What Are Journalists For?, by Jay Rosen

reviewed by Roy Larson in the April 12, 2000 issue

Two days after graduating from high school, I reported for duty as a summertime relief reporter for the *Moline Daily Dispatch*, where I covered cops and robbers, city councils and school boards, births and deaths, train wrecks and bubble-gum contests at the city parks. Not wanting to pretend I was older than I was, I carefully selected a white, open-collar sport shirt for my first-day attire. When I walked through the city-room door, my gruff and red-faced city editor said, "Larson, we belong to a semiprofession. We wear dress shirts to work with conservative ties. On hot days, you can roll up your sleeves two notches."

That was June 1947. The times they have a-changed. Newspapermen are self-consciously professional these days, though they may dress more casually. And many of the newer ones are women. Instead of the ancient clatter of typewriters, today's computer-equipped news rooms have the eerie quiet of churches on Thursday afternoons--except at synergistic operations where cable television cameras are reporting live on the day's stock-market closings. Profits are up, but circulation is down. And the future is uncertain.

Enter Jay Rosen, associate professor of journalism and mass communication at New York University, who strides into the journalistic "citadels of secularism," heralding the advent of a new religion of "public journalism" and issuing a call for repentance. His message is simple and straightforward: If journalists, removed from their post-Watergate pedestals, are going to recover their "lost dignity" and if newspapers are going to regain some of their "lost authority," they will have to change their familiar ways of doing things--for the sake of their own survival and the survival of the communities they purport to serve.
How? Rosen declares that restyled journalists must:

- Eschew the pleasures of their incestuous profession and reconnect with their communities.
- Shift the "master narrative toward the deeper concerns of citizens."
- Find "new frames" for old stories and retire such overworked metaphors as "public life as battleground."

- Cultivate democracy, don't just chronicle it; build up the world, don't just be content to describe it.
- Investigate possible solutions as well as expose problems.
- Practice "humble journalism."

Some of those suggestions are fighting words for journalistic heavyweights in high places--men like Max Frankel, retired executive editor of the *New York Times*; Leonard Downie, executive editor of the *Washington Post*, and David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker*. In journalism schools around the country, it's easy to stir up debate between those who fear that journalists will lose their necessary detachment if they become activists of a sort and those who think Rosen and his cohorts are on the right track in their attempts to reweave "the delicate web of trust" in American public life by continuing to tell "hard truths," while, at the same time, working to improve the climate in the public square.

Although Rosen is a prophet, he is not a lone voice crying in the wilderness. Such newspapers as the *Akron Beacon Journal*, the *Wichita Eagle*, the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Virginian-Pilot* and the *San Jose Mercury News* have practiced the gospel Rosen has preached--and with some success. In 1994 the Akron paper won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for its yearlong series "A Question of Color." The series examined racism in that Ohio city and was followed by a second series, "Getting Involved: What Can We Do?" The paper invited civic groups, religious organizations and schools to suggest projects that would improve race relations.

Rosen's book is especially timely during an election year, as politicians struggle to reach voters turned off by politics and as journalists, restyled and otherwise, scramble to report what so many don't want to read about.

It's timely for religious leaders, too. Like newspapers, churches are dealing with declining numbers and are struggling to retain sacred core values without allowing themselves to be run over by the stomping stampede of secularized marketers. Journalists and religious leaders, too prone to talk to themselves, need to be talking with each other. Together they must try to find ways to be faithful truthtellers and storytellers in an age hungry for narrative.