
Breakfast with Barbara Reynolds

by Barbara Reynolds

Editor's note: Barbara Reynolds, a member of the editorial board of USA Today, was the featured speaker at the Beta Phi Mu breakfast during the 1991 NCLA Biennial Conference.

I am very happy to be here with you. As I was telling Pauletta last night over dinner, Good librarians are better than American Express cards; journalists cannot afford to leave home without you.

First of all, we can't afford to be caught with false information. Not only would we sound stupid, but you risk a lawsuit, if your data are wrong. At *USA Today* the librarian is an equal partner with the journalists. She checks names, dates, places. If we have an idea, we ask for ways to develop. But what I think is the difference between a good librarian and an excellent librarian is that while some librarians act upon request; excellent librarians act before they are asked. They know that information is power, and that important decisions are made based upon information. Good librarians react; excellent librarians act. They become truth-tellers, based on the information they provide; they become the engines of social change by helping to fight ignorance. And a lot of times people have to have good information, even to know we are ignorant.

Journalists and librarians — information providers have the power to change, to correct, to reinvent, to help people think in new ways. We can be truth-tellers for the new world order. But what we do will not depend upon how many computers we own, or how powerful our satellites are, or what is in our data base, or whether we use Nexus or Lexus, but on how much we love each other. And it depends upon our courage. Do we have the courage to ask the right questions, to speak out when it is safer to keep quiet, to see a wrong and correct it?

What good is it to be in the middle of a technological explosion that will take us to Mars, to space colonies millions of miles away, when we can't see the homeless people we are walking over on earth. When

we see them, we ask questions of why we allow five hundred thousand children to be homeless in America. That means asking the next question... what can I do about it? And that's when things get difficult, because when we ask the right questions long enough, pretty soon we will demand right answers, or better yet start providing some answers ourselves.

When the public has poor information, this helps to create myths, superstitions and biases. Sometimes the most powerful act only means raising the right questions, at the right time, and at the right place. For example, why did the nation have to wait nearly 500 years until 1991 to find out that in 1492 Christopher Columbus did much more than sail the ocean blue ... that those first encounters of Columbus quickly led to last encounters. The Indians of the Caribbean were destroyed within two generations by the Spanish discoverers. This terrible saga raises the questions of who were the real savages? The original people who showed their Spanish visitors love and sharing? They were hanged; they had their hands cut off when they did not bring in their quarterly quota of gold dust. Their chiefs were roasted on fires of green wood... and when their cries kept the Spaniards awake, they were silenced with wooden slats put over their tongues. Christopher Columbus did more than sail the ocean blue. He set into motion a sequence of greed, cruelty, slavery, and genocide that has few parallels. And that, my friends, was the old world order. But why, when this information has long been available, why did it take five hundred years for the truth to rise? Where was this information? Wasn't it in the library books? Whose job is it to set truth free? Who is holding truth hostage? Yet in a strange way, truth is therapeutic. As we set the record straight about the old world order, that is helping to shape the new world order, especially within the USA.

Cultural diversity is in. Multiculturalism is in. Black people, brown people, yellow people are fashionable. The demographics of the browning of America are pushing a revolution of cultural change. By the year 2010, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, new immigrants will account for 90 per cent of the new hires in the workforce. Brown people, black people, yellow people are the new majority...and those information providers, like yourselves, who can deliver the knowledge we need to make peace with ourselves, to be sensitive, to be understanding, will be the engines of social change.

Based on different information, people are asking different questions. Why, for example, does the USA treat Native Americans like mascots..objects..doing the Atlanta Brave "chop," and cheering, "Go, Redskins," when that word to a Native American is a dirty word? Why are we just hearing this now, when native Americans have been saying, "Enough of this" for decades? If information is power, why often do we have so little of it? Where were

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the journalists or the librarians, who should have provided the information to let the opinion makers know how ignorant we are in our relationship to the first Americans? Those who refuse to ask the right questions ensure we will never acquire the necessary answers for corrective action for healing.... And the media are the biggest culprits.

For example, of the 1,865 questions asked the president in mid-September, 1,225 were on foreign policy. The "education president" was asked a grand total of four questions about public schools... six questions about the explosive issue of health care, two questions on the state of the banking system, and no questions about the homeless.

It is not always the president who does not have the guts to answer tough

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challenges. It's the media who haven't got the guts to ask. There is no reason at all except spineless timidity that allows the president to set the national agenda on what is important in this nation. We need to raise the right questions. Why, for example, can mothers with children be painted as welfare cheats when the taxpayers support a welfare system for savings and loan crooks? Right now the tab is seven hundred billion and growing. Who are the real welfare cheats? And why do we applaud the president for being a great peacemaker, when he is ignoring the war in our streets — twenty-three thousand died last year — murdered — more than any year in the Vietnam war. People in America are dialing 911 — no one comes.

Why are we allowing a myth to build even as we speak — that it is okay for Magic Johnson to be the messenger of safe sex. Yet, statistics right now in most libraries, will tell you that there is no such thing as safe sex... that condoms fail 14 to 20 percent of the time. So if condoms fail to protect against life, since when did condoms become a perfect prevention against death through AIDS? And isn't there anything in our moral souls raising questions like what ever happened to morality...to marriage... to commitment? As long as you have a condom, then sex is all right? Do we say to our children, "Dear, don't forget your crayons and your condoms," as they leave for school? When do we find the courage to challenge not only wrong information but also custom and social practices, when we know in our hearts they are wrong?

And while we are on the subject of AIDS, the information in our libraries will tell us that AIDS is an equal opportunity killer... not a

disease about men ... another perverted message coming from the focus on Magic Johnson. AIDS is the fifth largest killer of women ... and in New York State and New Jersey it is the number one killer of women. Then don't you think something is wrong when AIDS is hitting women at record rates...but most of the research is on men, as well as most of the drug trials? We don't even know what AIDS looks like in women. But who do you know that is raising these questions? And until the right questions are raised, and there's no credible answer, AIDS will be known by its misinformation. The public is depending upon us to set the record straight.

Some of the worst crimes, some of the most notable scandals occur when good people do nothing — when people are guilty of the crime of silence. Some of my best stories as a journalist have come from a librarian, providing me with good information to raise the question of why.

For example, a librarian gave me information showing that 85 percent of all the drugs are consumed by people in the suburbs... yet night after night television only records the drug crimes of the inner city. Something is wrong when you can look at the data and it tells you that America is 5 percent of the world's population, yet takes 50 percent of the drugs. You can't blame all of that on the blacks, but the nation will never solve the problem, until we see it as an American problem. Whatever affects one group, eventually affects all.

As a journalist through the years, I have tried to bring to the public information and opinions that hopefully can push change. Sometimes the information we provide, the stands we take are matters of life and death. For example, when I went to Ethiopia in 1985, I saw children six years old whom you could hold in your hand. I saw children dying in the desert at night for the need of a blanket or food that we throw away. In Ethiopia during the famine, they had no dumpsters to eat out of, no Salvation Army to provide used clothes. All they had were journalists...to be their eyes and ears to tell the world they were starving.

During the Persian Gulf War, I wrote often that the war was an oil war, that it was not our oil, and not our land, and not our business. The media caved in to the Pentagon and did not provide the public good information about the war.... not on the casualties, not on the reasons. The television networks made sure that those

who were anti-war didn't get much air time. Newspapers, most of them, waved the flag. They didn't want to offend advertisers. And if ever there was a time when the nation needed to know the truth, that was the time. And still is the time.

If we invade places where there is naked aggression, there were at least two hundred other places in the world where there were acts of naked aggression. But they didn't have oil. And how many children did we kill and how many are dying right now because we have destroyed their infrastructure to provide clean water? How often can we change the course of destiny just by the questions we ask and the information we provide? Are we providing the best information to the public to trouble the soul of America? That's what we should be about.

The last point I want to make is that we should not always let our roles define us, that the only work for a librarian is in a library. No more than the only work for a journalist is in a newsroom. Some of us do our best work when we step out of our roles, out of where it is safe, or what we know, to respond in new and different ways. Rosa Parks was a seamstress, but she stepped out as an activist. Dick Gregory was a comedian, but he stepped out as an activist. Shirley Chisholm was a school-teacher, but something in her told her she

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could make it in Congress. Anita Hill is a law professor who stood up and has kicked off a strong revolution among women who are more determined than ever to fight sexual harassment and white male supremacy. And Carl Rowan is a journalist, but he has a scholarship program that sends scores of kids to college.

So in conclusion, I want to end by encouraging you to remain excited about your role as a truth teller. Information is power. Misinformation leads to chaos. The Bible tells us that we shall know the truth and the truth shall make us free. I believe that the opposite is also true: that if you don't know the truth, you will always be the slaves of ignorance and bigotry. We have a choice today. What will it be?