

**Steve Losey Graduation Speech
East Carolina English Department
November 2017**

[Opening Thoughts]

Thank you very much. It's so good to return to Greenville and the ECU English Department, and I'm honored you would ask me to speak. My wife, Ellen, and children Maggie and James are here too, and I'm glad you have welcomed them too.

My years here were some of the best of my life. The thing that made studying at the English department such a joy was that the education didn't stop when we walked out of the classroom. I kept learning everywhere – not only from professors like Luke Whisnant and Alex Albright, Peter Makuck and Bob Siegel, and, rest in peace, Bill Hallberg and Mike Hamer, but from my friends and fellow students like Randall, Mary Carroll-Hackett and Gabrielle Brandt Freeman.

In ECU's English Department, learning continued well into the night:

- At readings -- both ones we sat in the audience for, and readings we put on,
- In writer's groups, that spent long hours in restaurants passing story drafts around over enchiladas,
- And shooting the breeze about writers you liked or didn't like over happy hour pitchers of watered down Miller Lite.

I didn't just learn how to string words together here. I learned how to listen to other people, to find the elements that make their stories, and how to boil those elements down so I could communicate those stories in an interesting way.

But then: It all came to an end. In December 2001, I stood right where you were, got my diploma, and was turned loose into the world -- and I had no idea what I was going to do next.

[Career reflections]

Fifteen years later, the path I followed would find me standing on a flightline on an airbase in the Middle East, wearing a flak jacket and a camera around my neck, getting ready to board a C-130 cargo plane bound for Iraq with soldiers who were deploying as part of the war against the Islamic State, or ISIS.

It was a long way from Greenville. But it was this Department, and the example set by all the people here, that put me on that path.

Now, all of you have to take your next step. Maybe you've got a job already, or maybe you're just starting to figure out which way you're going to go. It goes without saying that this is a very strange time for people with liberal arts degrees. In some quarters, it seems fashionable to dismiss studying subjects like English as a luxury.

"Stick with something practical," some will say. "That's the way to a career. English? Who knows where you'll end up."

With all due respect to those so-called practical majors, I disagree. As a matter of fact, in this day and age, I think that graduating with an English degree leaves you particularly well-suited to deal with one of the biggest challenges our society faces today: What comedian Stephen Colbert once called Truthiness. Believing what feels right, no matter what pesky facts might say.

But these days, it's even more pernicious than what Colbert called out a dozen years ago. Whether it's so-called "fake news" -- shady articles from dubious websites making outlandish claims with little to no evidence -- or disinformation, or conspiracy theories, it's everywhere these days, especially on our social media. It's deployed like chaff from an airplane, trying to confuse and distract a heat-seeking missile. And the end result is to likewise to try to confuse and distract us, to the point where sorting fact from rumor or even fiction is so exhausting that we just give up.

As George Orwell once said, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." And hoo boy, today, is it a struggle.

I find it can be one of the most challenging parts of a reporter's job: Trying to sort out the genuine truth from half-truths, and facts cherry-picked to put the best light on one side of the argument. At times, it's even trickier than debunking straight up lies.

That's where studying English helped prepare me. It's more than just the old cliché that a liberal arts degree teaches you how to think. When you study English, you learn to understand how other people think, what drives and motivates them, and how what they don't say can be just as illuminating, if not more so, than what they do say.

And that's what makes all of you, as English majors, particularly well-suited to stand up to the tide of disinformation we face today. You're prepared. You know how to find and double-check sources, construct and deconstruct arguments, and use your finely-tuned truthiness detector to say, "You know what? Something just don't smell right about that." You wouldn't be English majors if you didn't care passionately about language and ideas, and as a result, you are -- even if you didn't set out to be -- a defender of the truth.

And I challenge you to do so. This isn't merely a matter of civics. An organization -- be it a school, a company, a nonprofit, a government agency, or a nation -- that can't sift the grain of truth from the chaff of confusion is going to be lost, baffled and bamboozled, and end up making the wrong decisions at critical times. And wherever you end up working, they are going to need people who can tell it like it is, and sort through the facts to be able to make those right decisions. People like you.

So now that I've ranted at you for a while, I'll share with you a few pieces of advice I've learned in my career that I hope you might find useful.

[Stories + Advice]

My first piece of advice is this: Don't be discouraged if the job that you wind up in isn't what you dreamed of. Try to find a way to make it work for you.

When I left Greenville, I had grand visions of being the next Hunter S Thompson or Tom Wolfe. But those kind of writing jobs are few and far between. (And, to tell the truth, my personality was about as far off from those guys as you could possibly imagine, so it may not have been the most realistic career goal.) I ended up as a copy editor for a paper called Federal Times, laying out pages, proofreading and arranging photo assignments. It turned out to be my foot in the door.

After I proved myself in that job, my editor offered to make me a reporter. At last! Would I be flying with the president on Air Force One? Sparring with lawmakers on the Senate floor? Meeting with shadowy figures at midnight in parking garages, All the President's Men-style? Nope -- he needed someone to cover the U.S. Postal Service.

Of course I said yes, but inside I thought, "Really? The Postal Service? Like...writing about stamp prices?" And yeah, that was part of it. But what the Post Office lacked in prestige, for a green reporter, it more than made up in intrigue.

There's a lot of money that moves through the Postal Service, billions of dollars every year. That means a lot of contracts, a lot of power, and, sometimes, executives who don't always use that power in responsible ways.

I started meeting my own mini-Deep Throats -- except instead of having our rendezvous in dark parking garages, we'd meet at Starbucks. They'd pass along tips on executives who had harassed their employees, or steered millions of dollars in no-bid contracts to their business cronies. With those tips, I started to learn how to run an investigation into misbehaving government figures, and hold them accountable to the taxpayers they serve.

The veteran reporters I worked with showed me how to use the Freedom of Information Act to pry government documents loose. They taught me to build my case that someone broke the rules. And they taught me how to get the information I needed, but without showing all my cards too early. Somewhere along the way, as I covered that seemingly dry-as-dust beat, I guess I turned into something of an investigative reporter. Go figure.

But perhaps most importantly, I gained confidence. I learned how to ask tough, uncomfortable questions of powerful government officials. And I learned how to stand up for myself and make the case for why something was an important story when my editors challenged me.

And that brings me to my second piece of advice: When you know you're right, dig in your heels. Stand up for what's right, even when powerful forces are pushing back at you.

This is not easy. It can be lonely. It can be scary, especially if you're like me and constantly second-guess yourself. "What if I'm wrong?" But when you're right, and you win, you can help other people, and it can make all the other mundane and frustrating parts of your job worthwhile.

Three years ago, in the midst of a budget crunch, the Air Force started deeply cutting thousands of airmen from its ranks. (By this point, I had moved on to Air Force Times, and was covering the buyouts and early retirements in detail.)

But someone screwed up. I started to hear rumors that a bunch of people had been mistakenly promised that if they left, they'd get six months of health care extended to bridge the gap. So they took the buyout -- and a bait and switch was pulled. Whoops! That health care wasn't for you. So sorry, lots of luck in the civilian world.

They. Were. Furious. I brought their stories to the Air Force and asked, basically, what the heck? These guys served their country, you made promises, and now you're breaking those promises? What are you going to do to make this right? It took them days to respond, and when they finally did send me a statement, they admitted they had revoked health care from about 1,000 people, and they would look into it. That's bad enough, but it also included a line dripping with condescension: "It would be unrealistic to expect perfection."

I was flabbergasted. What a thing to say, when 1,000 people were left in the lurch! So what did we do? Posted another story with that "unrealistic to expect perfection" quote in the headline. The Pentagon didn't like one that very much.

Weeks dragged by, still no solution. I kept writing stories calling it out, and the military brass got madder and madder. At one point, I got into a shouting match over the phone with a public affairs official who let me know that the three-star general in charge did not care for the tone of my articles and vaguely hinted that if it continued, they might start ignoring my inquiries. My editor and I shrugged and kept writing. In the end, the Air Force finally cut through the red tape and restored the health care to not just those 1,000 airmen, but 4,000 airmen in all.

There's not a job on the planet that isn't frustrating and stressful at times -- at least, not one that's worth doing. Most of the time, it seems what you hope for doesn't pan out, or lands with a wet thud. But every now and then, if you keep your eyes open, and don't blink in the face of resistance, you can win. And you can help other people in the process. And it can make all the other stuff you go through to get there worthwhile.

My final piece of advice is this: Don't be afraid. Try new things, even if they seem crazy. I once traveled to the Air Force Academy in Colorado and camped out with the freshman cadets for several days, and I even trained alongside them at times for a story. I ran the obstacle course while the cadet instructors shouted in my face and smoke and cannons went off around me, crawled through the dirt under barbed wire, climbed over 20-foot-tall obstacles, and swung across water hazards alongside cadets half my age. I felt like I was gonna puke -- and the GoPro footage was hilarious. It was far from my most dignified moment. But they said I was the first reporter to ever try it, and it gave me a whole new perspective when trying to understand what people go through when they join the military.

Which brings me back to my trip this January to the Middle East. I admit, I was nervous about it -- it was a big responsibility, and I wasn't quite sure what to expect. But it ended up being one of the most fascinating weeks of my career.

For the better part of a week, my cameraman and I visited four different bases, including our C-130 flight to Camp Taji, an Iraqi army base just north of Baghdad. We woke up at about 4:30 each morning in a trailer in the base's living quarters, called Commando Village, photographed aircraft taking off as the sun rose, and then we spent all day interviewing

troops about everything under the sun. We interviewed colonels about the strategy for driving ISIS out of Mosul, Marines who flew search-and-rescue missions to save downed pilots, and mechanics on the flightline about the challenges they faced repairing Vietnam-era planes to keep them in the air. And after eating dinner in the DFAC, or mess hall, alongside troops from the United States, Italy, Canada, and several other coalition nations, I returned to my trailer, and, exhausted, immediately passed out, only to do it all over again the next day.

But one of the most interesting conversations I had was at the end of the week, over dinner with the captain who had been showing us around. This is a man who liked to deploy as often as he could, even though it took him away from his family, because when he's overseas, he felt like he was doing something that made a difference. As we ate kebabs, he started to open up about how the divide between the military and civilians worried him. He wondered, do people at home understand what he and the thousands of other troops we've sent overseas are actually doing there? Not in the simple, "Thank you for your service" kind of way -- viewing them as either perfect, unassailable heroes, or victims of war. But do they understand what we, collectively as a society, have asked troops to do and what their complicated war looks like on a day-to-day basis?

[Closing Thoughts]

I didn't have an answer for him. I just listened. But I think about that captain, and that conversation a lot. It inspires me to use whatever skills I have, to tell those stories. To help increase, even in little ways, people's understanding of what troops go through and the challenges they face, both on the battlefield and at home.

It is both a calling, and a privilege, to be able to tell other people's stories -- to have them open up parts of their lives, even some of the worst and most painful parts, and trust that you'll tell them honestly. Whatever I do, whenever I write, I hope it has a positive effect on the world in some way.

And now, Class of 2017, I ask you to do the same. Take risks. Be brave. Watch out for the truthiness. And go out and do some good.