

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

SEVENTEENTH-century Quakers were among the most prolific writers the world has ever known. They explained their compulsion by insisting that in the written word they were “speaking truth to power.”

At a time when English society was conditioned by religious intolerance, arbitrary authority and bloody warfare, these so-called “Publishers of Truth” advocated religious freedom, participatory government and pacifism. They also paid the price for their nonconformist views.

Of the nearly 13,000 Friends who lived under Stuart rule, 8,600 were jailed in Charles II’s first five years on the throne.

About 500 died in prison after being tortured. Yet the Quakers continued to write and publish their tracts at a voluminous rate, believing in the essential goodness of humankind and their ability to reform society by appealing to that goodness.

What compels a writer to share his views, especially when threat-

ened with incarceration, physical punishment — even death? The question often crosses my mind after I’ve received electronic hate mail or threats for challenging the status quo in my written work.

While I don’t have the moral courage of those early Quakers, “speaking truth to power” is an important responsibility for me.

I am a teacher of young people, those who will grow into positions of power and influence in society. I often share with them the op-ed pieces, journal essays and books I’ve written.

While I don’t presume that my views are the “whole truth,” I hope to present them as part of a larger truth that may be revealed if we are open to listening carefully to each other. My job is to encourage my students to think critically, question the stereotypes of society and understand that all problems may not be resolvable but that shouldn’t prevent us from address-

Why do writers write?

ing them in a meaningful way.

Writing is also an important expression of the right I enjoy as an American citizen to express my views, especially when I believe our government is defaulting on its responsibilities to the people. History teaches us that we must remain wary of the government, lest our constitutional rights be compromised.

In July 1798, for example, Congress, at the behest of Federalist President John Adams, passed the Sedition Act, aimed directly at the Jeffersonian opposition. The bill made it a crime for anyone to conspire in opposition to “any measure or measures of the government.”

The law was aimed at those who “write, print, utter, or publish any false, scandalous, and malicious writing” having the effect of “bringing the government, Congress, or the president into disrepute.”

Twenty-five people were arrested and charged with violating the act. Ten were ultimately convicted, the majority Jeffersonian printers and writers.

I believe that as long as the rights of a single individual in this country are abridged, then none of us is truly free. Sometimes writers are able to give an important platform to those who have no voice or don’t have the ability to express their concern.

Our government has a responsibility to ensure the freedom of all and, throughout history, writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Upton Sinclair, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein have made it accountable for doing so.

Finally, there is the personal compulsion to write. For those who don’t engage in the practice, it is difficult to understand why anyone would jeopardize their employment, professional con-

tacts and even career to do it.

Writing is not a choice for me; it’s a matter of conscience. A writer has no choice but to go against the grain when he feels his intelligence is being insulted.

It’s a matter of being true to yourself. In the process, writing often becomes a passionate form of self-expression that allows me to feel whole, even if my work isn’t read by another soul.

Once a colleague, impressed by my ability to articulate some rather controversial views and have them published, asked me what I feared. I was taken aback by the question because “fear” is a negative way of defining yourself. While I admitted that I sometimes fear the possibility of a reprisal, the greater fear was that I would leave this earth without having made a meaningful contribution to society.

And that’s what drives me in exercising the right, responsibility and compulsion to write. ★

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