Today Show's Ann Curry Describes PTSD, Discouragement and Hope at Harvard Nieman Foundation

It's not that often that a nationally-known journalists public admit to suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but last week at Harvard's Nieman Foundation, Today Show Co-Anchor Ann Curry did exactly that.

In delivering the Joe Alex Morris Jr. Memorial Lecture on foreign report, Curry described both the importance and trauma of foreign reporting—saying that while she and her crew sometimes wonder if their coverage of wars and international disasters make a difference, she believes that by calling attention to wrongdoing and suffering, journalists do help make the world more empathic place.

In the lecture, Curry, who has made 72 reporting trips to 48 countries since 2000, told an audience of journalists that that any correspondent covering such areas who says s/he doesn't have PTSD} " is either lying or doesn't realize it." For journalists, the disorder is often first evidenced "when you don't care," any more. Signs and symptoms include emotional rigidness, avoidance, and an uncharacteristic lack of empathy, Curry said.

Curry and her team members "talk things out" when they're experiencing those signs and some undergo counseling, she said. As a foreign reporter, "You need to be an emotional athlete to deal with trauma, with emotions…to see past the differences in languages, to look at people as if they're your own mother, brother, sister, your own child. When you don't do that, you're not effective as a reporter, you appear

elitistist…It’s crucial that you care, that you try to understand the experience and point of view of the people you are writing about, she said. ” Because if you don’t care, your viewers won’t care, either.

“When my team gathers, we often ask ourselves, why are we doing this,” Curry said. ”They can’t pay you enough to take the physical and emotional risk this requires.” Not only are crews frequently threatened with violence, but “you’re leaving your family; there’s the maddening reality that it’s a battle [with news organization] to get there. But there’s the sense of mission, the hope that some good will come of what you do. It’s an act of faith in the future.”

Curry said that she has a mission “to report on stories no one cares about” sand asked, “If more reporters had paid attention to what the Nazis were doing in 1941, would so many people have died?”

In answer to a question posed for former Nieman Curator Robert Giles, Curry said that in the current economic downturn, the US audience is less interested in foreign coverage than it had previously been—and that with cutbacks in news organizations, it’s more difficult now to convince news directors to send teams abroad. Where once NBC had crews on the ground in many places, she said, “now we travel abroad from here.” But despite the difficulties, she will continue to cover difficult stories—in part because, if she and others don’t, aid organizations will not receive funding donations from the American public.

Curry brought tears to my eyes when she described a 16-year-old Congolese girl who saw her parents killed, was chained to a tree, raped, and when she couldn’t walk, was left for dead. Men from her village carried her to a hospital. She was pregnant, and the baby died. Two years later, in 2008, when Curry interviewed her in an operating room and touched her hand; the young girl said she didn’t want

revenge. “Instead she said ‘All I want is to rise out of this bed and thank the people who saved me and cared for me. I want to praise God, and I want to feel a mother’s love again.’

“Now, the cause of women in the Congo has been taken up by people in the US; there are 4K races to protect people from the violence,” Curry said. “As a reporter, you want to feel that some good has become of what you’ve done.”

But, she pointed out, wars and violence do not end.

In another village, in the Sudan, Curry said, men strafed a village, then lit arrows on fire and shot them at thatched roofs. When people ran out of their burning homes, the men shot at them, shouting epithets. Curry said she interviewed one woman– a mother– and her children. “She was just one of tens of thousands…

“After five trips to Sudan, ” she added, “I do sometimes wonder whether any of this works makes that much difference to people back on the ground. Sudan is the new Darfur, she said. People are living and dying in displaced person’s camps…”

Rather than become discouraged, Curry said, ”We need to step back and look at the value of reporting with a wide view, through the scope of human history. And you can’t help but realize that human empathy is growing.

“Where once, rape was a fact of war, rape is now an international war crime. The idea that it is wrong is wildfire. Information, truth, lit this match, igniting wildfires across the world.

“I have no doubt that we’re evolving into a world of greater empathy. If you can work through the PTSD, if you can raise your sword and report these stories, you allow truth between nations and I encourage you to lift your sword.”

After the talk, the ever-versatile and inspiring Curry, who

had donated her $1000 honorarium to Doctors Without Borders in Somalia, left –wearing the highest pair of heels I've ever seen–for a flight to Indianapolis, to cover the Superbowl.

Anita M. Harris

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The Morris Lecture honors Los Angeles Times foreign correspondent Joe Alex Morris, Jr., who covered the Middle East for 25 years before he was killed during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Two years later his family, friends and colleagues founded the annual lecture by an American foreign correspondent or commentator.