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The following is the transcript of an interview conducted on December 9, 2008, by Scott Schroeder, principal of rabble+rouser, with Mike Leonard

Mike Leonard on Storytelling

Scott:

What do you think makes a compelling story and what is it that brought you to be the storyteller that you are today?

Mike:

A couple things that worked in my advantage is that I didn't get into the business until I was 30. I had a number of jobs before doing that, and a lot of the stuff was low-level, medium-level jobs where you'd never get noticed. And so I'm down in the trenches and understand what people think about, what kind of hopes they have, and dreams, and when those dreams go array and this and that. I think to be a good storyteller in any kind of situation you have to have empathy. Not that you need to feel sorry, but you have to know what they're feeling. And so, for instance, if you were a good color announcer on a football team, and if he's played the game, he has a certain level of expertise that helps. Some of those people can't communicate and that's the second part of storytelling, you know, you need to understand what you're talking about. The second part is you have to tell it in a way that's intelligent and is meaningful to people. I think the biggest mistake that people make in my business is they center and focus on these really big things, when a lot of times it's the small details that tell the big stories. It's the small things that you notice.

Mike Leonard on the Rockefeller Plaza Christmas tree stories.

The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree is a good example of the types of stories that are difficult, but can be really good, because I'm the only television reporter who does that—in the yard where the tree comes from before it ends up in New York. The reason why they restrict it is they don't want publicity to get out and have someone chain themselves to the tree or something like that. So, for the last 10 to 12 years I've done that story. The difficult part of the story is that it's just a tree in a yard. So you go there and I have 6 to 8 hours, however long I want to spend there, and it's just a person who either wants to talk or who doesn't want to talk. Or who thinks they have no story to tell or everything and I've been able, in all these years, to tell a good and compelling story because there is always one. Now, the reason I brought that up is a couple years back there was a guy, a sanitation worker in New Jersey, who has a small house and the tree was on his lot and it was like, those guys never get noticed. His story would never be told on television unless the fact the tree was in his yard. It wasn't the fact a lightning bolt hit the house or a plane crashed into it. The tree was there. It was a small thing and so part of the

story dealt with the fact that, you know, getting this light shined upon them. The part of the story that was most interesting was that his wife had planted the tree and nourished the tree. She died 3 or 4 years prior to my visit. But in this telling of the story he was talking about his wife and all the rest and then, midway through the story, he just said, "It's a shame she can't be here. She would have loved it if she were alive," the way he said it. I tried not to do it in a kind of clichéd surprise sense. The scene that was most compelling was I just shot him and he was doing the dishes alone in his little kitchen, and there was nothing said. He basically said she would have loved to see this; we were married 60 years and got along great. There were no tears or anything but when the scene is shown people were drawn to tears because it was a man who was alone in a kitchen doing the dishes where if he had a mate, they quite often would have shared that duty. And he was just standing by the sink and then, at one point, he took a sip of coffee and was looking out the window. I think those little moments are great.

John Prine is a storyteller too.

Mike:

Have you ever heard of the singer John Prine?

Scott:

Sure

Mike:

He's a singer/songwriter. Well, John Prine is great. When he sings a song and writes a song, a lot of the times a line in the song tells volumes about what the person is. There's a song called Six O'clock News, and there's a line in it about this woman and the child she had and the child died as a teenager. Before that point happened in the story, he was describing where they lived and he said, "God bless this kitchen, said the knick-knack shelf." So, by saying that you can kind of see the kitchen, you know, it's like not a lot of people would have something as simple as God bless this kitchen. You understood the woman's sincere modest means and all the rest. So I think that when you signal to the viewer or to the listener—that you are aware of the small things, it signals to the viewer or listener that you are aware of the big things, because everybody gets the big things. You know, wow, what a tragedy your roof got blown off. But if you see the small things and you understand them, then they go, oh, you get it, and they listen to you because they know you understand. So that's what I've always tried to do; I try to be subtle about it and not hammer them over the head. Sometimes don't even mention it, like the man in the kitchen. I have the ability to tell the story with words and pictures. I think that in my business a lot of times people don't write to the picture, they're too obvious, they'll talk exactly what the picture is saying.

Scott:

Too literal.

Mike:

You feel like you're just being spoon fed this thing, and I think when people do that, it seems like you're almost being talked down to and you don't have the same connection to the story.

Give the listener credit

Scott:

It sounds like even the phraseology, things like the knick-knacks in the kitchen, really paints a picture as a part of telling the story, not just saying the words, but actually conveying. You almost get the sense of what that entire kitchen must look like and you can imagine what kind of a house that person lives in.

Mike:

Exactly. What she looks like, almost what kind of lifestyle it was, she's probably a reticent-type person. I mean all of these things come out from that little line, instead of saying she was a woman of modest means, you can kind of tell it, and it gives the listener or the viewer the power of that intelligence of crafting the picture in your own mind, and it's more powerful that way. I think I got to that point, I don't know how I got to the point, I think partially it's because before I got into writing I used to make these home movies on a movie camera that was silent. I would put these stories to music on a separate tape recorder. It was really a very old system and bare bones and that's all we could afford. So I had to tell a story without words and so when it came time for me to add words to it, I always felt that the story had to be there and the words just had to support the story. So I automatically started less sort of grandiose with the words. More like this word should just add value but it shouldn't completely define the scene, it should set the scene up, you know. I wrote a book, too, without visuals, so I did sort of the same thing trying to write visually.

Scott:

It's interesting because in a way you're actually giving more credit to the audience, giving more credit to the listener. Is that right?

Mike:

Well, of course. And I think that now if I were telling a story of deep economic meaning and something that had to be explained, I'd still try and tell it in a simple way; I'd probably have to explain more. But most of the things, you know, these emotional situations that we all connect to, whether it's fear or jealousy or loneliness or insecurity or happiness or whatever, we all understand that stuff; we don't have to be told how to feel. What I try to do is take this sort of like reflecting glass that I've been given and just take it and angle it from the person I'm shooting to the viewer. It's going through me, I'm holding the glass, I'm holding the mirror, but I'm just really angling it so that people can see it in their best way, you know, and use their intelligence. I think what happens is when somebody speaks in more hush tones, you lean forward to listen, and if someone shouts at you, you sort of go back. If the story is compelling, you'll keep leaning forward...being a little bit more subtle and less over the top. I think local news is an example of mostly, here's a standard, this is how we tell a story. Bang, you know: who, what, where, when, why, and how, but it's told in a way that's just staccato, you know?

Scott:

Plus there is the old adage in local news, “If it bleeds, it leads?”

Mike:

Yeah that’s the content that they choose but in choosing that content, it’s like, you know, when I first started in local news, it was only about universal appeal and that’s another part of the situation that has to happen in a good storyteller. The person should feel like they’re connected to the story in some universal way. Now I could tell a story about a football player and be telling the story to a 65-year-old nun living in New Jersey. Depending on the football player, whether it’s fear of jealousy, loneliness, or whatever, can be felt by the nun, so it doesn’t matter that he’s a football player. I could be doing a story about the nun and the football player’s watching it. The line between the two should be strong and it’s there all the time to be done. You know, it’s like there’s always a story, and I know that. Like I said when I was in local news, people would go out and they’d bitch and moan about covering a certain thing. Like I have to do the auto show today, and they’d say it’s the same old story. And they go there and they bring the camera and they say the news wants 90 seconds on the auto show. They’d say, “The auto show came to Denver today, and with it brings \$200,000 into the economy and it had the \$500,000 Lamborghini.” Then they talk to somebody about the auto industry, then they go back and that’s it. Well that’s fine. But you could do that same story, you could go there and say, every year you go to the auto show and there’s always a big fancy car, \$500,000 and there’s always this and that. But, at that same auto show, there’s somebody who’s selling, you know, a compact car of some kind. You go to his booth and there’s no media there, you know, because he’s boring. And you talk to him about the fact that, yeah, you don’t get that much attention, but how many cars did you sell last year? Oh we sold...maybe the car industry is not a good topic now because of the fallout...but in general, this was the case. Back in 1980 when I was starting in television or ’79, this would happen and you’d go and say... so, the viewer would have empathy of this guy sitting at his booth and no visitors, and yet in the end you feel like he’s selling more of the cars. How many did the Lamborghini guy sell? One? But then you can also tell a little subtle story about the media--always goes for that flashy thing and forgets the guy in the middle. Now you don’t have to lecture anybody, you can just tell that same story in 90 seconds, but the viewer will have someone to connect with. And not just watching a glass window with a story coming up; the window is kind of broken and you feel sorry for the guy because he didn’t get enough visitors, but in the end you go, it’s okay, he’s fine with that, you know, and works culture of star-studded things and celebrity things—and so it’s a pretty easy way of any subject. I’ve told a thousand stories at NBC in the 28 years I’m there. They’ve been on football players and on ironworkers and nuns and farmers and, you know, politicians, and there is always a connection.

There’s a good story everywhere

Mike:

I never took a journalism course; I never took a writing course that I can remember. I mean, maybe in high school I took a writing course but I can't remember it. I thought, it was just living these lives and being observant.... And also, another really important thing is that, as a storyteller, I would never go to a story overly researched because I've never been to a story that I've read about that was what I thought it was gonna be. Because my mind already concocted something or maybe the quotes chosen, maybe the people who researched the story didn't have that same sense of empathy or whatever. So I stopped doing it because I'd get there and I didn't want to have to force the story along the way; I'd already precooked it. So I'd go up there, and it's a little scarier for people, because you go there, and okay, where is the story? And you find it. But if you're open, and you believe in what I call this "universe of abundance," where the answer is out there, the story is there, and you know it's there, when you know it's there, you usually find it. And I can go to the Super Bowl or convention and always come up with a different story because everybody seems to be running in the same formation after the same big stories; and you can tell the big story in a small way and people just don't either think about it or don't want to go there with no set story in mind. Or they're given an assignment and they say just do this and they say ok I'll do it. So I think most people who have succeeded at being known as good storytellers go there with a really open mind knowing that when they get there it's going to present itself.

Communication and also focusing on something small to tell a big story, because like I said before, that will connect you to the viewer or to the listener or the reader because they know you know. If you notice something small about a baseball player or an ironworker, if you notice something small but central to what they do--the way they keep their tools in their back pocket or whatever it is, the way the person ties their shoes or does a certain thing--it's kind of central to that person's character and it's a way of really letting the person know and the viewer know that you know.

Make an emotional connection

Mike:

I had a talk to a major company recently about making an emotional connection to their customers or clients. Basically the situation was the same thing in that, and I told the story about, I was babysitting for one of our grandkids and I was changing the diaper. The company that had packaged these little baby wipes, so when you wipe...before you put the diaper on, it was a package that was kind of constructed with one of those linings, it would close like a bag with a ridge that fits into another double ridge, you know. But you can't do it with one hand, and when you're changing the diaper you have to have one hand on the baby and you have one hand reaching for that. Well, first of all it was hard to open it. It was hard to shake out the things because they were connected like toilet paper and there's little scored edges. So you'd pick it up and you'd shake it and you couldn't close it, so sometimes you'd forget and they'd dry out. So I figured that the people who made it had never changed a baby. So the emotional connection can come either through a message that is told in a marketing way or the product itself or tell the marketer or tell the message about how you can close this and open it with one hand with your elbow. You could either have a funny commercial or sentimental

commercial about one hand on life and one hand on a product and you can't take your hand off of either one. That signals to the people who have done that before; they go, yeah, you get it. Whether it's Johnson and Johnson or Kraft or whatever, if you notice the little things that people have to struggle with or that bring them joy or wreck their day, they go, hey you big corporate entity, you know what I'm going through. You're big but you get it, and a lot of companies don't do that.

It's empathy and this connection where you've been through it, and I think sometimes empathy gets the wrong vibe; it's like I want to really be sympathetic. You're sympathetic but you don't have to tilt your story and bias it and color it that way, you just know. And when you know and have empathy, you know that if you played a sport, you know how easy it is to make an error, and people who have, usually don't go, you know, major leaguers never go to a baseball game and boo a player, ever. I've never seen it. And I went to training camp with a professional hockey team, I've never been to a game of any sport where the guy or someone who has kind of played at a high level, a division one or something, ever, ever have heard them boo. Because they've been there and they connect and they go, "Yeah man, it's tough, it's the worst thing when that happens." So I think a company and a product can do the same thing with telling their viewers or telling their customer in any number of either visual ways or cues or whatever that we know. And it's not like "Hey, we have the greatest product, this is a super product." That tells you nothing--everyone knows that you know it tastes great. It tastes great but also this, you know? So I think that, to me, like I said, I've been at the station for 28 years and in an era of downsizing and all the rest, they would have gotten rid of me a long, long time ago because I'm not on enough to justify what they pay me. But what I do for them is, because I focus on this stuff, the viewer connects me to the *Today* show and then connects Matt and all the rest of the people and then they say, "Well, the *Today* show gets it; they understand what I'm about." And so my role is valuable, almost like a symbol of the fact that we cover the big news but we also know the little things, too.

A good story will have universal appeal

Mike:

Our culture has tilted towards the big and the obvious. It's a celebrity culture, so they'll go with very few stories but they'll tell them a lot. It's like that whole marketing thing where they say, don't tell a thousand stories once, tell one story a thousand times. Well that's fine if you want to just drill that stuff into people's heads, but I think that's what's happened to the news business, is that they've become like you're selling a product instead of selling a bunch of stories. Now news organizations are saying, okay, no sports stories--we'll only tell stories that are interesting to women between the age of 18 and 35, so between these hours, that's our news. Instead of just saying, "Hey man, if it's a good story, the 23-year-old female secretary in Manhattan and the 89-year-old rancher in Wyoming will both like the story." I guess a lot of people just don't follow that tenet because they've ended up marginalizing all these shows and they've both become more and more narrow-banded, kind of, you know? Like I said, a show that has a real wide variance of viewers and stuff like that, and they watch it, and they watch it

because I'm confident there's a story there. I'm confident that there's not a whole lot of emotion that you need to convey to let people know that you know.

Mike Leonard on what's right and wrong with television

Mike:

Yeah, I hardly watch any television at all and so I've never seen probably all of the shows that people talk about and see. So I don't see a lot of advertising. I'll see at the gym, I'll glance by and stuff like that. I think that the ones that I really like are the ones, as I've said before, that tell you some little thing. I saw an ad, actually I was watching a hockey highlight show this morning on cable and there was an ad for an upcoming game. They're playing an outdoor game in Chicago against Detroit and they had music of the seventh-inning stretch, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," at Wrigley Field--is a custom there in baseball season. Over the music, and it was the actual announcer singing, this old guy Harry Carey, but the scenes were of these hockey players, looked like it wasn't a regular locker room, putting on hockey equipment and they're walking out towards, clearly it was a white background but it was like they were walking a runway, not into a darkened arena, but into the sunlight and it was a very effective commercial because it did what we're talking about. It conveyed the emotion of that. This is a really different experience and it made it totally different. It's melding these two things together. There were no words in the commercial at all; it was just those scenes. It wasn't like, hey, come to this historic first game or first game ever played on an outdoor blah blah blah. You just got the feeling of man, I want to be there, and it was told with no words. So, I've always been a fan of that, I've always been a fan of movies that do it that way.

I don't like really traditional sort of Mrs. Doubtfire-type movies and things like that where it's made with a real general audience in mind. I get really bored. I think people don't act that way, I don't get it and I don't buy into it. I don't need it to be dark or anything. It can be a happy movie. I just like a movie that just gives you credit for thinking. I think it certainly does draw me in, I'm not sitting there to be just, you know, manipulated and stuff; I want to participate. I would hope that marketers and people doing commercials want their people to engage, which I think means participation, mental participation in the thing, and not just be sitting there and be told.

The famous example of when news really sort of went towards that tell the same story a thousand times is the first OJ trial. All they had to do was say, "the latest on OJ," and your marketing budget was really small, because people had "shocking news from the OJ trial." They didn't have to say, "and tonight on Nightly News..." and try to convince somebody to watch. It was like, oh, wow, something's going on with OJ. So everybody kind of realized that if we could get one story we could (a) milk it for like 4 months. So that's why you had the Anna Nicole Smith stuff and you had the Britney things; it was like the latest on Britney, the latest on this, and you could get people involved in a soap opera thing, but it had no real meaning nationally or importance to the culture. It was just an easy way to market the news and, I think, to the detriment of the news personally because that's the biggest complaint I hear is people say, "I'm tired of this, why do I want to always see these

celebrities exploding,” you know. Of course the argument is always, well that’s what drives the ratings, but when you look at the ratings they’re always relatively small. Like when Jerry Springer was still on—I don’t know if he’s still on—but they’d get 900,000 viewers out of a country with 300 million, well that’s not a consensus, you know. Maybe his competitor was getting 600,000 viewers so, all right, 300,000 viewers is a big difference at that hour, but it’s not. That doesn’t say that the culture is demanding this stuff, that’s saying that that 300,000 like this better than the other thing, you know. But then next thing you know that’s all you see on television, so that was my issue with that. Once again it was just too easy, too easy to sell.