

2006 RNA AWARDS**AP's Richard Ostling named Lifetime Achievement Award Winner****By Ann Rodgers***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Richard N. Ostling, whose work inspired me to become a religion reporter 30 years ago, is the 2006 recipient of RNA's William A. Reed / Religion News Service Lifetime Achievement Award. Dick will retire from the Associated Press this summer but will continue to write his weekly Bible column.

The Medill graduate landed on the beat 40 years ago after finishing a tour of duty as trombone player with the National Guard band in Wilmington, Del. He turned down a general reporting job with the Houston Chronicle because he said the staff seemed confused about what they wanted. He accepted his only other offer, to cover news for Christianity Today, then based in Washington, D.C. He quickly realized he needed more academic background in religion and earned his master's from George Washington University.

From Christianity Today he moved to Time Magazine in 1969, writing 20 cover pieces for the magazine during his tenure there.

Dick has interviewed everyone from Billy Graham to the Dalai Lama over the years, but said his greatest challenge was the wild ride of June to November 1978.

In June 1978 the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints admitted black men to full membership, and Dick did the only major media interview with the church president.

The next week Pope Paul VI died, and Dick spent the run-up to the conclave churning out cover stories and large inside pieces from information supplied by his Rome bureau chief, Jordan Bonfante. Fortunately, Dick had attended a photo shoot with Cardinal Albino Luciani, who surprised the world with his election as Pope John Paul I.

"Newsweek was caught without a photo," he said, with a lingering sense of satisfaction.

After churning out "new pope" stories for a month he was about to leave for vacation when John Paul I died. Again he credits Bonfante with spotting the name "Wojtyla" in debriefings after the first conclave, making Time the only major news outlet to mention him as a candidate for this second conclave. By the time Dick finished the next "new pope" stories he had accumulated seven weeks leave, and was on vacation when Jim Jones and members of The People's Temple killed a U.S. Congressman and committed mass suicide in Guyana. He returned to his office to write.

"It was one of the most momentous periods you can imagine on the beat," he said. "You can't even explain the pressure you are under writing cover stories for news magazines."

Throughout his years at Time, Dick developed a reputation for understanding the nuances of religion news and for getting the story first.

"Dick would inform me, usually well ahead of anyone else, what John Paul's upcoming encyclical would say and who it would please and outrage," recalled John Moody, a former Time executive and now senior vice president at Fox News Channel.

“When we interviewed Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—now of course Benedict XVI—it was Dick who jostled with the German over the fine doctrinal nuances that took literally hours to get out of him,” Moody was quoted as saying in a letter nominating Dick for the award.

When Dick moved to AP in 1998 he may have been the first journalist ever to find the deadline pressure there less intense.

In addition to his work as a print journalist, Dick did some pioneering work in broadcast journalism. He broadcast religion reports for CBS radio twice a week for 19 years. In 1991 he worked on PBS’ “MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour” (later “NewsHour with Jim Lehrer”) as the first correspondent regularly covering religion for a national television newscast.

In addition, he wrote or co-wrote three books, including (with his wife, Joan Ostling) the critically acclaimed “Mormon America.”

Dick served as president of the Religion Newswriters Association from 1974-76, at a time when the RNA sought open meetings from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Dick also wrote an early history of the organization.

He has earned virtually every prize in the religion newswriting field at RNA, including the Supple Religion Writer of the Year and Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year awards. He’s also been honored by the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern, where he earned a master’s degree in journalism.

Despite the accolades, Dick is “a great human being—gracious, witty, collegial—and of course, incredibly knowledgeable and patient in imparting that knowledge to others,” wrote John Affleck, Dick’s editor at Associated Press, in a nominating letter.

Dick’s advice to young reporters today is to resist the pressure to rush to print or broadcast without careful research and checking.

“I have never seen so much widely distributed misinformation, distortion and foolishness in my life,” he said. “You just have to try to hold to the old-fashioned virtues and verities of good journalism. Don’t put something out if you’re not sure it’s correct and if you’re not sure it’s fair. If you have to wait a day to make sure it’s right, then hold it for a day.”

Here’s a listing of Dick’s top references for anyone writing about religion:

www.rna.org/pr_060510ostling.php

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