

“*Oh the Editor’s Life is the Life for Me ...*”

Here’s a quote from the speechwriter and columnist Peggy Noonan, on the craft of editing:

“Remember the waterfront shack with the sign FRESH FISH SOLD HERE. Of *course* it’s fresh, we’re on the ocean. Of *course* it’s for sale, we’re not giving it away. Of course it’s here, otherwise the sign would be someplace else. The final sign: FISH.”

I get what she’s saying. I’m a little surprised (or maybe “troubled”?) sometimes at some of the effects of spending time doing editing work — in essence, a sustained interest in things being expressed clearly — has. Not all of them are good.

The way editors listen to *sermons*, for example. It’s been a very long time since I heard one that I didn’t wish had been shorter. “You’ve been at it for five minutes; *get to the point*,” I hear myself saying. Or, “Your audience has reached the limit of what it can absorb: I hope you know how to end this well.” Or even, “Okay, you’re taking us into the underbrush of some tangled theological or exegetical point: are you sure you know your way out again?”

Shameful, I am quick to acknowledge, and as an occasional practitioner myself I am deeply sympathetic to the challenges of the pulpit. But show me a preacher who can self-impose a word limit (the time limit thus taking care of itself) and I’ll show you a grateful, attentive congregation.

Still worse: *e-mails*. My “refined editorial judgment” leaves no room for doubt that any e-mail longer than one or two short paragraphs will be regretted both by the sender and the recipient.

And *meetings*? Even more so. If there’s anything more trying than one person who can’t communicate clearly, it’s a roomful of them, with an hour or more of valuable time doomed to being wasted.

Possibly the terminal phase of the editorial condition sets in when this obsession with brevity and clarity finds its way into *face-to-face conversations*. “Disfluency” (I dare you to look it up) becomes increasingly annoying, circumlocution likewise. Sentences are laden with subordinate clauses, which, if diagrammed, would be proven to be moving backwards rather than forwards, etc.

You see how risky it is, this editing?

Yet there is an upside to the “editorial lifestyle” as well: in an environment where we have to process more communication, in more formats than ever before, who’s in a better position to say, “This better be good,” “How can this be said better?” or simply “Clarity forever” than the editor?

I’m telling you this here, in a *TL* editorial, for a simple reason: the world needs more editors, or at least it needs people who appreciate the value of editing. Editing is a useful discipline to foster in oneself, and to commend to others — a gift to the broader community.

Does this interest you? If so, please be in touch, because *TL* will be looking for more editorial colleagues in the coming year, and I’d welcome the chance to discuss these opportunities with you.

“Enough,” I hear you saying. Now please excuse me while I regret not making my point more lucidly and succinctly...

All Best in 2013!

DRS

