

Duke Journalism Awards Dinner

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Prepared Remarks by

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2021-22 recipient of the Futrell Award for Outstanding Achievement in Communications and Journalism

"Look around you. Look around the room, at all these faces. I'm seated between Phil and Michaela, two people that before tonight I've only ever met on Zoom. I see students I sat down with in masks at the Sanford School just a few weeks ago. It's so nice to see actual faces, not just this *[[covers nose and mouth]]*. This, which is anathema to a journalist, because you can't read the person you're interviewing and they can't read you.

This time last year, we couldn't have shared this connection. Or the year before. Wow.

You know the importance of connection because we all lived without it for way too long.

Human beings crave connection. We evolved for it. We exist for it. Our systems depend on it.

I wish I could say that our time of disconnection is over now that the pandemic is ending. But we are still living in a time of intense disconnection—from one another, from a shared sense of what's true and from an inability to agree on the rules that govern a civil society. It can feel awful. Even scary.

Tonight I'm going to talk about the importance of connection. Because as I thought about what I wanted to say to you, it kept coming to me over and over that for me, journalism is and has always been about connection.

Connection with one another, in the newsroom; finding the connection between one event and the next to help make sense of the world; and building connection within our communities. I think journalism is both part of the problem of disconnection in our world, and, I hope, part of the cure.

I'm Valerie Bauerlein Jackson, and I am the least likely graduate of the class of 1993 to be standing before you tonight. I'll tell you more about that in a minute.

For now, let me start by saying thank you so much for this honor. It is a joy to be here. If I get through this speech without crying, it will be something.

I'd like to thank Nan, Matt and all the Futrell family, longtime owners of the Daily News in Washington, N.C., up in the northeastern corner of the state. Thanks for the decades you've invested in good journalism and in making your part of the world a better place. And thank you for sponsoring this award, which has recognized, and encouraged, a truly awe-inspiring group of journalists over the past 24 years.

Speaking of awe-inspiring journalists. Congratulations to the students, Michaela, Caroline, Chris and Carmela. I am so impressed. Keep up the good work.

I'd like to thank Phil, Bill, Shelley and all the folks at the DeWitt Wallace Center for making this event happen, particularly for making room for my family. That includes my parents, who are here, my sisters, my best friend, my nephews...I am so glad they could all be here because they know better than anyone what this work means to me. And they know the toll it can take when some man made or natural disaster takes me away for days at a time. My husband Scott likes to say, "Val's travel is not too bad. It's just frequent and unpredictable." Thank you, Scott, for all you do for us, and a special thank you to my daughter Amelia and my son Luke.

So I'm going to talk for about 15 to 20 minutes, a little bit about my career and the state of journalism. Then I look forward to taking your questions.

Students, I'm going to start with a story for you.

Yesterday was the last day of classes, right? I invite you to come with me on a journey back to the last day of classes in 1993. You were literally like negative 10, but bear with me.

The Spin Doctors, a far less cool band than A\$AP Ferg, played the senior concert, the precursor of LDOC. Zima, the precursor of White Claw, was the hot seller at the Hideaway, the precursor of Devil's Krafthouse. Instead of texts, we communicated with dry erase markers on message boards on our dorm room doors, but other than that, everything was pretty much the same. I am pretty sure we even had tie-dyed t-shirts, like the ones I saw on campus today.

My senior year was coming to an end and I was freaking out. It was a recession, and the walls of House D were covered with rejection letters. That was a thing in those days.

Around this very time, I accepted a job teaching English in Japan.

And while I watched my friends set off for glamorous jobs on Capitol Hill, or Wall Street, or San Francisco like Carmela, I flew to the biggest rice-producing prefecture in Japan and spent a year teaching at an agricultural school and tailoring my lessons to be about fruits and vegetables.

And, yes, that whole year, I was low-level stressed about what I was going to do with my life. But I also had a ball. At the end of the year, I spent all my yen traveling around Asia.

Then, I came home. And I lived with my parents for five.long.weeks.

Like I said, I had spent all my yen, so I began looking for work right away. I interviewed for a job working with kids at a Methodist home for children. I worked as a temp, which I was terrible at. I hit bottom when I answered a want-ad, in the newspaper—I feel like I need to explain what that is? No? Ok. It was a want-ad for an exciting opportunity to make my own schedule and be my own boss. And I showed up for a seminar at an old grocery store on Market Street in Wilmington, my hometown. And I listened for an hour about the virtues of selling vacuum cleaners door to door.

Like I said, it was a dark time.

Around then, I went to a friend's wedding. And at the reception, I ended up sitting next to a woman who had been an editor at The Daily Tar Heel and had taken a job at The Shelby Daily Star, a little paper up in the foothills about three hours west of here.

I told her my tale of woe, about the vacuum cleaners, and she said something so simple, I'll never forget it. She said, "Val, you have a sense of curiosity about the world, and you can write. You should be a reporter."

Well, I had always been interested in journalism but I had it in my mind that a reporter was a hard-nosed investigative Washington Post type like in the movies and I wasn't sure that was me.

Luckily, she called me a week or so later and said, "We have five reporters and one is leaving. You should call the editor."

So I did. And he said, "Well, send me your clips and we'll talk." And I was like, "Clips? Do you really need clips..." Because I'd never even set foot in The Chronicle.

He finally agreed to see me if I drove up that Saturday because he'd be in the office anyway catching up on letters to the editor. So I drove the five hours up there and by the time we'd talked an hour or so, he agreed to hire me on a trial basis for two months, \$300 a week.

I was thrilled. I think I started the next week.

And guess what? I loved it. My first day I was assigned an 8-inch sidebar for the tab, a profile of the marshal of the Shelby Christmas parade. And I was like, ok. What's an inch, what's a sidebar and what's a tab? And I learned a key lesson. "Marshall is a fire marshal," and fire marshal only has one 'l.' My first mistake!

But I loved it from the beginning. Figuring out who to call, how to find stuff out, how to explain what you know, how to put it in order. I loved everything about it. I came to see myself, particularly on tough assignments, as not representing myself, or the newspaper, but the 18,000 people in town who did not have time to go to City Council meetings. I literally pictured myself walking in the room with a bunch of tiny little people on my shoulder.

I went on to work at a series of slightly bigger papers. I covered City Hall, then county government, then the State House in Columbia, S.C., for The State newspaper, and Congress for the Raleigh News & Observer.

I know we teach journalism in the classroom but it really is a craft. You learn it by doing and by watching people more experienced than you. Every newsroom I was part of was a family, some happier than others, but a family nonetheless.

It's really all about connection. So my first bit of advice to you is when a professor, or an editor at one of your internships, or anyone you admire, says, "Keep in touch." Take them at their word. Every single job I've ever had in journalism was because I heard about it from a colleague or a mentor or a friend of a friend.

Including at The Wall Street Journal.

Anyway, I am coming up on my 17th anniversary at The Wall Street Journal, the best news organization in the world. No offense to Frank. We love the Times. But the Journal really is the best.

When I have a hard assignment now, I imagine all the people in a football stadium on my shoulder. For some reason, I picked Ohio State because it's one of the biggest with something like 100,000 people.

Last summer, when I had to go to Miami and cover the harrowing mass grave at a collapsed condo tower, the only reason I could do it was because I knew I represented far more than myself.

I wish I could give you lots of good news about the state of our beloved field, but I'm afraid this is a good news/bad news situation.

We're reporters, right? So in thinking about what to say to you tonight, I did some reporting. I went back and read a few of the speeches given by past Futrell winners.

In 1999, Judy Woodruff was the speaker. I am in awe of her—I was a B.N. Duke scholar when I was here and she was the speaker at our scholarship dinner one year.

Anyway, in 1999, her big concern was the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and the rising power of cable news, particularly CNN, where she worked at the time. Remember this was in

the wake of the OJ Simpson trial, which was one of the first witnessed in real time by virtually everyone in America. And also in the time of Monica Lewinsky and the impeachment of Bill Clinton, and breathless analysis on TV, even in the absence of any new developments.

Judy Woodruff said we were in jeopardy of prizing sensationalism over substance, and well, she was right.

Fast-forward a few years and the winner was Kevin Sack, a Pulitzer winner then at the LA Times. He lamented the fact that newspaper circulation had dropped from 62 million in 1990 to 53 million in 2005. I am sad to say it has dropped even further to 24.3 million in 2021. Grim indeed.

In 2017, Craig Whitlock, who actually is a hard-nosed investigative reporter for The Washington Post, and was editor of the Chronicle when I was an undergrad, warned about the war on facts at the Trump White House.

And lastly, in 2018, the New York Times' columnist Peter Applebome lamented, and I'm going to quote this directly because he said it so beautifully, "the broken bond between journalists and their audience, the notion of a shared culture."

They were all right.

And I'd add, a concern of mine in 2022 is the proliferation of disinformation. There are legit-looking fake news posts zooming around social media 10 times faster than the truth can catch up. They undermine good journalism because people become skeptical of everything they see.

Another worry on my mind, as a parent, is how young people consume news. My kids watch something called "CNN 10" at their middle school, a 10-minute daily mashup of cable news, and I have never been more thankful for a 10-minute mashup of cable news. They get Ukraine, Elon Musk. It's something, right?

A big question on my mind is how do we reach young people where they are, if where they are is TikTok?

It's incumbent on us to consume good information, to pay for it and to proselytize about it, as you're doing tonight.

But there is good news, too.

I find great hope in the work that Phil, Bill, Asa and so many others at Sanford are doing about defining and defending truth, and uncovering and calling out disinformation.

I find hope in the number of young people who enrolled in journalism programs and law schools after a years-long assault on truth. I admire the feistiness of our legacy news outlets like my own News & Observer, and the proliferation of new ones, including The 9th Street Journal,

and The Assembly in Raleigh, which is building a newsroom the size of the N&O's and writing big stories in the public interest.

I'm so gratified to see Duke and DeWitt Wallace nurturing those programs, identifying and elevating good information. There are fewer jobs in legacy publications, true, but there are more publications than ever before and many are doing some seriously good journalism.

And good journalism, by trained journalists with a shared sense of ethics, is key to working ourselves out of this mess.

Let me spend a minute on my current project, which has already taught me a lot about interconnectedness. I am three weeks into book leave and yeah, I'm freaking out like it's 1993.

Last summer, my big, big boss, the top of the masthead, called me, which he rarely ever does. And he said, "Are you following this crazy murder case in South Carolina?"

He knows I'm obsessed with South Carolina. No offense, North Carolina, but South Carolina is way funner!

And I'm like, "the case with the double homicide? Where the wife and son of a wealthy family were found shot dead on their hunting estate? And it turns out there are three other mysterious deaths? And there's \$10 million missing? Yeah, I guess I'm following it."

We talked and then I asked a classic WSJ question, drilled into me over years of writing about money, business and power. I said, "Well, what's the Wall Street Journal version of this story?"

And he paused a second, and I think he even sighed. And he said, "Sometimes a good fricking story is just a good fricking story!" Except he didn't say fricking.

And off I went with the big boss's blessing. I wrote a story on the Murdaugh family of South Carolina that ran on Page One last fall. My goal, besides telling a good fricking story, was to show how the family had controlled the prosecutor's office for 120 years AND the most powerful law firm in the Lowcountry. And how that had allowed them to have extraordinary control over law enforcement, politicians and ordinary people. And how that influence may have affected the fact that those homicides remain unsolved, with no suspects, a year later.

I signed a book deal because the story is about true crime, and the subject of a Dateline episode (which I was on?!, to my sisters' delight). But also because the story is really more akin to "All The King's Men," or "To Kill a Mockingbird." The family's power took root in the years after the Civil War, when freed Black slaves outnumbered whites in the Lowcountry by 5:1, and white people set up systems that let them hold onto power. The consolidation of power by these so-called rural barons allowed them a degree of control that just didn't exist outside the rural South.

I am hopeful that the book can connect the dots on what that Jim Crow-era rolling up of power has meant for the economy, the political system and yes, the ability of a small group of people to wield power for decades. But first I have to write the darn thing.

So I've talked about the connections among journalists, which have nurtured my career and taught me everything I know.

I've talked about the importance of creating connections within our communities.

And I talked about my goal of finding connections between an individual story and the bigger picture. Or as Bill described it to me yesterday, in his book and hopefully my own, taking those daily iterations of the first draft of history and trying to write actual history.

Let me close with a quick story.

I am not an athlete. When I was younger, the only team I was ever captain of was Quiz Bowl.

But when I was in eighth grade, I ran track. I know, it's ridiculous. But I did it because my softball coach was the track coach and it was just a few weeks after school and one big meet, as I recall.

Well, there was a lot of life happening at that time. My sister Jessica and I ran for student body president and vice president, and lost, I might add. But we ran a good campaign! And my older sister Lisa was starting high school, and my parents were traveling out of town some to care for sick family and it was just a busy time.

Anyway, flash forward to my late 20s, early 30s, and I offhandedly mentioned being on the track team. And my sisters, who are both here, were like, "Uh no, you absolutely did not." And I'm like, "For what possible reason would I make that up?"

So they called my mom, who I hope you met, because she's about the nicest person in the world. Her nickname is literally America's Sweetheart. So like sisters do, they called America's Sweetheart and asked her if I ran track and I think her actual words were: "Ha! No, I don't remember that at all."

And so it began. If someone was shopping for tennis shoes, it'd be like, 'Let's ask Val, she ran traaaack.' If the Olympics were on, it was like, "Val's going to want to watch track and field." It was relentless.

Well, a few years ago, my parents decided they had no more need for our boxes of high school and college memorabilia. Yours will too, I promise. So they loaded up a bunch of stuff and sent it back to Raleigh with me and my sisters. My brother-in-law Warren, who's here, was going through a box because I think he wanted to get it out of his home office. And he found some

incontrovertible evidence that in fact, for the past, I don't know, 20 years, I'd been telling the truth about being on the track team.

He had a choice, a moral choice. Should he tell me and relieve me of, literally, decades of suffering? Or pretend it never happened and go about life as usual?

Well, that Christmas, after all the presents had been opened, my brother-in-law comes out with one last gift bag.

And in it was this *[[pulls out prized possession, which is, ridiculously, a trophy of a girl running]]*. County Champions! D.C. Virgo Junior High! With my name on it!

I keep this in my office. And I tell you about this awesome trophy to make a point.

When faced with a moral decision, like my brother-in-law was, it's incumbent on you to...Haha that's not the point, I'm kidding.

The point is, I was bad at track. I did it because my friends on the softball team were doing it.

And, I was pretty mediocre at softball. I was scared of the ball and always hopeful, especially if there were bases loaded, bottom of the inning, that they would hit the ball to someone, literally anyone, else.

And it hit me not too long ago.

Journalism was the first thing where I was like, "Hit the ball to me. I want the ball." When a big story breaks overnight, I have a tendency to call my boss and say, "I'm up, do you need me to start making calls?" To this day, I want the ball. Hit the ball to me.

So let me leave you with a few bits of advice:

When you find something that makes you feel like, "Hit the ball to me," pay attention. If that thing is journalism, I'll be thrilled.

Secondly, if you don't know what you're going to do with the rest of your life, don't sweat it. It's going to work out.

And lastly, this is a business of connection. Please stay in touch.

Thank you."