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We'll miss you, Tim, more mightily than you would ever have believed

Joan Chittister | Jun. 16, 2008

There is nothing that makes us pay attention to life as effectively as does death.

With unprecedented grief, MSNBC, politicians of all ilk and stripe, and the nation in general mourned the untimely death of Tim Russert, moderator of NBC's longest-running TV news show, "Meet the Press."

Television memorials ran for days. The state flag was lowered in Buffalo, N.Y., Russert's hometown. Flowers and tributes piled up in front of NBC news bureaus in Washington and New York.

And all of that for a journalist. A journalist. Never had the country seen the likes of it.

And well they might. He was a gentleman, an intelligent man, a craftsman and an honest broker of ideas. He was also, it seems, a fine father, a loving husband, a good friend to many, a person of deep faith. A very decent man. As a result of the outpouring of such emotion, such coverage, from every level of society, there's really not much left to say, it would seem, about the man himself.

But something needs to be said regardless.

What will be remembered most, perhaps, is not simply about Tim Russert as a person but about Tim Russert's effect on the intellectual stature of this country.

Maybe we even need to wonder a bit about his effect on us as individuals.

Tim Russert represented what television in this country does not, as a class, have. He produced the quintessential talk show. The difference between it and most others was that he really allowed people to talk. When he asked a question, he permitted people to answer it, fully, the way they wanted to say it -- not the way he wanted them to say it.

More than that, when they answered the question, he respected both the person and the answer.

He didn't shout at people or bully them. He didn't cut them short in mid-sentence.

He didn't force answers on them. (A while ago, I heard a television interviewer badgering a program guest with "But you do mean this, don't you ...?" The interviewer repeated this over and over until, exasperated by his refusal to admit to her version of the answer, the guest simply cut off his mike. And I changed the station. No news there.)

Tim didn't interrupt and interrupt and interrupt as a person was trying to respond to him.

He didn't ignore the flow of ideas.

He came prepared to an interview. He knew the subject and the positions the person held on a subject -- sometimes the many positions a person had held on the subject -- as well as the positions other people held on the same subject. And he allowed the person being interviewed to explain his own at length.

He wasn't asking questions to trap people. He was there so that the rest of us could come to understand a person's point of view and so shape our own. Intelligently, profoundly.

He was above and beyond sound bites and argument. He was into real thinking and trying to take the rest of the country with him.

He didn't deal in nonsense and trivia. He didn't spend important time on the haircuts or tears or cleavage or voice quality of politicians. He dealt in program plans and accountability and authenticity. He "belled the cat" for the country. He warned the rest of us about the underlying meaning and effects of things we were taking for granted. He alerted us to the future.

His kind is rare on U.S. television. We have other such journalists, of course, but we are more inclined to consign them to public radio and television rather than to make thinking the coin of the realm. To the mass of the public, television throws snippets of answers, bits of trivia, or 30 second snatches of ideas rather than serious conversation. For most audiences, the news media write sensational headlines or they dally in gossip.

Russert took on the significant issues of the day. He pursued them relentlessly. He refused either to talk down to the public or to talk over our heads. He enabled people to see the significance of what could seem like remote issues to their own lives.

Tim Russert was trying instead to make citizens out of voters, thinkers out of listeners. He was trying to form a real democracy rather than simply throw pottage at herds of politicized sheep.

Indeed, he is mourned. And yes, he died a most untimely death. Not simply because of his lack of years but because he had so much more work to do to bring others up to the level of his discourse. He was not sensational, not confrontational, not destructive. He was a real thinker. He was a real political philosopher for the age. A real journalist.

Read the headlines and you'll see the difference between his approach to a subject and the treatment most talk show programs give to an idea or an event. Turn on the TV and watch the gladiatorial contests that go on daily, hourly, between reporters and guests. Or more to the personal point, read the responses to columns that are meant to begin a national discussion of major ideas and count the personal attacks and absolutist remarks that are intended to cut off communication rather than promote it. Then we need to ask ourselves, with him as a standard, how we phrase our own ideas and concerns.

Then maybe we'll begin to understand what we just lost in Tim Russert. Then maybe we'll all work harder, as part of his legacy, to be more worthy of what it means to live in a democracy, to be civil, to be a thinker, to be a genuine seeker.

From where I stand, it seems pretty clear: Neither this country -- nor any collection of people, in fact -- is polarized because people have different ideas. Polarization comes only when one group of people are not permitted to speak their ideas without fear of suppression and certainty of rejection by the others. Tim Russert was an antidote to polarization. He let everyone speak. And he listened.

Indeed, we'll miss you, Tim, more mightily than you would ever have believed. The fact is that we have never needed good thinkers, good communicators, good journalists more than we do now. Without you, that kind will be more difficult to find.

(Editor's Note: Sr. Chittister appeared as a guest on "Meet the Press" April, 16, 2006, Easter Sunday, as part of a panel on faith in America. The transcript of the program is here: Meet the Press panel on Faith in America [1].)

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