



Writing Sample: Opinion / Blog Writing

I heard you, Malachi

By Jennifer Diaz

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Did you ever burn your hand on a stove? Do you remember the pain of it?

On Friday, November 3, a man doused his body with gasoline and set himself afire to protest the war in Iraq. He died quietly in flames. His name was Malachi Ritscher.

Haven't seen it in the news? Neither have I. Rather strange if you ask me, considering that it happened right here, in downtown Chicago, in front of hundreds of commuters during morning rush hour. The only conventional newspaper coverage to date was a tiny paragraph that appeared in the Saturday edition of the Chicago Sun-Times. Since then...nothing.

Should we be concerned about the lack of coverage? This is serious, friends. You don't have to be a communication scholar to know that the news media go by the maxim, "When it bleeds, it leads." In a time of intense controversy over war, a man offers up his life and endures prolonged, excruciating pain to make a tangible statement of his belief in peace—are we to believe this isn't newsworthy?

When Thich Quang Duc, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, set himself on fire in 1963 to protest the corrupt and brutal regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, it was all over the media. A lucid, well respected American citizen makes the ultimate sacrifice on American soil four days before a national election—I ask again: is there no story here?

I would assert that there are two stories here. One is that **A MAN SET HIMSELF ON FIRE NOVEMBER 3rd FOR WHAT HE BELIEVED IN.** The other is that, in a society where a rogue government is afforded the power to "create reality" and where the once objective news media have become politicized conglomerates either owned by or cozy with the powers that they are supposed to be watch-dogging, a lack of coverage on a newsworthy story warrants close scrutiny.

Deeply disturbed by this event since I got word of it, I felt compelled to investigate it further. In memory of Mr. Ritscher, I write now of both stories. As you read, I implore you: agree or disagree, but do not be indifferent. This man's message was

important enough to him to choose an excruciatingly painful death—so that you and I would hear it.

A traffic nuisance

Malachi Ritscher had a home-made sign with him when he left the house Friday morning. Firefighters found it next to his charred remains. It read, “Thou shalt not kill.”

A jazz aficionado who produced professional recordings of countless performers in local venues, Ritscher was well loved in the Chicago jazz community and has been described by members of that scene as being a warm, modest and selfless individual. A long-time music enthusiast, Ritscher was a fixture at several local jazz haunts. He was said to be very generous—band members tell that he would pay the admission fee for their gig, record their performance, and then offer them the recording he had made free of charge. Many of the recordings were later sold commercially. Others corroborate Ritscher’s generous nature. “He gave me peppers from his garden!” cried bartender Janice W., tearing up when she heard what he had done.

Ritscher was deeply disturbed by the United States’ waging of war in Iraq, which has led so far to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. In his mission statement, posted on his homepage along with a self-written obituary, he writes of his morbid actions:

I refuse to finance the mass murder of innocent civilians...What is one more life thrown away in this sad and useless national tragedy? If one death can atone for anything, in any small way, to say to the world: I apologize for what we have done to you, I am ashamed for the mayhem and turmoil caused by my country.

One can only imagine what Ritscher must have been thinking as he made his way to the site of his self-immolation—the aptly chosen “Flame of the Millennium” sculpture west of Chicago’s downtown loop. Would Americans appreciate his sacrifice? Would it be a force for good in the world? One thing he surely didn’t expect, as he watched a sea of morning commuters crawl by on the nearby Kennedy expressway: that it would go unnoticed.

But that is just what has happened. At some point after Ritscher’s ordeal began, a motorist called police to report that a statue was burning. Except for those who happened to read the blurb in the Sun-Times or to see a short “breaking news” spot on Chicago’s CBS2 local news station, the hundreds of motorists who drove by the incident still know it only as a traffic annoyance—that “statue fire” that was slowing things up on the I-90 Friday morning.

A different kind of news hole

Because there has been no further coverage of it in any of the main news outlets, they—and most other Americans—will never know what Ritscher did...what one man was willing to do to make a difference in the world.

“I don't understand,” friends have told me. “Why wouldn't the papers run it?” Their puzzlement comes from a lingering, tenacious belief in the objectivity of the news. Moments like these—high news value, no story—are particularly valuable in that they expose our news media for what they have become: corporate black boxes from which the only news that escapes is that which cooperates with profit margins and political allegiances.

In the new era of “synergy,” or coordinated advertising among corporate affiliates, media conglomerates have formed alliances with some of the (other) largest companies in the world. Time-Warner/AOL, the globe's largest media conglomerate and owner of CNN, is affiliated with cooperative giant Kraft and Viacom, another corporate behemoth. Additionally, the generous campaign contributions invariably made by such conglomerates to politicians suggests another kind of synergy—a political one. As it pertains to objective news reporting, synergy means that there are more toes to step on—and therefore more rules to follow—about what types of stories reporters can run (and more importantly, not run).

The fact that Ritscher's bold anti-war message came right before an election, combined with the conspicuous lack of coverage on the event suggests a conservative bias to the news, not a liberal one, as goes the government-sanctioned myth on the topic.

Some will suggest “copycat prevention” as an explanation for the lack of coverage; news outlets are known to occasionally self-censor sensational acts of murder or suicide in order to avoid glamorizing them and inspiring similar behavior in others. But they routinely break this rule when the murder or suicide is deemed important enough for the public to know about. Reports of school shootings have been followed by more school shootings, but we still hear of those. Why? Because the American public needs to know what's going on in our schools. We also need to know the effect the war is having on its citizens.

Ritscher's passion

Although his act might have had some influence on the midterm elections, had it been heard, the relevance of his message extends beyond any short term outcome. Instead, Ritscher entreats Americans to change their attitudes.

Lamenting what he saw as a moral vacuousness in American culture, the would-be martyr felt that Americans are “...more concerned with sports on television and ring-tones on cell-phones than the future of the world.” Ritscher saw the problem

as being due to a gross deficiency of personal responsibility in American culture, and offered his self-immolation in a spirit of unified atonement.

Some have suggested that Ritscher's actions can be explained by mental illness. It seems clear that the man was deeply troubled. But it is not clear how that negates his message. At a time when 10% of Americans are taking psychiatric medication, the marginalization of "the mentally ill" as an identifiable group of people radically different from ourselves is making less and less sense. Besides "disturbed," Ritscher is also described by those who knew him as being an animated, friendly person who talked enthusiastically of his many interests and travels in addition to his political beliefs.

Another description that people have applied to Ritscher's mind-boggling choice is "senseless." But his mission statement offers an elegant response to that notion:

My position is that I only get one death, I want it to be a good one. Wouldn't it be better to stand for something or make a statement, rather than a fiery collision with some drunk driver? Are not smokers choosing death by lung cancer? Where is the dignity there? Are not the people the people [sic] who disregard the environment killing themselves and future generations?

In addition to intent, the mission statement reveals a strong sense of moral duty and a faith in the God of his understanding. In the document, he presents his act as an example of a lived, choice-based faith that he feels is lacking from modern religious life.

In a gentle, but pointed, rebuke to Christian pop culture—which is said to have been a key factor in both of George W. Bush's presidential campaigns—Ritscher asks, "Who would Jesus bomb?" And alluding to the intense and politicized culture warring of recent years, he implores Christians, Jews and Muslims alike to believe that "God's message is tolerance and love, not self-righteousness and hatred."

As beings we are born with a life currency and the administrative powers to spend it as we see fit. Some will denounce Malachi Ritscher for squandering his life-money. Others will love him for putting it where his mouth was. No matter where you fall on that continuum you must agree: his act should buy him more than a mere traffic mention. Unfortunately, all the papers want these days is the green stuff.

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