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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

If you knew Gerry Morse well, you might think that these lines from the celebrated poem by Dylan Thomas were appropriate. Gerry's father lived to be one hundred and two. He lived in Manhattan on his own, getting around quite nicely, until he was ninety-nine. Somehow, one expected that Gerry would live to a similar age and with an equal zest for life. The zest she had in abundance. At seventy-nine she was as resilient as ever; she brought the same interrogatory intelligence to her work; the determination to find the missing comma was as intense; the complaining edge she cultivated – a modus operandi rather than a personal trait – as sharp.

But when the end of her time on Planet Earth appeared imminent, she was her customary self. She took charge. The doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital were puzzled; test after test didn't bring up anything they could use; she had the CAT scans, the blood tests, the x-rays, the ECGs, the monitors for this and that, and nothing showed up that lent itself to making a diagnosis; nothing, except for the fact that she was getting weaker and weaker.

Gerry decided she had had enough of the probing of doctors, of the intrusions into her body, of being the object displayed to interns who were regaled every morning with the mysteries that eluded being solved by doctors on the beat. They would congregate at her bedside, perform their rituals, and move on to the next patient, muttering about the clinical challenges her case provided. In exasperation, or perhaps because as the weeks wore on they did not want to be reminded on a daily basis of the limits of their own knowledge and the uselessness of expertise in the face of the unfathomable, they suggested that she should go to a nursing home.

And that, for Gerry, was it. "Get me out of here," she told her daughter Ruth, "Take me home." And Ruth complied. Back at home Gerry made her own arrangements — no food, no nourishment, and no doctors, a species Gerry had little time for.

And so, she got about the business of dying, approaching it, much as she approached everything in life — with great thoroughness and concentration to detail. In a sense, she made death oblige her. She bent it to her will, and death simply complied — no rage against the dying of the light. In the end she simply switched life off.

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For all of us at this journal her death came as a cushioned shock, cushioned because we knew it was inevitable; a shock because sometimes a person lives so fully that it is difficult ever believing that the space she occupied so abundantly will be emptied. Some lives flicker; some glow. Gerry's glowed.

Every author who has written for the journal over the last twelve years owes Gerry a debt. Even if she were alive today no author could ever repay it. She was no mere copyeditor who performed the obvious perfunctorily — putting commas, semicolons, colons, and periods where they ought to be, correcting grammar, throwing prepositions into the wastebasket, altering awkward sentences, and the like. She was a teacher, a craftswoman. She prided herself on being a professional and expected others not only to treat her as such, but to act as professionals themselves.

If you said you would call her at a certain time to discuss your malapropisms and other deviations from the proper use of the language she was devoted to, and you did not do so, you were in trouble. You did not risk her wrath, you caught the full blast of it in your ear, especially if she suspected that you felt that a copyeditor was a pain in the ass, someone you had to indulge, to get out of your way as quickly as possible, an aggravation rather than someone at pains to turn your wretched writing into something that would make sense to the reader so that readers could, because the flow of the language carried them easily, grasp the ideas you were advancing, follow the train of your arguments, and understand the content of your article.

(Now, that's a sentence that would be right up Gerry's alley. She would say, "Far too long, cut it up!" And I would say, "But Gerry, it flows," to which she would rejoin, "Yeah, it flows all right, right into the gutter!" And to battle we would go!)

With authors she created partnerships, the object of which was to improve their work, to make an article, substantive in content but poorly written, into a substantive article that was well written. They came to know her through her voice; sometimes gruff, her impatience with herself rather than with them coming through; sometimes persistent, sometimes hectoring; insistent in its demands that authors pay attention to what she was saying, to understanding why they could not leave adverbs dangling, infinitives split, participles running amuck, use commas where there should be periods or semicolons, and that you did not use the subjunctive when nothing better came to mind.

She was the guardian of language. She policed it and would not tolerate its abuse. She had devoted her life to the pursuit of the perfect sentence. Nothing pleased her more than making sense out of the seemingly incomprehensible; to breathe life into an article, rid it of obtuseness, turgidity, and plain nonsense.

Many academics who are quite brilliant when it comes to conceptualizing a thesis and subjecting it to rigorous analysis using sophisticated research tools have trouble putting their work into an understandable form. They often put it into a form that is familiar only to others in their field — who are also inept at putting their own work into an understandable form. Professional argot substitutes for professional writing. Journals proliferate with articles understandable only to those who are masters of their argot. But the authors, for the most part, are incapable of putting a sequence of sentences together that simply and lucidly explicates what it is that they want to say.

The *New England Journal of Public Policy*, since its inception in 1985, has been guided by the belief that if a writer, no matter what field he or she may be in, has something to say, we will publish it only when its structure and writing are such that an interested public, policymakers, and members of our state legislature and congressional delegation can understand what we want them to read — and absorb it.

We take an equal pride in the quality of the articles that grace our pages and in the quality of the writing.

This is a process that involves the author, the editor, and the copyeditor. They work together. The editor, in consultation with others knowledgeable in the author's field, is the eye that takes the measure of content; the copyeditor is the eye that takes the measure of comprehension, and the author is the eye that takes the measure of the other eyes. It is an iterative process, and once articles are approved for publication, the copyeditor takes center place.

And this is where Gerry excelled. She would suggest sentence modifications, re-sequencing of paragraphs, perhaps even a massive restructuring of the article, and on occasion even question the premises on which the article was based. Even authors with well-established track records for publication were not spared Gerry's intense scrutiny.

Gerry was an editor's dream. She had an extraordinarily keen eye, but better still, she had an extraordinarily keen mind. We debated the contents of articles and, out of that give-and-take, a better, more rounded article would emerge.

Gerry was an author's dream. Tough and uncompromising when it came to how the English language was used, the author would witness her "surgery" and behold an outcome that invariably made the reconstructed article a better article, one that could be read and comprehended by an inquiring "lay" person. Gerry served as reminder to public policy specialists: if specialists in a public policy area want to stimulate debate on issues or to challenge the ruling orthodoxy, they must reach the public at large, not just other specialists made in their own images. Being able to reach a broader readership extends the forum of debate, makes it more inclusive, and hence more democratic. Accessibility is the door to inclusivity; inclusivity the door to participation in the process of debate and change.

Gerry was tough to work with. During her fourteen years on the watch, she quit seven times. She would call me, express some gnawing aggravation, say she was quitting, and I would suggest lunch. We would meet, have a nice lunch at a nice restaurant and talk for a couple of hours about writers she had edited in her time, the idiosyncrasies of writers she had known, the state of the nation, current affairs — anything but the journal. When we were finished, I would offhandedly say, "I'll be sending you a few articles that are ready for you to work on." She would growl something about staying on only for one more issue, and that would be that for a couple of years. Gerry didn't want to quit; she wanted attention. And after I realized that, I would visit her more frequently.

Her husband and her father died while she worked for us. She lived and worked alone, but she lived a full life. Yet the fact is that no matter how resilient you are, at a certain age, the silence that hangs over a large house that is empty but holds the memories of a fuller house can evoke a sense of loss. We would sit, have a couple of glasses of wine, and watch the video of her father's one hundredth birthday, always a happy detour, and inspiring to watch the old man, full of dignity and pride, wrinkled with the wisdom that great age confers as life's last gift.

In later years, her threatening to quit became a little ritual. I knew she wasn't going to, and she knew that I knew. But we didn't allow that to interfere with what we had to do to forestall her "imminent resignations." However, once she had established an ownership in the journal and considered it as much "hers" as "ours," she folded. The "hers" and "ours" melded, and for a woman who often used gruffness to

conceal her feelings, it was like a homecoming. She was part of the team, not someone working in isolation in Newton. She was attached to something that all of us were making. She was the cheerleader.

I always enjoyed my encounters with her. We fought over many things but always made peace. She laughed mightily at human foibles, but most of her laughter was directed at herself. She understood the absurdity of trying to construct the perfect sentence since perfection did not exist. Armed with that knowledge, she merrily continued her pursuit. After an issue was published, she went through it with meticulous attention, and if she discovered a mistake, often discernible only to her own eye, she took it as a personal failure and would brood about it for days.

She had no time for the foolish, the trivial, or hypocrisy. She kept to the meat of things, and if you couldn't meet her there, she had little respect for you. For Gerry, respect was something you had to earn, not something you were automatically entitled to. (Oops!! She would catch me on that one, insisting that I change it to, "not something to which you were automatically entitled.") Some authors would complain to me that she was cantankerous, and I would tell them, "Good for her! That's her job. In the end, you are the beneficiary of her cantankerousness; it's your work that is going to be improved, so bear with it." She was cantankerous, not at you, but at words. You had to march to the drumbeat of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Chicago Manual of Style* or else!

Now the drum has changed hands. When you read this issue, you will see that our new copyeditor, Patricia Peterson, has all our authors marching to the same drumbeat. Gerry would be proud.

II

This issue of the journal can be summed up in one word: provocative. At least two articles break new ground. Anthony Robbins and Phyllis Freeman explore the ways in which environmentally oriented public health is uniquely suited to help organized medical care in providing health and in restraining expenditures. Janet Farrell Smith challenges policymakers to look at what will soon become a hot issue — the medical use of genetic information. The genetic testing of children, now becoming prevalent in the foster care and pre-adoptive stage in order to facilitate placement and satisfy prospective parents' "need to know," is already a controversial issue, and if the practice of genetic testing becomes widespread in one area of medical care, it is almost inevitable that it will be "exported" to other areas. One is compelled to ask: Where is the public debate? And what might the consequences be if genetic testing becomes a common practice? Technological breakthroughs in medicine are altering the framework we use to make policy decisions, yet we remain wedded to the old paradigms.

Jie Chen and Thomas Ferguson also can claim a "first." They analyze the determinants of Massachusetts school district test scores under MCAS — the state's testing program — and demonstrate direct links between improvements in MCAS scores and state aid to school districts. The results when other variables are factored in are surprising. Perhaps not surprising, but certainly worthy of consideration for policymakers, is the finding that the more districts spend on athletic programs as a percentage of the state's "foundation budget," the lower their scores.

Two other articles conclude this issue: Richard Hogarty's case study of how independent authorities operate in Massachusetts uses two transportation agencies as

examples. His study provides us with a better understanding of the central paradox policymakers face in trying to satisfy the contradictory demands of autonomy and accountability. Carolyn Ball and Kenneth Nichols also present us with the findings of a case study they conducted in regard to domestic violence in rural, northern Maine. Many law enforcement agencies do not have the capacity to track incidents of domestic violence, especially the relationship between the victim and the offender. When they analyzed the law enforcement data collected in 1997 and 1998 for northern Maine, they found that the reported severity of physical injury was low; the victim's contact with the police was unlikely to be the first incident of domestic violence; the number of male victims of domestic abuse is higher than in self-reported data; and intoxication, either with alcohol or drugs on the part of one or both parties, was at a higher level than the level of intoxication in the general population.

III

We live in strange times. 9/11 did something to this country. Despite all the analyses, the endless discussions, the proliferation of books trying to elicit the meaning of an act that was so inhuman that it begged understanding, insecurity and vulnerability ratcheted to levels never before experienced by Americans.

Anxiety soared, fear stalked. But in much of the rest of the world the shows of sympathy masked real feelings, feelings that America had it coming. I was in a production studio in Johannesburg watching while a popular TV drama series about apartheid was being shot when news of the World Trade Center crashes came over the news line. The reaction was extraordinary. Blacks spontaneously leaped to their feet, raising their arms with clenched fists in gestures of celebration. Whites were stunned; they stayed quiet. One did not know whether they were more stunned by the reaction of their black countrymen and women than by the Twin Towers disaster.

President Bush's refusal to attend the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) earlier this year and America's adamant refusal to endorse agreed-upon protocols, save for the most insipid; America's seeming non-negotiable intention to go to war with Iraq, despite the entreaties from all moderate Arab countries, has aroused an anger with America and a level of anti-Americanism the likes of which I have never seen or heard before.

Not being used to death from internal threats, America overreacted when it declared a war on terrorism. A war on terrorism? Doesn't anyone know that you cannot defeat an enemy you cannot define? Doesn't anyone know that Bin Laden is winning? We are corrupting our value system, undermining our institutions, and rewriting our Constitution, all in the name of a war against an enemy that is at once invisible and all-encompassing, an enemy that mutates whenever circumstances pose a threat to its survival. Is terrorism the metaphorical equivalent of HIV/AIDS? It, whatever it is, doesn't need to destroy us; we are doing more than an adequate job of destroying ourselves.

Has anyone read V.S. Naipaul? "Where jargon turns living issues into abstractions, and where jargon ends by competing with jargon, people don't have causes; only the enemies are real."

Has anyone read *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon? ❁

