Are you thinking in a different way?

Usually, I've been thinking about it a little bit longer. It's been sort of in the back of my head.

What goes into making something that's very personal, part of your own personal experience, into some sort of public statement, a public expression?

Well it can't be so personal—I mean—it can't be about your fingernails. It can't be about something so personal that it's boring to other people. So you try to broaden it out. Not always—I mean everybody has four or five personal columns in them in a year. You know, the dog bites the electrician. But beyond that, you have to write to a general experience or else it's very self-indulgent. And newspaper writing isn't self-indulgent. Even the use of the expression—you wouldn't say that in fiction. You wouldn't say someone was being self-indulgent and mean it perjoratively, you'd mean it creatively. But in journalism, because you're writing in a newspaper, you're connecting, you're trying to communicate in a direct way, you don't indulge all that often. It's different.

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What was it like to write your book Turning Points?

Well, it was very hard.

In what way?

In that I was writing it and doing my column. And it was very difficult to keep a flow, a long-term flow, while you're doing short-term things. Also, any book is on your back for three years—or "twenty"—doing it the way I did it.

The interviewing was very interesting. I have a friend at the *Washington Post* who says that journalism would be the greatest job in the world if you could go out, interview the people, come back and tell all your friends about it, and not have to write. And so it was difficult in that sense of always knowing it was there, waiting to be done. But most people would tell you that's writing.

I was interested in how you interviewed all these people, because what struck me when I read the book was the real sensitivity of the interviews. I mean even the

word interview doesn't sound adequate. Interview almost sounds too mechanical. How did you encourage these people to open up and tell their stories?

Well, I think if you talk to people, most people want to tell you. It's not that complicated, I mean, unless you're asking them with a camera on their face to tell you about their abortion or something. Most people are interested in telling you about their lives, if you're interested. I don't find that a problem. Of course, I've been doing it for a long time.

How do you interview someone well?

There's no *someone*. There are enormous differences between how you interview somebody who you're trying to get information out of, and the person doesn't want to give, you know, in an investigatory sense, and how you talk to someone about their life. And there are enormous differences between people. If you develop one interview technique and try to use it on everybody, it just doesn't work. Anyway, most of interviewing is listening, and asking the next question.

Did having more space than you have in your column change the way you approached the writing? Did it change the form of your prose, or the style?

I haven't read this book in eight years, so at the risk of sounding like Ronald Reagan, it's hard to draw back and—but clearly, you have a lot more room for letting it go. You don't have to get all the ends up so quickly.

How do you reconcile the full limitations of space, when you're trying to get the correct number of "inches" in your column, and there's so much more to say?

That's part of the challenge. Well first of all, you can come back and say it again next time. I wrote a column this week—on the basic subject of what does sexuality mean in a person's life. Now, you can't do that in seventy-five lines, you know. It was writing off of all the questions of Hart's personal life. It's a real challenge. It's a constraint. But you'd be amazed how much less space you need to say something interesting. You can't say everything, and then people write back and say "why didn't you say x, y, and z?" But you can say a thought, and then maybe some other time you come back to it and you say another thought. But, you know, that's almost true whatever space you're given. How much space do you think you'd need to write the book of what human sexuality means in a person's life? There's no way, right? You condense a lot. A lot of my time at the VDT [computer terminal]

is spent editing. It's good discipline. It's a "discipline" that a lot of writers should have more *discipline* about—writing shorter.

What do you throw out when you edit?

Well, sometimes you throw out a lot of the stuff you took your time to report, or sometimes you throw out a lot of the things that sort of underlay. I mean if you write a piece with a certain amount of authority, a lot of the solid part of that authority never shows up because it comes from having talked with people, and having thought about an issue, and having read a great deal about it, and it gets factored into the voice. It is not actually appearing as quotations or as footnotes or any of the things that academics do. It's just because it's part of that sense of authority that the piece carries.

When you write with a voice of authority, and especially when you write about a very controversial subject, a very charged issue, how do you establish, first of all, a tone that works?

I don't really know how you do that, it's not an artificial thing, it's an internal thing. You don't adopt a voice, you let it out, you work with it until your own voice gets out. It's not some thing that you say, "I think I'm going to write this piece with a voice of authority," and then you go out and you find an appropriate voice of authority and you copy it, and you learn to do it, and you do it. It's expressive, and either it's there to express or it isn't.

How would you describe your voice of authority?

I wouldn't, really. I don't really know. It's just something that when I write, it sounds very much like when I speak, and there isn't an enormous—there isn't, you know, "Ellen Goodman, writer" over here and "Ellen Goodman, speaker" or whatever, over here. I really don't know because I haven't studied it—I never took a journalism course.

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How did you get started—what was your first job like?

My first job was at *Newsweek* magazine, and it was in 1963, and I sort of walked in off the street, literally. And I got a really lousy job, which is what they gave overeducated young women, these jobs as researchers. All the men at *Newsweek* were reporters, and all the women were researchers. You have to realize this was before the Civil Rights Act of

1964, so there was no legislation saying you couldn't discriminate against women. And everything was quite out-and-out. You know, if you were a girl—quote, unquote—you became a researcher. If you were a man, you became a writer, or a reporter. And I stayed at *Newsweek* in this lowly capacity for two years. And then I went to the *Detroit Free Press* as a reporter for two years. Then I went to the *Globe*, in 1967, and was a reporter. I started writing a column part time in '71, and then I had a Nieman Fellowship in '73-'74. After that I wrote a column full time.

When you got the column, you could go beyond being purely objective in your writing. What was that like?

Of course, there's the whole argument in journalism about objectivity and subjectivity. Everybody has a point of view. It's just that, when you're a reporter, you're required to mute that point of view, and at most, it's covert rather than overt. And you're not supposed to express it, obviously, even though it may infiltrate what you're doing. And when you're a columnist, that's the whole thing. That's the job, to tell people what you think.

I've read some of your work in which you talk about the idea of ambivalence, and you have said that the word that most typified the 1970s was ambivalence.

Yes, but I think what I mean is not even so much the *seventies*, as it is *people*. I mean, you're ambivalent, and societies are ambivalent about different things in different periods. But certainly the ambivalence about women's roles remains, remains in altered forms. It changes, but ambivalence is a real key.

What is it like to write for an audience that's ambivalent?

What's it like to live? What's it like to deal with families that are ambivalent? The world is at least ambivalent, if not—whatever the mathematical quarter of ambivalent is. [Laughter] Life is very complex, which is not exactly a news flash, and people's feelings about things are often contradictory. And rather than pretending that that isn't so, and writing as if it weren't so, it's more useful, if you're an observer of society, if you're trying to describe the arguments that go on, to try to get a handle on some of that, and I do a lot of that.

Some people who teach writing, and who are concerned with the theoretical side of writing, say that writing is a means of arriving at an end. In other words,

it's a process of thinking, and that through the act of writing, through the process of writing, you can arrive at whole new conclusions. Does writing do that for you?

Well, you certainly arrive at conclusions. I mean there are many times when you're writing a column, when you start out with a kind of reaction, which is more of an emotional thing, and you end up with a conclusion, which is more of an intellectual thing. So that there is the process of defining, and codifying—that's not quite the right word—but it's a process of getting a handle on something, very often.

Making sense?

Making sense of your world, sure. That's what everybody does, whether they're writing fiction or non-fiction. It's an attempt to, even if they're writing science fiction or nonsense, to attempt to make some order, if not sense . . . out of what they see and out of what they feel. And I think that's probably generally true. Who are the people who are driven to write? They're a sub-group, aside from those who are writing memos. [Laughter] I mean people who are writing serious writing—they're a sub-group of people who are trying to find meaning or express what's going on. You know, they're not everybody. They're not people who just accept.

Has the experience of writing ever changed your ideas about something, or at least shown you other perspectives on it, affecting your conclusion about some issue?

I would call that the process of reporting, rather than the process of writing. Of course, I'm using "reporting" in a very amorphous way. The process of reporting includes thinking, as well as talking to people, as well as reading—the whole process of collecting information. Clearly, if you're not doing that, you're not going to be able to write. It's important to me when I write, particularly if I'm writing about public policy or something, to let the reader know that I understand that other people may not agree. I mean, if it's that kind of piece. So that you have to think your way through, and very often if you're writing, further down, an issue that the reader might have thought about, and that's one of the things that you—certainly, that I—want to do, is push the argument a little further. You have to start where they are, agree with her, which is also part of the way you think something through anyway, you let people know how you're thinking about it. And then they presumably, or hopefully, accept, even if they

don't agree with you. And a lot of people don't agree with you, in point of view, but at least they accept how you got there, what you're talking about, and that you understand other perspectives.

You use humor, quite a bit, don't you think?

I don't *use* humor. [Laughter]

OK, what do you mean?

[Laughter] I don't think about what I do especially. I mean, I've never, as I said, taken a journalism course, I've never analyzed writing. In fact, when people from time to time have done a paper, it's like, if you thought about how you did something, before you sat down to do something, you couldn't do it. You just do it. I think that's probably my newspaper, hard-edged sort of attitude about it, a little bit. But it's not like you *use* humor. You either are humorous or you aren't—you either have an arch point of view and see things that way, or you don't.

Writing a column is expressing your voice. And if you aren't a funny person, there is nothing more pathetic—I don't mean that I'm a hilarious person, I'm not. But, you know, if you don't have that perspective, there's nothing worse than somebody trying to be funny. Although humor's very hard to write.

Why?

It just is—you're never sure whether it works until somebody reads it. You're never sure it works because it's often kind of "ticky." Humor is more "ticky" than a lot of other things. Eccentric, personal. It's like two people's senses of humor may match or may not. My secretary tells me that she often laughs because there are some times, on the days when I'm writing something funny, I look grimaced. She thinks I'm writing about nuclear holocaust or something. It's just hard—humor is hard.

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You do a lot of portraits, not just a whole column devoted to someone such as Eleanor Roosevelt or Norman Rockwell, or some other famous person, but within your columns you will have a portrait of a person in a situation. And we come to know something about that person as an individual. What has led you to pick up on that and work it into an issues-oriented column?

I think that you probably see more of those in a collection than you

would see in the course of writing a column, because they're distilled. Because at the times when you put together a collection, you can't do as many things that are timely because they lose their timeliness, for obvious reasons. I'm interested in people, I'm interested in how public policy interacts with people's lives. When I wrote the column on the recent affirmative action decision, everybody starts getting so sort of arcane about what it means or what it doesn't mean, and footnotes in the Supreme Court decision, and it's more useful just to say what actually happened in this person's life that made this relevant. You just sort of bring things out of the heady atmosphere into your own realm.

What does it feel like to be finally finished with something?

Well, I think that's one of the nice things about journalism. I have a friend at the office who says "I write 'em, they run 'em." It's sort of, ahh, done. And you have to have a sort of personality that can put things behind you, even if you haven't liked that one. Because it happens. It's not like writing fiction where if you don't like it you throw it away, where you put it in your top drawer. There are days when it's not your best work and it's due. And it's going to be out there, and so there are days when you just put it behind you. There are other days, obviously, when you feel much better about it, but you have to have the capacity to put it behind you and go on to the next one. And I think that it's part of the reason why you don't get writer's block. Journalists tend not to think of their work as precious. It's wrapping the fish the next day, people are reading it on the subway, they're reading it over the coffee, they're putting the kitty litter on it, and they're flipping past your column to get to the supermarket ads.

But they're also reading it in school. They're reading it in advanced writing classes. People are looking at Ellen Goodman's work.

That's great, but that isn't the majority. I mean, my column runs in four hundred newspapers, twice a week mostly, whenever. So, there are millions of people reading it, and there are ten thousand who might ever see it in the kind of course that you're talking about. So the average reader is reading it in just the way that I describe, and maybe if you're lucky they say, "I've got to get the kids out to the bus, but I want to save the column for later." That's luck. That's when you've made a constituency—a person might actually save a column. Those are the few, most people just swish. [Tossing gesture]

They read it quickly?

Or they *don't*. But you want people to read. Everybody who writes wants people to read. You want to engage people.

What kind of people?

Newspaper readers are, ahh, a wide range, in terms of age, socio-economics, and you don't have the very poorest segment of the population, who don't generally read newspapers, but aside from that, it's as general an audience as you ever get. And of varied interests and varied education, and it's really a mass audience.

And varied points of view—so when you write about, say, a “women’s issue” to use a phrase, or an issue of feminism, and you know that it’s going to be read by a reader who is hostile to that kind of point of view, what goes into the choice of words?

You don't think about that, when you're writing, you don't think about the retired colonel from Boca Raton who's going to write to you on a postcard and tell you you're full of shit. What you think about is the issue and the nut of it, and how to write it, and how to make a coherent argument, and you hope that that person will read it. That person's not going to change his mind, but you hope that maybe it turns the issue around a little bit. I don't belong to the Bill Buckley “You can't be able to read this” school of writing. He'd love that. . . . [Laughter]

What do you mean by that?

Well, you know, there are some people who, by use of syntax and references and vocabulary, make themselves difficult to read. I believe in being accessible, whether you're talking to somebody or you're writing. If you're writing for a mass audience, you want to be approachable, accessible, and you want to connect.

And that's affecting all your selection when you're sitting at the terminal. . . .

No, what's affecting it is time. I know this is contradictory. I can tell you what's out there, and I can tell you this sort of thing, but when you're sitting there you're thinking about what interests you. How to discuss it, and how to describe it, and the other stuff I'm saying is just sort of built in at a certain point—that you want to be clear, and you're

not writing a diary, you're writing for other people just becomes part of the process. But after you've been doing it and doing it a long time, you pick things that interest you and are also newsy. The one thing that all my readers have in common, by definition, is that they read the newspaper, so there's a text. To a certain extent, I'm writing off of the news more than half of the time. And then you think about the task at hand, like solving a puzzle. How do I solve this puzzle. This is today's puzzle. Before you go home, you have to solve today's puzzle, or they won't let you go home.

And sometimes, you said, you never fully solve it?

Right. But you finish it.

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How would you describe yourself as a writer? Are you a journalist, are you a commentator?

I'm a commentator. I'm an observer. I suppose generically, a journalist.

How does one write essays for journalism?

I don't know, I was a street reporter for ten years before I ever wrote one. I come out of a reporting tradition, and most of the columnists come out of reporting traditions. George Will was an academic. But I came out of being a street reporter, basically, and feature writer, etc., the whole realm. And I think what's crucial is experience, that you can't write a column on personal experience as easily or as effectively until you've gotten older. Let's suppose that I'm right about what I was saying before—that everybody has six personal columns in them. That's the first three weeks. So to do it week, after week, after week, calls on reporting skills and on experience, and I think it's very hard to write a personal opinion column if you're on a twice a weekly basis, until you've had some time to learn other things, for finding your own voice in other ways. It's not hard to be a reporter, it's not hard to be an essayist, but to be a newspaper, to be a regular, you need a little time in reporting, I think. That's not necessarily what everybody would say.

Who do you read?

I read everything. I'm a fairly eclectic, omnivorous reader. I read

several newspapers a day, and I probably at least read through all the major national monthlies. And I try to read non-fiction and novels on a gradual basis. I give up other things. I tend not to watch enough television, which would be much more useful in commenting on cultural events. I miss the gate on television because I can't stand doing the reporting which is, to say, watching the stuff. So I kind of miss the gate on that, and I should be more up on it. But it's how you allocate your time.

Whose work in commentary do you like?

I like a lot of people, for a lot of different reasons, even ones I may disagree with politically. I always enjoyed Meg Greenfield because she had a kind of arch Washington style. I have enjoyed Bill Safire who I don't always agree with, to put it mildly, but he's a good columnist—punchy. Good columnists, I enjoy a lot of them. Dave Broder, who is very reliable and constructive, and a good reporter, he's good. And I like Tom Lewis because he's maintained a sense of righteousness, which is admirable. There's a lot of different people I like.

You were talking about style, and I'm probably giving you, I'm probably tipping over, giving you a less reflective point of view because of the tradition it comes out of, by the way, that I do write in a more literary vein than a lot of other columnists. I know that. I mean I like writing. I like playing with words. I like metaphors. You know sometimes you have to be careful you don't get metaphor happy, but you know, I like all of those things. It's very hard work, but I like the process of writing and playing with words. So I tipped my remarks a little bit beyond when I talk with somebody from a more academic tradition because I think that academics tend to over-analyze so that they get stuck in terms of writing and finding their own voice, because they get stuck on the water metaphors.

They get stuck on formulas?

They get stuck on formulas, and they get stuck on analyzing water metaphors in somebody's work, and what your work is about is not the water metaphors.

What is it about?

It is, well, let's see, what I mean is what you do, when you start to write, is you express yourself, whether it's a personal essay or not, you find a way of writing that's constant, if that's the right word. I've always

thought that one of the tricks of writing is listening to your writing in your ear.

Do you read your work aloud?

Well no, but everyone in the city room tells me that I . . . [makes a gesture of mumbling and typing]. So you hear it in your head. It's this process of listening to yourself write, and that takes *time*, but it's the only way that you can do it. It's the only way you can know if it sounds right.