

received from a cross section of Americans. How does the United States know that Iraq possesses deadly biological weapons? What threat do these weapons, if they exist, actually pose to the United States and other countries? How likely is it that American military action can actually eliminate such weapons? And even if a military strike does succeed, how will Iraq's compliance be monitored in the future?

These were good questions, even obvious ones, yet I was struck by how little press coverage of the Iraq crisis had addressed them, and how any one of them could itself be the basis for a good story. (Indeed, William J. Broad and Judith Miller of *The New York Times* did publish such a story, not long after the town meeting.) I was also dismayed at top officials' inability to provide thorough answers, which led me to wonder how much they had been focusing on what military intelligence purported to know, and how little on what remained unanswered. ✕

## 2 IDEAS

NO MATTER HOW CURIOUS and alert one's mind, life can seem a confusing, nearly overwhelming array of undifferentiated bits of information. Each and every one of these could be the seed of a story, but the vast majority, of course, are not.

Facing this paradox can be one of the most daunting aspects of writing, for very few writers, in my experience, have any real understanding of where their ideas come from. The postpartum depression that many writers experience after completing a story arises in large part, I'm convinced, from anxiety about where the next story is going to come from. During the heyday of the mergers-and-acquisitions boom on Wall Street, a character in my book *Den of Thieves*, one of the most successful investment bankers on Wall Street at the time, told me he was consumed by anxiety about where his next big deal would come from. Though my work as a journalist seemed far removed from his world, I knew what he was talking about. While I don't believe I ever experienced the phenomenon as intensely as he did, it took me years to get over the same feeling about stories.

The reality is that good story ideas are abundant. Once one begins to think consistently along the lines explored in the last chapter, they will manifest themselves at a rapid rate. That doesn't mean that all of these ideas will—or should—turn into stories, but they will provide a pool of possibilities from which

the best can be culled. Here's an illustration: The front page of the *Journal* ran fifteen feature stories a week, fifty-two weeks a year, except on occasional holidays. That's over 750 feature stories a year. To ensure that supply, my staff and I generated at least that many ideas, which we farmed out to reporters and other editors. Yet even our best writers were expected to produce only a tiny fraction of the stories we needed. A writer who publishes ten to twelve feature stories a year is working at an amazingly productive pace. One good book idea can occupy a writer for much more than a year, and usually does. A writer can build a career around surprisingly few ideas, as long as they are good ones.

A good story idea is a precious thing. Some ideas are so good that I have pronounced them foolproof, meaning that I believed it impossible that the resulting story could be a failure. (I admit I was proven wrong on occasion, demonstrating that there are no certainties in writing.) Sometimes an idea was so good that I could approve a proposal after hearing a single sentence. As a rough estimate, I tell my students that a good idea constitutes about 50 percent of what makes a successful story.

When seeking story ideas, it is important to sweep aside one's own ego. I have known many writers who sneered at any idea they didn't conceive themselves. They seemed to take particular pride in spurning anything suggested by an editor. Some of the best story ideas are generated by writers, of course, since they are often in the best position to see what is going on around them, unlike an editor desk-bound in New York or Washington. But the generation of an idea is almost always a collaborative process. It is extremely difficult for even the most experienced writers to evaluate their own ideas. I encourage my students to discuss ideas among themselves as much as possible, for ideas are often honed as they are verbalized. I have never gone forward with a major story without gauging the reaction of someone I trust, usually my editor.

Whatever the source, good story ideas should be received like the precious gifts they are. What does the source matter? I have seen good ideas emerge from the unlikeliest places. After all, when the story is published, the writer gets all the credit. A gracious acknowledgment or two may be all that's required. (I might add that there is nothing less gracious than taking credit for someone else's idea.)

The underlying sources for stories are surprisingly few. There is, most obviously, direct observation or experience. Then there are other observers or participants, commonly called sources. Finally, there are other published accounts. These three categories cover nearly all story ideas.

As for direct observation or participation, we can naturally start with ourselves. If you had been a member of the Heaven's Gate cult (most of whose members died as they tried to shed their earthly bodies to join a passing comet), you would almost certainly find a publisher for your first-person story. If, on the other hand, you were in San Francisco during the 1989 earthquake, and hope to write about your experience, you will be competing with millions of others with similar accounts. I describe people who undergo such experiences as witnesses to history, and a witness to history always has a potential story. But the reality is that most of us will never be such witnesses, and certainly not often enough to build a career around them.

I can recall only one instance when I found myself a witness to history, and the experience was so unusual that at first I didn't even recognize it as a story. I find this is a common reaction among professional writers: we are so used to seeking out the stories of others that our own rarely strike us as possible stories. (This is in contrast to many nonwriters you have probably met, who find virtually anything that happens to them to be newsworthy, and are eager to tell you about it.) In this case, I was planning a trip to my hometown of Quincy, Illinois, during the summer of 1993 to help cope with the flood that inundated much of the upper Mississippi basin that summer. Quincy is located on a bluff above the river, and while its elevation protects it, the surrounding farmland and towns were all threatened. While I was a high school student there we would pile sandbags on the levees nearly every spring, and I knew from my parents that volunteers were needed for the dire threat that had materialized that summer.

A flood is not an easy story to cover. For one thing, it moves slowly, the water often creeping up just an inch or two a day. It also covers a huge geographic area. Only when a levee breaks is there a dramatic surge of water. That summer, television had begun devoting more airtime to the disaster, but only when it reached historic proportions did print journalists start arriving in the Midwest. (Indeed, I remember hearing that at the American

Society of Newspaper Editors convention in Chicago that summer, the flood had been cited as a story best left to the electronic media.) *The New York Times* was an exception, sending numerous reporters to the area. Among them was Sara Rimer, a Boston-based reporter who was dispatched to Quincy. Sara happens to be a friend of mine, and when I learned she was heading to Quincy, I arranged for her to have dinner with my parents and suggested people in town she might want to meet. That hardly proved necessary, since I was soon receiving reports that Sara had become the toast of Quincy.

When I arrived in town, I went to see her at the Holiday Inn, and she was filled with enthusiasm. "You have to do a story about this," she insisted. The idea hadn't even occurred to me, though of course it was staring me in the face. Listening to Sara, I realized that so much about Quincy and the area that I took for granted struck her as exotic and colorful: the Green Parrot, a bar in the lowlands; the local sheriff and his deputies; the antebellum architecture and timeless feel of Quincy itself. While I'm sure she didn't anticipate this, I could easily see Sara herself as a character in the story: the big-city reporter who comes to the small Midwestern town. "But surely you're writing the story," I protested. She shrugged: she was filing daily copy, but couldn't get the time and the space to do something sweeping that would capture the immensity of the disaster and the human stakes. The next day, when I called my editor at *The New Yorker* to say I was heading down to the levee and thought there might be a story, he was enthusiastic.

Nothing I said in that conversation was a fully developed idea. The Midwestern flood of 1993 is what I call a topic, and a topic is not an idea. I have had to make this point to students and writers on countless occasions. Topics are inherently boring, because they pose no questions and incite no curiosity. They are like encyclopedia entries: interesting only if that happens to be what you want to look up. "Women in law" is a topic. "Welfare cheats" is a topic. "South Africa" is a topic. Reporters would come to me with the most earnest demeanors, and say something like "I want to do a story about how oil companies are causing explosions at natural gas facilities." When I stifled a yawn, their outrage would be apparent: "How can you not care about something so important?" The answer was simple: anytime someone

had to use the word "about" I knew we were discussing a topic, not a story. I would urge the reporter to come back with something more specific: What company? What explosion? Some topics are more interesting than others, but they should never be mistaken for ideas.

How the Midwestern flood metamorphosed from a topic to a story idea I will later describe in detail, but the point I am making here is that it originated in my own experience. Even so, it took another writer to prompt me to recognize the story. Quincy had earned its single footnote in history when it hosted a Lincoln-Douglas debate over a hundred years before. It had simply never occurred to me that anything happening in my hometown would ever again warrant national attention. I was wrong, and I was blind to the resulting possibilities. I should have been constantly asking myself whether what I was experiencing might be of interest to others.

Not only being a witness to history, but any personal experience that is sensational or bizarre enough will rather obviously yield a potential story. I am not going to dwell on this, for the likelihood of these things happening to us is extremely remote. Moreover, I often wonder how many of these alleged experiences have ever been fact-checked, though they are routinely treated as nonfiction. But if you have actually been abducted by a UFO, conversed directly with God, or danced with an angel on the head of a pin, you may as well write about it. Someone, no doubt, will publish it.

✕ But the possibility that lightning will simply strike and embroil you in a potential story is relatively remote. For that reason, many writers and reporters try to engineer such experiences by moving into the path of the storm, so to speak; then, they write about what happens. This may be the most common source of ideas that spring from direct observation or experience. During the 1991 Gulf War, for example, every major news organization sent correspondents to observe the action (though they were so tightly controlled by the military that what they saw yielded little worth reading). As far as I know, no writer actually joined a branch of the military, planning to fight in the war and then write about it, but that approach, too, is time-honored. Journalists routinely rush to witness wars, disasters, crises of every sort. Tiananmen Square, the Berlin Wall, the Soviet coup against Gorbachev

—all were major events to which I dispatched *Journal* reporters, so they would be there to witness the story. I remember sending Jane Mayer, one of my favorite reporters, to Cairo during the Gulf War. Cairo seemed rather far from the action, but at the time there was concern that Saddam Hussein would unleash his Scud missiles on Arab nations supporting the United States, and Egypt seemed a likely target. Jane was willing to go. After a few days she called me wondering if something she'd noticed at her hotel might be a story: wealthy Kuwaitis were whiling away their time at the hotel disco until the war was over, leaving the fighting to others. Of course it was a story. The piece Jane wrote revealed more about Kuwaiti attitudes than anything I read from the front lines. It was a brilliant observation on her part, one that many reporters would have missed.

At a much more mundane level, reporters would often come to me with an "opportunity" to, for example, accompany the chairman of Procter & Gamble on a trip to Venezuela, with the hope that something might happen worth writing about. I was cool to such suggestions, since nothing usually happened in a reporter's presence, or if it did, it was staged for the reporter's benefit. If something spontaneous and interesting did happen, it could usually be reported in the ordinary manner, with far less expenditure of time and resources. Reporters were invariably disappointed by my response, especially when these opportunities involved trips to places like Hawaii and Paris. Still, these were all attempts by reporters to put themselves in a position to see a story in the making. And occasionally they do pay off: Jon Krakauer participated in an expedition to Mount Everest that resulted in the deaths of several participants. His resulting book, *Into Thin Air*, was a national best-seller.

Another popular genre is the reporter as direct participant, what I sometimes call the George Plimpton approach. These stories are generally triggered by the question "What would it be like to be . . . ?" The blank can be filled in by just about anything: "a pro football player," "a Radio City Rockette," "a stock-car driver," "a participant in a tractor pull," "a beauty-contest entrant," "a Playboy bunny," to cite several that have resulted in stories I've seen. Any wacky activity pursued by someone—bungee jumping, walking on hot coals, playing the violin in the subway (all actual stories)—can be indulged in by a writer who brings a man- or

woman-on-the-street perspective, sometimes to humorous effect. I believe a fair amount of discretion needs to be exercised when evaluating this kind of story. I find that many end up being tedious, because the writer's experience is just what the reader would expect. Why not simply interview a participant, instead? I believe a question worth asking when considering whether to pursue such a story is "What unique qualities do I bring to this?" In some cases the unique quality will be nothing more than one's own ordinariness, which makes the writer a surrogate for readers who can live vicariously through the experience. The danger is that the resulting story may be just as ordinary. I find a good rule of thumb in this area is to consider whether you, as a writer, actually want to undertake the experience that is the subject of the story. If so, it probably isn't risky enough, daring enough, unusual enough—in sum, surprising enough—to pique a reader's curiosity.

X Travel writing often falls into this category, and in doing so highlights another pitfall of the first-person story: all too often, it becomes autobiography. As the writer experiences one ordinary, predictable event after another (room service, a little sight-seeing, some light entertainment), concluding the account with a description of the bed linens, readers learn more about the writer than the place visited, and few of us are interesting enough to sustain this.

A variation that poses some special problems is the so-called undercover story, in which a writer poses as someone he or she is not. *Black Like Me*, in which a white man posed as black, may be the best-known example. Undercover work was once a staple of investigative journalism, particularly consumer stories, but since an adverse verdict against ABC News in the Food Lion case, in which ABC reporters took jobs as workers at a large grocery chain and then reported on unsanitary conditions, there has been a cloud over the genre. The reporters' failure to disclose their true identities was deemed fraudulent. Many First Amendment lawyers don't expect this verdict to be upheld on appeal (it was reversed recently by an appellate court), but it has at least temporarily chilled undercover reporting and writing. Legal issues aside, this kind of journalism has always raised moral and ethical problems; in my view, it's always worth pondering whether the story is fundamentally fair.

Years ago, when I was working at *American Lawyer* magazine, we wondered whether personal-injury lawyers would allow their clients to lie in order to enhance the likelihood of a favorable verdict or large settlement, and thus a large contingency fee for the lawyer. We devised a scenario in which one of our reporters would claim to have tripped and been injured near a Consolidated Edison repair site. She would emphasize that Con Ed had nothing to do with the injury, but would wonder whether she might still have a claim. To pull off such a story required a fair amount of dramatic skill, poise, and courage, and none of the reporters wanted to do it. An editor, Jane Berentson, volunteered, and ultimately took her story to about a dozen lawyers in New York. Fully half of them did tell her to lie, even when she protested that she didn't feel comfortable doing such a thing.

As a story idea, this passed several of my informal tests: no one wanted to do it; it was risky, which brought with it a certain suspense (would the reporter pull off the deception, or be unmasked?); it posed a question to which we didn't already know the answer; and we believed it would be a public service. At the same time, we wondered if it was fair. None of the lawyers knew they were speaking to a reporter. While Jane was careful not to encourage anyone to ask her to lie, the experiment nonetheless had overtones of entrapment. Ultimately Steve Brill, the magazine's editor, decided to withhold the lawyers' names. He reasoned that the purpose of the "Integrity Test" wasn't to expose individual lawyers, randomly selected, but to assess the overall integrity of the malpractice bar. The story itself proved a huge success, was much talked about, and was reprinted in numerous publications.

I myself have done only one first-person undercover story, "My Life in an Unaccredited Law School," for which I enrolled in Golden West College of Law in Los Angeles and showed up for the first week of classes. California was one of the few states that permitted such law schools, and they were flourishing there at the time, 1978. It was a relief to discover that I could tell the truth in response to every question on the application. (It did not, for example, ask whether I had attended any other law school or received an advanced degree, in which case I would have had to reveal that I had already graduated from law school.) I am, in fact, a terrible liar. I was once hauled in for questioning

at the Canadian border while trying to stammer out an answer to the question of whether all the passengers in my car, who were then asleep, were U.S. citizens. (They weren't.) I also believed I would be terrible at using an assumed name, so I used my real name on the application and at school. I found it relatively easy to maintain the deception, though my fellow students must have found me a little aloof. I wasn't eager to discuss whatever had brought me to Golden West or where I lived (a hotel). I recall only one moment of panic: I was driving a rented car, and a fellow student asked me why my car had Nevada license plates. I hadn't even noticed. I stammered again, and finally told the truth: that I was driving a rented car. Fortunately, that satisfied his curiosity; he didn't ask why. My departure after a week caused no comment that I know of.

The resulting story was written in a humorous vein, trying to capture the "Animal House" feel of the place, and it was enlivened by some very clever cartoons. Readers seemed to love it. In this case, all the names used were real, including those of faculty members who had made some blatant misstatements of the law in class. I felt that Golden West was holding itself out to the public as a legitimate law school and that there was no plausible expectation of privacy in a crowded classroom. Hence, real names were appropriate. But to be honest, I felt a little queasy about the experience. I was glad I didn't have to misrepresent myself more than I did, and I don't plan to do any more undercover operations.

Still, as an idea the unaccredited-law-school operation met my tests. What was life like in an unaccredited law school? I had no idea. While the schools turned out to be even more chaotic and shoddy than I might have guessed, the story might have been even better if they turned out to be good schools, kept out of the mainstream by a hide-bound profession's efforts to restrain competition. But what's important was that curiosity drove the story from the outset. As an undercover operation, this wasn't something I particularly wanted to do; indeed, I was very nervous because of the chance that I might be exposed. So I assumed readers would get at least a small vicarious thrill from experiencing this apprehension with me. Finally, as I've already noted, I felt the story would serve a public interest.

By far the most common type of story that results from direct

observation or experience is the memoir, a first-person account that generally doesn't rely on any event of national interest. In recent years there has been a near explosion in the publication of memoirs, not all of them by celebrities. Indeed, in what seems to be our confessional era, almost nothing seems to be off-limits. I even suspect some writers of exaggerating their afflictions in an effort to appeal to talk-show hosts and hostesses or, in the case of self-help tomes, to make their turnarounds or makeovers all the more impressive. This trend will surely peak, and despite many successes in this genre, the everyday experiences of most of us are unlikely to turn into national best-sellers. Still, what seem to be ordinary experiences may indeed be the raw material for good stories. How does one know?

I find the simplest test, again, is to ask a question: What about my experience might interest someone else? Even better: What about my experience do I myself find puzzling, and what might I better understand given additional reflection and research? This latter question is particularly significant, since a disadvantage of first-person ideas is that self-knowledge leaves relatively little room for the kind of curiosity that yields the best stories. Often we already know too much about ourselves.

The broad themes that emerge from such stories are often more important than the immediate subject matter. Any story, for example, in which someone overcomes significant adversity appeals to an almost universal interest in suffering and redemption. If that adversity is something little written about or understood, but widely shared, so much the better. Many successful memoirs have been written in recent years in which the nominal subject matter has been taboo—alcoholism, spousal abuse, incest, a husband with AIDS, and so on. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything today that would be both widely experienced yet still shocking. (Sensationalist talk shows seem to be turning ever more desperately to situations so aberrant as to be freakish.) In my view, the potential universality of an experience is far more intriguing and compelling than sensationalism. Jessie Lee Brown Foveaux, an elderly woman living in Kansas City, wrote an account of her troubled marriage to an alcoholic. After it was featured in a front-page *Wall Street Journal* story, her story sold to a publisher for a million-dollar advance. The bidding war may be highly unusual, but her experience was not.

Another question to ask is whether one's own experience embodies some broader trend or condition. If, for example, you were thrown off welfare because of the Welfare Reform Act passed by Congress in 1997, you might very well write about the experience, because many people similarly situated were having to cope with the same crisis.

Another category of memoir succeeds less because of the significance of the writer's experience than because of its setting. In these cases, the writer is a guide to another time and place about which readers may be curious. The enormous success of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* is due not only to McCourt's beautiful writing but also, at least in part, to its setting in Depression-era Ireland, a time and place significant for many Americans with Irish roots and, indeed, for many with immigrant ancestors. Much highly autobiographical fiction, such as Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* and Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, succeeds for similar reasons. One is a guided tour through the demimonde of Manhattan, the other of Los Angeles.

Most memoir stories are far more modest in scope. I have written one such story myself, about being audited by the Internal Revenue Service. The fact that I was subjected to a full-scale audit, in a year when my income as an author and journalist was exceedingly modest, seemed at first to be nothing but a source of annoyance and anxiety. But in pondering whether it might make a story, the thought occurred to me that money and taxes are subjects of nearly universal interest that do remain something of a taboo. How many other people would be foolhardy enough to bare their experiences with the IRS? Not many, I suspected. Last year, more than a decade after the story ran, someone came up to me and said the story was one of his all-time favorites. I had all but forgotten it.

It should be obvious by now that our own experiences provide a wealth of possible story ideas and that we should be vigilant in spotting them. But it is also true that I would never have a career as a writer if I had depended only on direct observation and experience. Stories that began in this manner account for only a tiny fraction of my own output. And if you work as a journalist, you will soon learn that you were not hired to write about yourself. I mentioned in the previous chapter that, as an editor, I distrusted my enthusiasm for stories about subjects that

I personally found interesting. It is even more difficult to be objective about first-person stories, and for that reason it is essential to discuss these ideas with someone else, preferably a respected editor. The tests I have outlined need to be applied rigorously, and if you so apply them, you will discover that most of your own experiences, however fascinating to you, hold little appeal to a wide readership. Fortunately, the universe of story ideas is much broader.

Other people possess a wealth of story ideas, if only you can get them to share those ideas with you. Such people are usually referred to as sources. If you are known as a writer or journalist, you'll find that almost everyone has a story he or she wants to tell you. Most of them—the overwhelming majority of them—are bad stories. When I was a fledgling reporter working for the summer at my hometown newspaper, the *Quincy* (Ill.) *Herald-Whig*, one of my jobs was to entertain story ideas from our far-flung “local correspondents” in places like Cherry Box, Missouri, and Lima, Ill. I recall accounts of a tick being extracted from a boy's forehead and a traffic back-up caused by a broken stoplight. I have listened to so many bad story ideas that I can usually recognize one after a single sentence. But I keep listening, and my phone number is listed. I do sometimes ask people who embark on long and convoluted stories to put them in writing, because I find it helps them organize their thoughts. I read my mail. Just when I think I can't bear one more bad idea, something wonderful surfaces, for instance, the fact that inmates were growing marijuana right under the sheriff's nose outside the Palmyra, Missouri, county jail—a story I did write for the *Herald-Whig*.

More recently, I received a newspaper clipping from a restaurant owner in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I had never heard of him, but he had read a recent story of mine in *The New Yorker* and thought I might be interested in the article. The possibility that I might be interested in writing for a national publication about anything happening in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, seemed remote. The clipping, from the local paper, was brief; it described the trial of an accountant, Dan Miller, who had been fired from his job for being gay. Afterward, his former employer sued him, alleging that he had stolen clients. The jury had ruled against Miller, assessing \$150,000 in damages. On its face, this seemed inexpli-

cable to me, and I have learned that anything that seems inexplicable is a potential story. I called the restaurant owner, assuming he knew more, but he did not. He simply thought there had been a miscarriage of justice and, as an immigrant from France, he didn't understand how such a thing could happen in America. He said he wouldn't want anything like that to happen to either of his two sons. He was asking the same questions I was. I ended up pursuing the story: total strangers can turn out to be sources. ✕ Friends are often sources, and I'm often struck when I talk to other writers by how many of the characters I've read about in their stories turn out to be known to them. This is often the case when writers search for someone to illustrate a broader theme.

I recall, for example, discussing the AIDS crisis with Jane Berentson, who wrote “Integrity Test” and worked as my deputy Page One editor at *The Wall Street Journal*. A made-for-TV movie broadcast the night before had focused on mothers whose sons had AIDS. I mentioned that I liked the movie, that the subject would have been a good one for the front page, and that it was too bad mothers and sons was a subject that had been dissected so thoroughly elsewhere in the media. Jane mused that the topic of fathers whose sons had AIDS seemed virtually unexplored. The idea appealed to me instantly; among other things, the *Journal's* readership was overwhelmingly male. We had a computer search done, and indeed, it turned up virtually nothing. Why was everyone writing about mothers, but not fathers?

The upshot of this conversation was a story about a father coming to terms with his gay son's fatal illness. Judy Valente, a *Journal* reporter covering the airline beat in Chicago, wrote one of the most moving stories I've ever read, which was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. She knew the son slightly from the church they both attended, and she became very close to the family as she did the reporting. So her “sources” were known to her apart from her work as a journalist. Reporting and writing this story was emotionally draining for Judy, especially since the young man died.

✕ I am reluctant to write about people who are my friends. I know too well what can happen with even the best-intentioned stories: they almost never appear as the subjects would have written them. A few years ago, *The New Yorker* was planning a

fiction issue and asked me to think about writing a nonfiction piece on the subject. I told the issue's editor, Dan Menaker, that I didn't really have any ideas, but that I had been recently struck by how little money my friend James Wilcox made, although he was quite a successful novelist. Dan responded immediately that I should write a piece about Jim, but I demurred; I didn't feel comfortable writing about someone I knew personally.

At the time, I didn't know Jim all that well. One day while visiting Amanda Urban, my agent, I noticed a collection of Jim's books on her shelves. I had read several and was a big fan, and I told her so. When Jim's next book, *Polite Sex*, came out, she invited me to a dinner party and sat me next to him. We had since gotten together several times to play some piano duets.

Dan dismissed my concerns, saying I should just disclose our friendship. I felt I should discuss the prospect of doing the story with Jim, who, I thought, would resist the idea. To my surprise, he readily agreed. Needless to say, his editor was thrilled at the possibility of publicity. Still, none of us was prepared for the to-do that followed. Jim's books vaulted onto paperback best-seller lists. We were both interviewed on public radio, and Jim found the exposure so painful and humiliating that he canceled all other appearances. I think he was somewhat traumatized, and the episode could easily have damaged our friendship.

I feel I was right to be cautious about writing about Jim, but it's another example of a story that was right under my nose. I wouldn't have recognized it if Dan hadn't prodded me and then been so enthusiastic. What made it a promising idea? The notion that a novelist would have to struggle financially was hardly a new or surprising one. But the extremity of Jim's circumstances was surprising. He was, after all, a critically acclaimed writer, the author of seven books. His astonishing candor about his life and financial circumstances brought his plight to life in a way that hadn't been done before. Yet this was never an idea that I believed to be foolproof, and without Dan's encouragement, I doubt that I would have pursued it.

Most sources are known to the writer, but except for out-and-out publicity hounds like Donald Trump, relatively few propose stories about themselves. What's scarce is a good source, particularly one who thinks like a writer. Such a source is to be cherished. Among the virtues of hearing a potential story from a

source is that you may be uniquely privy to the information, which means that you won't be competing with the rest of the world's writers on the same story. It is a great luxury to be able to work on a story alone, without the pressure of competition. In such cases, many writers get their sources to pledge that they will tell no one else. This I have always found difficult to do. But I have found that most sources understand the writer's need for exclusivity, and I have rarely had to make the agreement explicit.

What makes a good source? Good sources share an enthusiasm for stories. Like good writers, they love to read. They seem to love the idea that they are contributing to stories others will enjoy. "Gossip" has a pejorative tone, so perhaps I should simply say that good sources love to talk and exchange information. They are hungry for it.

The best source I have ever encountered is James J. Cramer, who runs his own investment partnership and founded The Street.com, a successful Web site on investing. I first met Jim long before he became a celebrity personal finance guru, when he came to *American Lawyer* to work as a reporter. We became friends, and remained friends when he went on to Harvard Law School and then to a job on Wall Street. In this respect, he was triply unusual: he was a personal friend, he thought like a journalist, and he worked on Wall Street, one of the most fertile sources of story ideas that interest me. Jim has a naturally curious mind, he seeks out paradox and contradiction and looks for explanations. He had his own far-flung network of sources. He positively percolated with story ideas—some of them, naturally, better than others. It was Jim who pointed out to me the mysterious rise in a key futures index the day after the market crash in 1987, a rise that proved critical in avoiding a complete market meltdown. Given investors' state of mind at the time, the rise made no sense. Could it have been manipulated, albeit for benign reasons? Pursuing this question was one of the factors that led to a *Wall Street Journal* story by Daniel Hertzberg and me, "Terrible Tuesday," for which we later won a Pulitzer Prize.

In that story, we turned the day after the crash, which had received almost no attention in the media, into a suspense-filled narrative of how disaster was averted. We provided an hour-by-hour account showing how serious the danger became, how close to panic many participants were, and how the sudden re-

versal in the Major Market Index offered a psychological boost that caused the market to recover. We never proved there was manipulation, but made a strong circumstantial case for it.

Another terrific source was Martin Siegel, who for a time was head of mergers and acquisitions at Kidder, Peabody and then, briefly, at Drexel Burnham Lambert. Siegel didn't give me confidential information about his own clients. But, like many good sources, he told me plenty about clients of other firms. (Siegel later got caught up in the insider-trading scandal and became a major character in my book *Den of Thieves*. It is naturally awkward when someone moves from being a source to a subject, a topic I'll discuss later.)

The best sources need to be sought out and cultivated, which is why I always encouraged people who worked for me to use their expense accounts and take people out to lunch and dinner. But many sources are readily available. One category needlessly shunned by many writers is public relations agents. It is true that PR people are often fundamentally at odds with journalists, since journalists are seeking the facts and PR people are often trying to conceal them, or at least to distort them in a way favorable to their clients. And some PR people manage to be exceedingly annoying, beginning their conversations with "How are you today?" in that mock-sincere, time-wasting tone perfected by telemarketers who call you at home during the dinner hour. But in my experience, a good PR person can be a good source. Some are former journalists themselves, so they recognize a good potential story. [A prejudice against PR agents—or any other category of person, for that matter—should never stand in the way of a good story. Our job as writers is to listen, not to judge.]

That doesn't mean that a source's motive shouldn't be considered in assessing whether something might be a story. Journalists often, and rightly, worry about being manipulated, and PR agents are especially likely to try to use journalists for their own purposes. But far more important than someone's motive in providing information is whether the information is true. And a virtue of conceiving stories as questions is that the outcome of the story is unknown. It's impossible to say ahead of time whether the piece will be favorable or unfavorable to its subjects, whether it will affect a stock price or not, or whether it will have any intended result at all. Good sources understand this.

Writers need to spend a lot of time talking to people. Colleagues of mine at *The Wall Street Journal* often marveled at how much time I spent on the phone, laughing and talking, often with my feet propped up on my desk, rarely taking a note. This didn't seem like "work" to them, and they sometimes asked how I got anything done. In fact, it *was* work. Oil drillers sink plenty of dry holes before they hit a gusher. I was simply prospecting for possible stories. Did I enjoy myself? Yes, and why not? The grim earnestness with which some writers tackle their work is only too evident in the resulting stories. Good sources can tell if you genuinely enjoy talking to them. If not, you're wasting your time and theirs.

I have found that the most fertile category of story ideas is one of the most readily accessible: other news accounts. By this I emphatically do not mean stealing someone else's idea, or rewriting a story that's already been done. [But the fact is that most news accounts raise more questions than they answer, thus leaving room for a much more thorough and enriching account.] Many news articles cover a brief, finite period of time, and are actually fragments of much longer stories. Journalists who write only news stories think differently from the kind of writers I am trying to encourage. Their focus on the traditional "who, what, where, and when" of news often distracts them from the deeper resonance of their stories. I have often seen the most eye-popping stories reported in a few deadpan, matter-of-fact paragraphs, usually buried deep inside a paper, or appearing in a publication with little circulation.

If you have been exercising your curiosity as I recommended in the last chapter, recognizing the potential stories lurking behind news reports will become almost second nature. You should realize at once that myriad questions remained to be answered about the cable-car accident, the Monica Lewinsky brouhaha, or Congressman Bill Paxton's sudden, mysterious decision to resign from Congress, to mention just a few recent cases. Another revealing exercise is to look at what kinds of feature stories and nonfiction books are being published: almost all of them derive from events that were originally covered as news stories. Even John Berendt's phenomenal best-seller *Midnight in the Garden*

*of Good and Evil* was based on events widely reported in the Savannah, Georgia, press.

Let's consider some examples of this process.

On November 11, 1992, *The New York Times* ran this story on the third page of the Metropolitan section, without a by-line:

A partner in one of Manhattan's most prestigious law firms was found stabbed to death early Monday morning in a motel in the Bronx, the police said yesterday.

The victim was identified by the police yesterday as David L. Schwartz, 55 years old, the head of the real estate section of Cravath, Swaine & Moore.

Sgt. William Larkin, commanding officer of the 45th Precinct Detective Squad, said investigators were still seeking a motive. Lieut. Richard Kuberski, a Police Department spokesman, said some of Mr. Schwartz's personal effects had been stolen. He would not reveal what they were.

Mr. Schwartz's body was found by a night clerk at about 1:30 A.M. in a room of the Hutchinson River Motel at 2815 Westchester Avenue, described by the police as a transient motel near the Hutchinson River Parkway in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx. He had been stabbed several times in the chest and neck.

Mr. Schwartz, who lived on Park Avenue in Manhattan, had registered under the name Lou Rathmayer.

Mr. Schwartz was married and had three grown children. He had joined Cravath after graduating from the University of Virginia Law School. He became a partner in 1969.

What an extraordinary story, positively shouting with unanswered questions. It concerns a murder of a prominent person, and death is inherently dramatic. Yet note the flat, uninflected, style embraced by the *Times*—almost as if, in deference to the sensibilities of the victim's family, the paper wanted to suppress readers' curiosity. At the same time, the anonymous writer was clearly aware of the sensational aspects of the story and chose to highlight the most incongruous details.

From the first paragraph, it's obvious that something curious has happened. Many people, no doubt, were stabbed in the Bronx that year, but none of the others was "a partner in one of Manhattan's most prestigious law firms." What was such a person doing in a Bronx motel, and why was he stabbed?

This question highlights an issue often discussed in journalism classes: why is it "news" when an Ivy League student, an honor student, a partner in a law firm, to cite a few examples, is murdered, but not when a drug dealer is? The discussion inevitably turns to whether coverage of such events is racist or sexist or betrays class prejudice on the part of editors and writers. The answer, I believe, is far simpler, and rooted in human curiosity: murders of such people (or by them) are surprising. While our surprise as readers may in fact be rooted in stereotypes, it is also backed by evidence: most partners in upscale law firms do not become murder victims; for drug dealers, the risks are obvious. In any event, while writers, in my view, shouldn't reinforce stereotypes by pandering to a prejudice, it is futile to try to suppress readers' curiosity by ignoring them. Indeed, as we shall see, it is often the writer's task to heighten curiosity. Anything surprising is a potential story, and the more surprising the better.

Later in the *Times* story, we learn that the reporter has asked the obvious question about motive, but has no answer. The mystery deepens. Clearly, robbery is suspected, since we learn that "some" of the victim's personal effects were missing. Still, we have no explanation of what Mr. Schwartz was doing in a Bronx motel. Only in the last few paragraphs does the writer reveal the most suggestive details: this was a "transient" motel, located off a major highway; Mr. Schwartz had registered under an assumed name and was found at the unlikely hour of 1:30 A.M.; he was a resident of tony Park Avenue, which makes it even more mysterious that he was found in the Bronx. Finally, Mr. Schwartz was married and had three children, facts whose relevance isn't immediately apparent. There the story ends.

Asking questions about a news story usually involves speculating about the answers as well, drawing on our everyday knowledge of the world and our common sense. This doesn't mean that such speculation will turn out to be correct, but it is a good exercise in deciding whether certain questions, if pursued and answered, are likely to result in an interesting story. Read between the lines of the *Times* story. Most readers would know that "transient" motels are often used for sexual assignations. It is probably no accident that the writer included this fact in an otherwise very brief report. And if Mr. Schwartz was stabbed during such an encounter, what was the sex of his assailant? It is,

of course, possible that a woman could stab a man "several times in the chest and neck," but is it likely? If the assailant was a man, the fact that Schwartz had a wife and three children takes on new significance. Is it possible that Mr. Schwartz was gay? Such questions lead to even more questions—always a sign of a good potential story.

I was among the people reading the story in the *Times* that morning, and all of these thoughts occurred to me. I do not scour the third page of the Metro section every day looking for obscure crime stories, but this one caught my attention for a particular reason: I knew David Schwartz, because I had worked as a lawyer at Cravath for three years. I never worked with him, and probably had exchanged only a few words with him, but I certainly remembered him, and my memory made the story all the more puzzling. He was hardworking and disheveled, and seemed socially ill at ease, with one exception: I vividly recall him and his wife as excellent ballroom dancers at the firm "prom" held every winter, and I could still picture them on the dance floor of the Pierre Hotel, he in his tuxedo, she in a flowing, full-skirted gown. It was frankly hard to picture him having any outside sex life at all, let alone arranging assignations at a Bronx motel. The idea that he might have been gay, or interested in having sex with another man under any circumstances, seemed ludicrous.

I called a friend of mine at Cravath that day. The firm's phone lines were, predictably, humming. He told me that the firm had issued a brief statement, and that the suspect was male. Raymond Childs, a young black male, was soon arrested and charged with the murder. This was dutifully reported in the *Times*, and more gleefully in the tabloids. Then the story quickly died, none of its incongruities having been explored, much less explained.

This, obviously, had all the elements of a fascinating story. Indeed, it's hard to think of a much more obvious example. So did I immediately propose the story and start work? No. I was busy talking about it, speculating about it, another sure sign that something is at least interesting. Yet I did nothing. Why?

Looking back on my reaction, I see that my failure to grasp the potential story was in part due to its first-person element. As I've mentioned before, it is often very difficult to recognize a story when you are in the midst of it. I knew David Schwartz, and I knew other people who knew him, so of course my curios-

ity was high. When I have a personal interest in something, my confidence that others would also be interested erodes, so I sometimes tend to miss those stories. But in this case, there were more fundamental, but quite common elements to my obtuseness. Basically, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to pursue this story.

This lack of desire stemmed partly from my having worked at Cravath. I had an excellent experience there, I was grateful to the firm for educating me and paying me, and I liked many of my co-workers. In my first book, *The Partners*, about big law firms, one chapter was an unvarnished account of Cravath's intense and ultimately successful defense of IBM, one of its biggest clients. I had never worked on the IBM case or any other IBM matter, I was careful to use nothing that I had learned while in Cravath's employ, and the firm's partners cooperated in my research, allowing me to interview them. Given Cravath's success in the case, I always assumed the chapter would be viewed as positive from a PR perspective, though that was not my concern in writing it. Still, some of the anecdotes I included, such as the time a lawyer at the firm billed twenty-seven hours in a single day by flying to California, changing time zones, and working on the plane, were distinctly double-edged. Some lawyers at the firm felt I had betrayed them, and were furious with me (one has never spoken to me since). With that experience still in mind, I wasn't eager to revisit the place, this time in the context of a lurid murder.

Even more fundamentally, the whole subject made me squeamish. I was admittedly interested, but I didn't necessarily want to proclaim that to the world by writing about the matter. The very thought of calling Schwartz's widow and children made me almost physically sick. To probe a dead man's sex life and then share it with the public struck me as repugnant. It often surprises people when I say this, and I doubt many believe it, but like many writers I know, I am actually a rather shy person. I also grew up in a typical Midwestern family, where sex and religion were not discussed. Besides, I was worried about my reputation as a writer of "serious" nonfiction. Wasn't this kind of story better left to the tabloids? Although I was not consciously thinking along these lines at the time, such were the feelings that blocked my thinking of the Schwartz murder as a story.

So why, one might wonder, did I nonetheless find myself having an animated conversation about David Schwartz with Tina Brown the next time I dropped in at *The New Yorker's* offices? It's obvious that on some level I *did* know that this was potentially a good story. As she often does, Tina had asked me what was going on, what were people I knew talking about, and I had told her about the murder. I knew she'd be interested. One of Brown's strengths as an editor—the greatest strength, I think, an editor can have—is her unabashed curiosity. She wasn't fazed by the subject matter. She wanted to know what had really happened—and she suggested I write that story for *The New Yorker*.

I didn't immediately agree, but I did think about it. I focused on the elements of the story—the crime, the unanswered questions, the seeming paradox—and recognized that the answers I sought probably lay in the personality of David Schwartz and the world he inhabited. He had obviously been a far more complicated and desperate man than anyone realized. I thought the resulting story didn't have to be lurid or sensational. In fact, how could the truth be any worse, or more embarrassing, than the speculations swirling among everyone who knew him? Someone was likely to write this story, and couldn't I handle it as responsibly as anyone? I decided to go ahead.

I experienced another attack of squeamishness when I met with Hillary Clinton, at her behest, before beginning work on *Blood Sport*, my book about Whitewater and the Clinton White House. The first lady's confidante, Susan Thomases, had approached me, saying the Clintons were interested in cooperating in a book that would get at the truth of all the scandals swirling around the presidency.

News of Paula Jones's allegations of sexual harassment had just broken, and I felt obliged to ask Mrs. Clinton whether she would be willing to have me investigate the matter. The very idea of such a question made me anxious. Here I was, on my first visit to the White House, meeting the first lady for the first time, and I was going to ask her about an alleged sexual impropriety by her husband? But I did, and Mrs. Clinton seemed unfazed. "Of course" I should investigate Paula Jones, she replied without any hesitation. "She's part of the right-wing conspiracy to destroy my husband." Then I thought I detected tears welling in her eyes. "You have no idea how humiliating it is for me to have to read these stories," she added.

Since then—and after I did, in fact, investigate the Paula Jones case and find it far more complicated than I assume the first lady did—I have often wondered about those tears. I am sure they were genuine. But whether they flowed from hurt, from a belief that her husband was incapable of the sexual behavior alleged, or from sheer frustration that her own will had been unable to intimidate the Paula Joneses of the world, I cannot say.

I have come to recognize that my own aversion to a story or a question is often a positive sign. Readers, in effect, pay writers and journalists to ask the questions they themselves are too squeamish to ask. I have also come to recognize that silence about subjects "that dare not speak their names" perpetuates ignorance and fear. Schwartz's patronage of a male prostitute made him no less of a human being. And didn't my own fear of talking to his family mirror society's prejudice and sense of taboo, rather than my compassion? Was my reluctance to ask the first lady about Paula Jones rooted in a belief that the subject was irrelevant to my book? Or was it that on some level I wanted Mrs. Clinton to like me, so I didn't want to offend her? I have often had occasion to reflect on my reactions to these stories, and I now urge my students to do the same whenever they recognize similar signs in themselves. Like avid curiosity, reluctance is a possible sign of a good story.

That doesn't mean caution should be thrown to the winds. Recently, someone suggested I write a story about the religious convictions of Whitewater independent counsel Kenneth Starr. This person told me that Starr sometimes began staff meetings by holding hands and praying, and had been spotted singing hymns in his backyard. I asked what relevance this information, if true, might have, and the person replied that Starr was on a witch-hunt against the Clintons, inspired by religious zealotry. I immediately felt reluctant. The reasoning, I suppose, was that Starr was a religious conservative; religious conservatives are intolerant of sexual infidelity and hate Bill Clinton; and therefore Kenneth Starr is improperly motivated by hatred of Bill Clinton rather than allegiance to the truth.

As I ask my students to do, I held on to my reluctance and tried to think about its source. The fact that Starr came from a religious background (his father was a minister, and Starr himself once sold Bibles door-to-door) was something I had reported in *Blood Sport* as part of a portrait meant to emphasize how differ-

ent Starr's upbringing was from that of Bill Clinton. But I had encountered absolutely nothing in my reporting on Starr's conduct of the Whitewater and Lewinsky investigations to suggest that his religious background had anything to do with the decisions he was making as a prosecutor. Some of those decisions could be criticized on strategic grounds, and were, but the motivation for them was obvious and had nothing to do with religious zeal. I recognized that I was apprehensive about asking Starr his religious views because if he in turn asked how my questions were relevant, I had no good answer. I opted not to pursue the story, and not out of any personal fondness for Starr.

I don't cite any of these examples to prove that I have superior judgment in such matters, only to show my reasoning. The case could be argued that I shouldn't have done the Schwartz story, should have kept all references to sex out of *Blood Sport*, and should have pursued the Starr story. But too many writers and journalists flee from their emotions, and never stop to reason at all. Often writers fear the impact a story will have on its subject. This is perfectly appropriate, and I warn students that the day they stop having feelings about the subjects of their stories is the day they need an extended vacation from journalism. But our ultimate duty as writers is to our readers. To subjects I pledge to tell the truth, to be fair, to act in a way consistent with ethical standards. I do not, and cannot, promise they will like the story. ]

Consider the following news story, which ran in *The New York Times* on December 11, 1992.

It was September 1990, and Hollywood was about to be shaken by the news that the Matsushita Electric Industrial Company of Japan was buying MCA Inc., the entertainment industry giant, whose president was the blunt, bare-knuckled Sidney Sheinberg.

On the evening of Sept. 21, 1990, with the pending purchase still secret, Mr. Sheinberg's son, Jonathan, visited the family home and heard his father discussing the deal on the telephone. That overheard conversation formed the basis for civil insider-trading charges filed yesterday by the Securities and Exchange Commission against Jonathan Sheinberg, who is 34 years old, and three other men.

The scene in the Sheinberg home was detailed in documents filed in Federal District Court in Los Angeles by the S.E.C.'s regional office. The commission said that Sidney Sheinberg, after realizing that his son had overheard him, had sternly warned Jonathan not to trade in MCA stock or disclose what he heard to anyone else.

Nevertheless, the commission charged, Jonathan Sheinberg told at least three other people in the next 72 hours, and those three men quickly purchased MCA stock or options. When the deal became public later in the month, the stock soared from the mid-30s to nearly \$60 a share. The S.E.C. calculates the three men's improper profits at \$417,000.

The three men accused along with Jonathan Sheinberg were Richard G. Ursitti, his father-in-law; Richard E. Shephard, his business manager, and Barry C. Fogel, an acquaintance. The elder Mr. Sheinberg, who confirmed last year that the commission was examining trading in MCA stock, was not accused of any wrongdoing.

All four men named in the complaint agreed to settle the charges, with no admission or denial of guilt, by paying a total of \$1.3 million in disgorged profits and insider-trading penalties. Of the penalties, \$416,000 was assessed against Jonathan Sheinberg, although he did not personally trade on the information. Lawyers for all four men said their clients had settled to avoid the expense of a trial.

Celebrity status aside, the case is being parsed and puzzled over in legal circles, lawyers said yesterday.

The story went on to discuss legal issues in so-called "family-circle" insider-trading cases.

Crime has offered writers fertile ground for centuries, and not just because it is often a lurid and violent subject. Crime stories present themes of law, justice, order, and morality. They embody the inherent and constant conflict between the individual and society. To the extent that crime is aberrational, it helps define what is considered normal or acceptable. For these reasons, I often urge my students to consider writing crime stories.

The Sheinberg story immediately caught my attention. I have long been intrigued by insider-trading cases, and not just because I wrote *Den of Thieves*, about the Ivan Boesky case, which roiled Wall Street in the 1980s. In my view, insider trading is the perfect white-collar crime. It seems irresistibly tempting to otherwise

law-abiding people. Even more puzzling, its perpetrators tend to be affluent. They don't need the illegal profits. So why do they do it?

This curiosity about motive, not any inherent interest in the stock market, largely drives my interest in insider trading. This is an often frustrating element of insider-trading cases, since prosecutors are concerned only with proving the elements of the crime; motive, however fascinating, is not always legally relevant. Years ago, while a reporter at the *Journal*, I was assigned to cover the trial of Foster Winans, a fellow *Journal* reporter accused of leaking information slated to appear in his "Heard on the Street" column to a stockbroker, who in turn earned illegal profits and paid Winans for his information. For obvious reasons, this was an extremely sensitive story for the *Journal*. I was told to cover it as I would any other story, and I did so, though it was hard to ignore the fact that my copy was sent each day to the chairman of Dow Jones for review. (No changes were ever made.) I still consider the Winans case to have all the elements of a great story, but attending the trial each day was often frustrating, because the prosecutors didn't ask the questions I wanted to ask. It was all I could do to stop myself from jumping up and continuing the questioning.

In reading the Sheinberg story, I was immediately struck by the opportunity to explore the questions that most interest me about insider trading, because the case posed those questions starkly. Sidney Sheinberg, as the story makes clear, was one of the most powerful and wealthy men in Hollywood; his son shared in that wealth. Jonathan surely had no financial motive for what he did; indeed, he himself didn't even trade on the information or profit from it. The case had another interesting dimension. The story reports that Jonathan's father warned him not to use the confidential information he'd overheard. Yet he did, defying his father's injunction. Why? What was the relationship between Sidney and Jonathan? What, in other words, was Jonathan's motive?

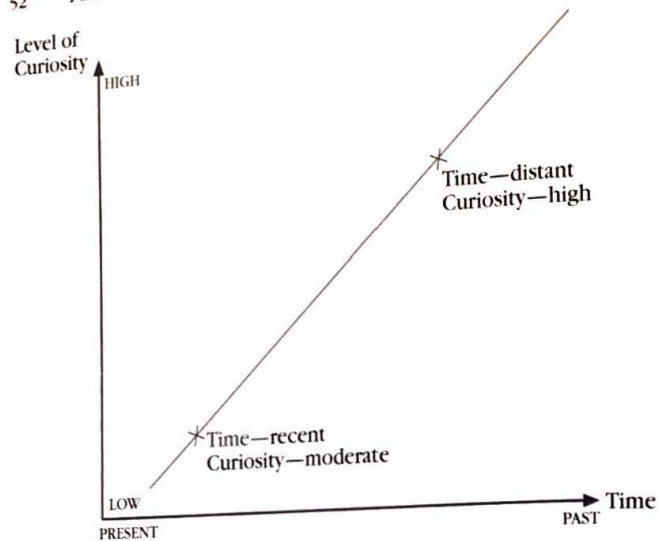
These questions make clear another point I often make to my students, which is that a good story idea is "about" many things. On the surface, this story is about insider trading. But is it really? I was relatively uninterested in much of the *Times* story, which explored the implications of the case for insider-

trading law. To me, it was immediately apparent that the *really* complex, rich story would be about the Sheinberg family, the relationship between a rich and powerful father and a less well-known son, about family relationships in Hollywood, about an Oedipal conflict, and ultimately, about human nature. Indeed, I've come to believe that nearly every good story is ultimately about human nature—a subject that comes as close to any as being universally interesting. What the completed article might ultimately say about these far-flung subjects, of course, I did not know—which only added to the story's appeal, since it fueled my curiosity.

News stories often raise more questions than they answer, and the *Times* account is a textbook example. Note how the writer has used some very specific, colorful anecdotal detail: the reader is in the Sheinberg home; Jonathan overhears his father "discussing the deal on the telephone"; his father "sternly warned" him. The presence of such detail implies that the writer knows a great deal about the subject—yet not even the basic questions are answered, let alone more minor ones. What did the father actually say, both on the phone and to Jonathan? Such details as the *Times* article offered whet a reader's appetite, but hardly satisfy it.

The *Times* item illustrates another important point about good feature-story ideas: they are less time-bound than typical news stories. Indeed, for what is essentially a news story, this one begins with a distinctly "feature" lead: "It was September 1990 . . ." In other words, even when the *Times* article appeared, the events were two years old. Yet I was considering it as a possible inspiration for a story that would obviously be published even longer after the events in question.

✕ When is a matter *too* old? That's not often an easy question to answer. But too often possibly good stories are dismissed because they didn't happen yesterday, or the day before, or last week or month. If the question is compelling enough—say, "What caused the Big Bang?"—the events can be as old as the universe itself. A good rule of thumb is that if there's still a mystery, there's still a story. On the other hand, some unanswered questions clearly lose their appeal as time passes and curiosity is dulled by the sweep of more recent or more important events. I like to illustrate the phenomenon with a graph:



So freshness is an advantage, all else being equal. When I remain curious about events that happened some time in the past, I try to examine the source of my curiosity. If it is highly idiosyncratic, rooted in my own particular interests (e.g., why did my ancestors migrate from Scotland in the seventeenth century?), I tend to be skeptical. If it touches on broader themes (e.g., was Alger Hiss a Communist spy?) I'm enthusiastic. It's important to remember that exploring a still-unanswered question will almost always yield news, even if that news relates to events in the past. News is something we don't already know, not necessarily something that just happened.

In the Sheinberg case, I wasn't at all troubled that the events had happened several years earlier. Sidney Sheinberg was still a powerful figure in Hollywood, and his son was working there. If I could obtain answers to my questions, they would be fresh information. I recognized that not even people in Hollywood were desperate to know the details of the case; many had probably never heard of it. But, as I've already mentioned, my curiosity was rooted in broad questions about human nature, a subject that never becomes stale. Would the Sheinberg case stay fresh forever? Probably not. But I was confident I could still kindle reader interest for quite some time, because I was interested myself.

On August 2, 1994, the following story ran in *The Wall Street Journal*:

WHITTLE PULLS PLUG ON MEDICAL NETWORK,  
 AMBITIOUS NEWS SERVICE  
 IN DOCTOR OFFICES

*By Patrick Reilly*

Whittle Communications L.P. said it will shut down its Medical News Network, a costly interactive news and information service in doctors' offices.

The failure of the ambitious interactive service, which had been tested in 5,000 doctors' offices and was scheduled for a nationwide launch this fall, is another indication that Whittle Communications' founder and chairman, Christopher Whittle, is coming up short on raising the funds necessary to keep the company's media ventures alive. In the face of uncertainty over health-care policy, Whittle couldn't get major drug companies to sign long-term contracts to advertise on Medical News Network.

Whittle has already closed two media properties this year—Special Reports video and magazines for doctors' offices, and advertiser-sponsored books. Whittle is now said by people familiar with the talks to be negotiating the sale of about half of its interest in Channel One, the advertising-supported news program broadcast in 12,000 schools, to the merchant-banking arm of Goldman, Sachs & Co.

Now "Whittle, at this point, has really got only one platform, and that's Channel One, but that's it," said Michael Wolf. . . .

Whittle said yesterday it will focus on the education business, including Channel One and the Edison project. Edison, which is headed by Mr. Whittle but financially independent of Whittle's corporate operations, aims to run for-profit public schools and has already lined up schools in several cities to support its plan. There, too, however, Mr. Whittle is in need of new funds to support his ambitious plans beyond this year.

The story went on to detail, at considerable length, Whittle's recent business problems. In short, it was a typical well-reported business story, written in pyramid style. All the bases seem to have been covered, with no obvious questions.

What was my reaction to this piece? Surprise. I was very

surprised, though I knew next to nothing about the Medical News Network, nor was it something I was particularly interested in. Like curiosity and queasiness, surprise is an emotion that should be embraced and examined whenever it arises, for surprise contains the seeds of a story. The more surprising, the better. Why was I so surprised in this case? Chris Whittle had been the subject of immense publicity, nearly all of it flattering. The tale of how he and Philip Moffitt had come from the backwoods of Tennessee to rescue *Esquire* magazine and take Manhattan by storm had been told and retold, and it was a great success story. Even though the pair had broken up in what seemed an acrimonious parting, Whittle had launched numerous innovative ventures and continued to court the media. His charm, coupled with his revolutionary ideas, made him irresistible. Yet, without exactly saying so, the *Journal* story made it clear that the Whittle empire was rapidly collapsing. This conflict between expectation and reality is often at the root of surprise. It is also almost always the root of a story, because it gives rise to a very common question: How could someone like So-and-So fail? Surprise often spawns a question beginning with "how" or "why," and if it does, there may be a story.

In this case my surprise was heightened because I knew Chris Whittle slightly. When I first worked at *American Lawyer*, the magazine shared office space with *Esquire*. I was invited to *Esquire*'s fiftieth-anniversary party at Lincoln Center, which was in reality an extravagant tribute to Whittle and Moffitt's success. While at *The Wall Street Journal*, Whittle had been invited to lunch with the paper's top editors and the chairman of Dow Jones. Whittle was charming, as usual, but brash, ridiculing the way the *Journal* sold advertising and predicting the demise of traditional media in favor of his newer, advertiser-friendly publications. He seemed cocky. I could see why he had a reputation as a legendary salesman. He had some people around the table nodding in agreement even as he insulted them and scoffed at the notion of editorial integrity deeply ingrained in the *Journal* culture.

I was also familiar with and intrigued by another aspect of Whittle's life, though it didn't involve me personally. I knew he had a keen interest in architecture and design, and I had seen magazine photos of his extravagant Dakota apartment, designed

by the interior decorator and architect Peter Marino. He had no sooner completed that apartment than he bought a newer and larger one, launching another renovation and decoration. He had a spread in East Hampton, Long Island, and he had commissioned Marino to build a lavish headquarters for Whittle Communications in Whittle's hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee. These were more than the usual accoutrements of success. Whittle lived on a scale that was both romantic and extravagant. What drove him to such lengths of connoisseurship and consumption? How would his love of luxury be affected by his recent setbacks? Had it contributed to them? In other words, I sensed in Whittle broader, universal themes of—again—human nature.

I hasten to say that I bore Chris Whittle no personal animus. If anything, I liked him. While I didn't share his views about editorial integrity, I admired his grandiose ideas and his courage, even foolhardiness, in pursuing them. I admired his energy and his drive. I thought he had good taste. Having grown up in a small city in a rural area myself, I suspected Whittle and I were alike in many ways. But none of those feelings were very strong; if they had been, I might have hesitated to pursue the story.

Thinking of this story in terms of Chris Whittle's personality made a huge difference, for it was no longer just a business story but a tale of personal success and failure. I sensed that if I could understand what had happened to Whittle, readers would learn something they could easily relate to in their own lives. This is one of the reasons, I believe, that biography has always been so popular. (People want to know why someone else succeeds or fails, even if they aren't inherently interested in what that someone has done.)

To illustrate the role that surprise often plays in story ideas, consider this item, also from *The Wall Street Journal*:

WORKPLACE: AT CHRYSLER, DEBATE GROWS ON GAY RIGHTS

By Nichole M. Christian

While attention is focused on General Motors Corp.'s labor negotiations, Chrysler Corp. is facing allegations from some workers that it is antigay.

The No. 3 U.S. auto maker has come under fire from gay and lesbian employees over its recent refusal to include the

words "sexual orientation" in its antidiscrimination policy. General Motors added such language to its antidiscrimination policy years ago. But Ford Motor Co., like Chrysler, said it hasn't done so because it feels its antidiscrimination policy covers everyone. . . .

The story went on to discuss the issue at other companies, then returned to Chrysler:

Even with the contract talks now concluded, Chrysler's failure to adopt the nondiscrimination language has ignited the gay community. A few workers picket at different times each day outside Chrysler's sprawling headquarters in Auburn Hills, Mich., and some of them show up at Chrysler dealers from time to time . . .

The reporter then briefly quoted two gay Chrysler workers, one a tool-and-die maker, the other an electrician.

It's interesting to consider how *Journal* editors must have struggled with this story. It ran in the "B" section of the paper and, lacking an obvious news peg, it was tucked into the paper's "Workplace" column. Even so, the article's first words are about the now long-forgotten GM talks presumably taking place at the time; whatever was happening at Chrysler had been going on for a while and hadn't reached any obvious resolution. The traditional news format invariably has trouble conveying this kind of story, since it lacks the "news" that can be summarized in one or two sentences. I'm sure the eyes of most readers glided right over this item, and that it didn't make much of an impression.

So what caught my attention? Not the lengthy discussion of how companies are or are not codifying nondiscrimination policies toward gays and lesbians—that's the kind of subject I consider a topic rather than a story. The notion that well-educated white-collar employees at, say, IBM, were organizing for gay rights wouldn't have come as any surprise. But blue-collar workers, in the auto industry? I was surprised.

I readily admit that this feeling was rooted in stereotypes, both of gay and lesbian workers and of the auto industry. I've been interested in cars since I was a kid, and used to keep scrapbooks of the new models I clipped out of ads every fall. As Page

One editor of the *Journal*, I made a point of visiting Detroit each January for the North American auto show, which I both enjoyed and found to be a fertile source of story ideas. I got to be friendly with a few high-ranking auto executives. So I was reasonably familiar with the culture of the auto industry, and I have to say it's one of the most macho, for want of a better word, I've ever encountered. If anyone I met on any of those visits was gay, he or she did a good job of concealing it. So when I read the *Journal* article, I was doubly surprised: first, that there were gay workers on the assembly line; second, that they were willing to identify themselves as gay, even willing to picket outside Chrysler's headquarters.

However hard we try to free ourselves from stereotypes, we inevitably absorb them, or are at least aware of them. I believe this can be a virtue in thinking of story ideas: when we respond with surprise to facts that defy stereotypes, we have an opportunity to explore those stereotypes and perhaps debunk them. As Page One editor of the *Journal*, I heard regularly from an organization at the journalism school of the University of Missouri that annually graded national publications on the degree to which its articles perpetuated racist, sexist, homophobic (etc.) stereotypes. This group purported to analyze the stories by counting how many were about blacks, Hispanics, gays, and so on, and then deciding whether they were "favorable" or not. I got a failing grade every year. I was always bewildered by this exercise, though I had no objection to such groups evaluating our performance on the basis of whatever criteria they chose. I remember the group was especially incensed at a front page story we ran about a black contractor in New Orleans who was convicted of substantial fraud, arguing that this portrayed a black person in a negative light. That this might perpetuate a stereotype had never occurred to me, but when I thought about the matter, it struck me that I would have been patronizing not to run such a story. Shouldn't all potential subjects be held to the same standards of interest and newsworthiness?

In any event, the Chrysler story not only surprised me but also triggered a bit of squeamishness. Homosexuality still wasn't a subject of polite conversation in Detroit, and I knew it would cause embarrassment to bring up the subject with auto executives. As I later learned firsthand, some executives even had trou-

ble saying the word "gay." So the story idea had this going for it as well.

I sometimes tell my students that I can sometimes sense that a story proposal's good just by hearing a sentence fragment. In this case, when asked what story I was working on, all I had to say was "Gay auto workers."

As I hope even these few examples make clear, to recognize a good story idea requires self-awareness. In my experience, most people are uncomfortable with most of their emotions, and are happy to push them aside and forget about them. Writers need to embrace their feelings and study the origins of them within themselves. Surprise, shock, outrage, anger, disgust, squeamishness, embarrassment, nervousness, anxiety—all are signals that a story may be at hand. This kind of self-analysis takes practice. But eventually it becomes second nature. It's also interesting. Otherwise unpleasant feelings can be recognized for their potential as inspiration.

## 3 PROPOSALS

NEARLY EVERY GOOD STORY IDEA begins as a question. But some ideas are better than others. Most good writers have more ideas than they have time to turn into stories. So how does one discriminate among them? More practically, how does a writer persuade an editor to commission a story when the writer has nothing more to show than an idea?

In shaping a proposal, I find it helpful to place my idea into one or more categories. In my years of writing and editing, I've discovered that six broad categories account for a large percentage of all published non-news stories. It isn't necessary to explicitly label an idea as falling into one of these categories, but it's often helpful, and I've found that most editors at least subliminally respond to proposals that promise a kind of story with which they are familiar, and which has proven successful. (As I'll demonstrate later, these categories also help dictate a story's structure.) Categorization is nothing more than an analytical tool: obviously, the world of stories isn't so simple or scientific, and many good stories embrace more than one category.

The first three, which are both more common and generally easier to report and write than the others, are the trend, the explanation, and the profile. Any one is a good place for new and unpublished writers to begin.