If you have good stories, good anecdotes, great insights and good thoughts, then your writing will seem good. The more you put out, the more you’ll get.

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I’m writing my 21st book and this one is about the Korean War, that notorious black hole in our contemporary history — especially the miscalculation, which led to the extension of that war to fighting with the Chinese. The book is called The Coldest Winter. I’m very proud of it. I’m 73 years old, and I think it’s my best book.

I thought that I might talk a little bit about a book that I wrote some 35 years ago, which allowed me to cross over from journalism to being both journalist and historian, The Best and the Brightest. I sort of had a foot in both camps, and I probably was accepted by neither — certainly the historians watch people like me warily. Sean Wilentz, the rather well-known, rather gifted historian at Princeton once did a 4,000 word fulmination against David McCullough, one of his books, and took time out to whack me. He said that one of my books, The ‘50s — that the book had been defeated. And I wrote him a letter saying, “how do you defeat a book?”

You put it out there, people buy it. This particular book sold about 250,000 copies, I think it was, in hardcover. About 400,000 copies in book clubs. It did very well in paperback. It had an eight-part, very good History Channel documentary, which I thought was really a pretty good run for a book. But anyway — there’s always a little wariness on the part of the more classically trained historian. At any rate, I thought I’d talk a little bit about The Best and the Brightest, and why I did it and then perhaps I could give you some guidance.

The Best and the Brightest reminds me of moments when John
Kennedy was a young man running for the presidency, and a young woman asked him how he became a war hero, and he said that it was “entirely involuntary” — that the Japanese had sunk his ship. In a way, that’s what happened to me. I went out to cover a war and then it didn’t work. In the sadness of it, in the wreckage of that war, I had a need for better answers than I had come up with. That’s what involuntarily turned me into a historian.

I’d like to go backwards before I go forwards on this, and that is to give some of you the sense of the apprenticeship that I did. That is, that it didn’t just happen overnight. I had been the managing editor of a very good college daily. I had worked in the summers on metropolitan papers. When I graduated from college, which was just the very beginning of what would soon be the civil rights movement, the year after Brown vs. The Board of Education, I had taken a job on the smallest daily. Then I had four very good years at a great paper in Nashville, Tennessee. I thought I’d mention that, because it was a particularly important part of my apprenticeship. I was there from 1956 through 1960 and the sit-ins began in that particular city. I was lucky enough to cover them, to be a principal reporter on a very good paper. I would say that not only were we the best paper in the traditional Confederacy at that time, but we made a very good case that we were the best non-national newspaper in the country then, and I worked with very gifted people, and many of them went on to distinguished careers… It was a very, very good crew, and I was this young guy — probably their first Ivy League hire. However, instead of being just one of 50 young Ivy League people hanging around The New York Times or The Washington Post city room, I was the one guy with this sort of hunger, hanging around there. We’d go out to dinner every night and I’d just hang on their every word. How they’d done stories, I would ask them that, how they had done this — it was really quite thrilling. I very consciously — for those of you who are apprentice journalists, or working on it I — very consciously worked on the part of my game
that was weakest. I knew I did certain things reasonably well. I had a certain quickness. I could write generally better than most people in the city room, but where I was weaker was in the legwork. So I set out, very consciously in those years, to learn how to do it better, to overcome innate shyness, to sort of get that quality that takes you from one good interview to the next one. In fact, to this day, when I lecture to young journalists at different journalism schools, when I sometimes sense that their interest is ebbing — I’m not going to help them and their peers to become an anchor man or an anchorwoman and I feel their attention span shrinking, and I would say, I will now tell you the best question for any interview: I’d look at them and say, “Who else should I interview?”

So it was really a wonderful four years and when I came out of there, I was really in training. I had been trained and taught by very good people. Within six months, I was hired for a relatively minor slot at The New York Times bureau, because the Third World was exploding. In six months I was in the Congo. In 18 months I was in Vietnam. I looked around at foreign correspondents with all this great training and as soon as I got overseas, I realized that I had been better trained than most of them.

So I will now fast forward slightly to the decision in the Philippines. In 1968, I had just come back from my second tour in Vietnam. I was deeply depressed by it. We had 500,000 troops there. We were inflicting on this small Asian country the heaviest bombing in the history of mankind. I had a profound sense that in fact the war was over. It didn’t work. I was also deeply dissatisfied with my own reporting. I had done well, won the right prizes, but I had not done well enough for myself. I had too many questions still to answer. It was at the cutting edge of — between being a journalist and a reporter.

I came back, in the fall of ‘67, and I spent 1968, which was an enormously explosive, volatile year, covering the domestic repercussions of the war back in America. I knew that it was all
over then. We were stalemated, and we were going to have to go home. So, I thought of a book, in my dilemma, of how and why, but principally why, we’d gone to war there. How could men, who were said to be the ablest men to spearhead the government of this century, be the architects of the greatest American tragedy since the Civil War? Although the current incumbents have probably done more harm than that. I tried to figure out the proper equation for this book to work. I would try to get an advance that would cover four years of work. I would try and spend two-and-a-half years doing the legwork, and one-and-a-half- years writing it, which was by the way, in the pre-computer typewriter era where the rewriting was slower. One of the great things about the age of computers is how much easier it is to rewrite and how much less retyping there is. My friend in Iowa once said that God had not done anything for writers in a long time. He realized that and He gave them the word processor. It can make your life so much easier in terms of the rewriting.

Anyway, I thought if I did two interviews a day for that period — I thought I was increasingly confident of my skills as an interviewer — I thought I would have plenty of rich material. I knew how good a reporter I was back then. I knew that was a special strength. I had morphed myself over, from someone for whom that was not a strength, into someone who had one.

I thought I could do the legwork, but two-and-a-half years of legwork are a really long time. I could really do a lot of interviewing. I could find out what happened and who the people were. If I had a lot of good material, then I thought the writing would be good… If you have good stories, good anecdotes, great insights and good thoughts, then your writing will seem good. The more you put out, the more you’ll get. You really know a book is going to work when you start weeding out good anecdotes.

The question was, could I do it in an election? I mean, I’d been this person in college who had not done well, I was not a good
student, I was in the bottom half of my class. I was not someone whose intellectual skills were applicable to academia. And I thought well, you know, I’ve been doing this stuff for a long time. I knew I could write. I knew that there were people out there who were intellectually superior and were great historians, but I could interview them. I mean, I could find George Kennedy, and Walter Lippman, and interview them and learn from them. So I could pass that test.

I pondered that this thing would take up four years of my life. I had left the New York Times about a year-and-a-half earlier, because I was restless. You know, what other writer might do it better? The person I thought really had better credentials was my friend Bernard Fall and he had been killed. He was a great teacher to all of us. He was a wonderful historian. If you have not read his book on the battle of Dien Bien Phu (that one got very small play) I commend it to you to review, to read what happened to the Americans there because it was known in advance, eleven years before they arrived in full force, that it was a battle in which they would not be able to win. Bernard was killed there in 1967.

So I thought if I didn’t have the exact historical knowledge, I could find people who did. I had enough literary skill and in my case, the advantage of writers and reporters is that you have to do it all the time. You don’t get 10 years to read — you’re very market driven. I had the work ethic, and I had the passion to do it. And the advance was $41,000 after the agent’s fee.

I made it last four years. I had to make money doing other things at the same time but it worked. A friend of mine once asked Teddy White — one of the people who pioneered what I ended up doing and who made my life a lot easier — a curious question: What makes a best seller? Teddy answered that in the beginning it came from your gut. It was something you did because you had to do the story you had to tell. That was true of this book. Who would have thought a book on how we went to war in Vietnam would be a commercial
success? I certainly did not do it for the money. I did it because I had no alternative to doing it. It was an act of witness which stayed thirty-six weeks on The New York Times bestseller list. That just stunned me. The key was density of information: anecdotes and stories and insights, and I thought if you did, and you got that, the book would not only be accurate, but something very important for a book. You would have a voice of authority. It’s one thing to get it right, but it’s another thing to have it and to get it in your bones that you have the authority. Really, the more you know, the more confident your voice gets, and the more fun it will be for readers, because there will be so many wonderful stories. And there were really wonderful stories.

Reporters are charged traditionally with “who, what, why, when, where.” I think the most important question, as you go towards being a historian, is why. Why do things happen? Why do they not happen? What are the forces at play? And that’s really, I think, what put me out of the routine of daily journalism. This is not just a book you do. This is part of your own education. This is a great, great gift you get from this life, and that is the chance to be paid to learn. I mean, what defines your life at the end of it when you hit 70 or even a few years more is love and friendship and family and things you’ve done. But I think it’s the education and the ability to spend, what is now 52 years, learning every day. Going out every day and asking questions and coming away with just a little bit more knowledge. What a blessing. Each book was really like a graduate school. I’d enter graduate school for four years and learn this and go on to the next one and learn something more. So, I got to study the rise of modern media, a book about the industrial challenge of the Japanese, a book about the Civil Rights movement, a book on the impact of technology on the society of the ‘50s, the conflict of the Cold War, the rise of the China lobby in the Korean War — that’s a great education. That’s more than any person really has a right to expect.
I was in this without knowing it, a part of a larger movement of restless reporters of a generation. Restless, with the narrow boundaries of journalism as they existed in the ‘50s and into the ‘60s. We probably were responding without knowing it, to the changes forced by technology. One thing print had always been was the fastest carrier, but there was a new faster carrier, television and it was self-evidently more powerful and seemingly more dramatic. So we had to do things they couldn’t do. We had to go places where they couldn’t go. We had to use skills that they didn’t use. We were very lucky, because they were so incredibly lazy.

In television newsrooms across the county: there’s a football game, let’s get the camera angle of the local fans cheering on their team. Because the instrument itself was so powerful, and it was an end in itself, really, this storytelling, they did not do reporting that was really complete. What they did was a greater gift: they raised the question in people’s homes every night that we had the chance to answer if we used our skills properly.

If we did this, we had to be thoughtful of where we went and where we didn’t go. We had to write reasonably well, because we were now in competition with something. A new media carrier, which had drama and excitement, was competing with the time of our audience. There they were out there, and they were offering something exciting and easy to follow. If we were to compete, we’d better be very good storytellers.

There is, I think, craft. I think you can keep learning, for those of you who are starting out. How do you do it?…Knowing where to look. Knowing how to build steam. Knowing how to sustain a narrative drive. How to keep a reader interested—this is a real challenge. Everybody’s attention span is short. We are really competing. I mean, it used to be just television. Now it’s 200 channels. It’s four channels of Law and Order. There’s 20 sports channels and there’s the Internet, there’s the blog — every person is his or her own editor. First you have to get it right. You have to
make it accurate. Then you have to learn how to dramatize it, to bring it alive, to find the people and the events that make it real. So you’re not just a reporter, and you’re not just a historian — not in the world we live in with all the competing forms of information. You are a playwright too. You’ve got to bring in the drama. Impress upon people why they need to know it…

I love to interview, and I think the great thing about doing it is it makes you younger. Going out and interviewing people, I always find that refreshing. When I did the book on the Korean War, I took sustenance from the people I interviewed. What I’ve come to think of, as I’ve gotten older, is the nobility of ordinary people. I don’t much like covering powerful people anymore but I really like covering the older Korean veterans.

The only time I really faltered was about 23 years ago, doing The Reckoning. It was a very, very hard book: Industrial redevelopment, Tokyo, Japan, industrial decline. It was not easy trying to write about industrial decline and the collapse of Detroit. It was not an easy thing to do. I came home one night, about 25 years ago, and I told my wife that I didn’t think I could do it much longer. For the first time, I thought I was getting old. My wife replied, “Don’t worry, you’ll be like Harrison.” Harrison Salisbury was a great New York Times reporter… a man of such extraordinary energy that people like me were always moved by him. I looked him up — I was about to be 50 and Harrison was about to be 75. So instead of having a 50th birthday party for me, we had a wonderful celebration of 30 guests for Harrison, for his 75th. The publisher of The New York Times came in and looked down at the people gathered there: Neil Sheehan, Tom Wickard, Tony Lewis, Seymour Hersh, and he turned to the room and said, “There’s nobody here but people who have caused trouble for The New York Times!”

It made me feel younger, and the great thing is, 23 years later, I am 73, and I am just signing a contract for another book. So Harrison really did save me — it gets to be more fun, the more you do it.