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Peter Jennings: Ending an Era

by Rushworth Kidder

I'm not sure why memory is so selective, etching some moments in the mind while others rinse right off. But among the moments I spent with Peter Jennings, one in particular stands out.

In 1979 we were both in the London press corps, he for ABC News and I for the **Christian Science Monitor**. That fall, as London came slowly into winter, so did the negotiations at the Constitutional Conference on Southern Rhodesia, held at Lancaster House. Lord Carrington, Britain's foreign secretary, was patiently guiding a process to turn an apartheid Rhodesia into a free Zimbabwe. What we could not have known (though some of us suspected) was that the end result would merely exchange the injustices of Ian Smith's white minority government for the brutalities of Robert Mugabe's black minority government. Yet there we were, the Western media, waiting for something to break loose in an agonizingly slow diplomatic minuet.

One day, getting word that an important announcement was to be made later that morning, Peter and I found ourselves sitting side by side at a press conference at Lancaster House. We each had arrived early, so we sat swapping stories about the differences between Londoners and Americans. In the side aisles the camera crews were setting up, and down front the custodial staff was bringing in a table and a half-dozen chairs. One of the chairs looked just like the others but was twice as wide -- a sure sign that the famously plump Joshua Nkomo, leader of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union, was going to join us that morning.

As we chatted, Peter showed no special interest in the muffled bustle around us. But all at once, in the middle of an anecdote he was telling me, and without missing a beat or changing his voice, he said, "Excuse me a moment," and stood up. Pulling a reporter's notebook from his suit jacket and glancing at it for only a second, he turned, faced one of the cameras, and started speaking. "Here at London's Lancaster House today..." I recall him beginning. He continued for a sentence or two, setting up a report to be broadcast to U.S. audiences in less than three hours. Then, after repeating it once more word for word, he sat down, put away his notebook, and picked up the thread of his anecdote.

If a professional is one who makes expertise look natural, Peter was a pro. Neither of us knew what was going to be said at that press conference -- anything from "This conference has failed" to "We've reached an amazing agreement." Yet

knowing he'd have no time to tape it later, Peter had to write a set-up piece to fit whatever was coming.

For Peter, that was the operative word: *write*. I always felt he was a writer at heart. He loved opportunities to build arguments in more than the desperately few brief sentences that television allows even its finest talents. When he occasionally wrote for our newspaper, he did so with great relish. I recall him telling me once, in a perhaps unguarded moment, that he harbored real questions about giving up print journalism for what he called "the dubious pleasure -- and I *do mean dubious* -- of having your mug on television screens across America every night."

When Peter left off anchoring ABC's "World News Tonight," an era ended with him. It was an era of anchormen (pardon the gender reference, but that was the fact) who still embraced the noble idea that the United States needed a common hearth, a place for us to gather each evening and listen together to the stories that were daily defining the moral character and culture of a nation.

What made Peter's "hearthmanship" stand out? It was not that he was any more handsome, flashy, probing, sophisticated, or hard-traveling than Dan Rather at CBS or Tom Brokaw at NBC. It was not even that his program, alone among the three network rivals, kept "World" in its title and international issues in its sights. It was that he was, by love and practice, a wordsmith. That commitment to language graced his appearances with a kind of formal craftsmanship -- after all, good news writing is a crafted spontaneity rather than (as television sometimes seems) a spontaneous craftiness. But then, even his name carried a note of formality: Against Dan and Tom, he was never Pete, always Peter.

But what he could not have known (though we all suspected) was that, by the time he left the air, the air itself was different. The Web changed news in two ways. First, as it replaced anchors who gave us news whenever *they* wanted with computers giving us news whenever *we* wanted, it shattered the public hearth into a thousand fragmented sources. Second, it began to de-link reporting from pictures and move it back toward words.

If, like Peter, you knew the power of that hearth, that would sadden you. But if you knew the power of words, that should gladden your heart. After all, the table-stakes for getting a job in U.S. television news are still glamour, charisma, and a smooth patter. But the essentials for Web journalism are back to what they've always been for good newspapers: insight, sharp reasoning, and a command of literary style. News, it seems, is inching out of a visual era into a verbal age.

Maybe Peter wasn't born too late. Maybe he was born too early.

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