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# Now, It's Personal

*Lovejoy recipient Ellen Goodman probes the decaying state of political debate*

By Stephen Collins '74

On November 12, the day of the Lovejoy convocation, Ellen Goodman filed her second column of the week before driving north to Waterville from Boston, where she is a columnist and associate editor at *The Boston Globe*. Despite her deadline, with more than 425 newspapers holding a hole for 750 words of her trademark wit and insight, and her immersion in a book project on women's friendships, Goodman arrived early—another trademark. Anna Karavangelos, her editor at the Washington Post Writers Group, says that in the more than 20 years that she has been in syndication, Goodman has never missed a deadline, usually delivers a day early and writes ahead to cover vacation weeks. Although anyone who has had to meet regular deadlines might be tempted to call that kind of record annoying (the story you are reading was a week late), it is as much professionalism as it is a commitment to individuals who depend on her—to personal relationships.

Bridging the personal and the professional, the personal and the political, is Ellen Goodman's province. She is recognized as a pioneer who helped expand editorial commentary, which traditionally covered only the political, to include the personal—families, relationships, women's issues, ethical dilemmas. That is a major reason that Goodman received the 1998 Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award at Colby this year. That and the fact that she is, in the words of Karavangelos, "one of the most thoughtful observers of political life that America has ever produced."

A cum laude graduate of Radcliffe, Goodman spent her first two years as a working journalist at *Newsweek*. "I started working just before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, so it was

legal to discriminate. I worked for *Newsweek*, where all the women had to be researchers and none of them could be reporters," she told her Colby audience. She began at *The Boston Globe* in 1967, before maternity leave had been embraced. "I had my daughter in the spring and I decided to stay at home in order to get her off to a start in life, so I didn't come back to work until she was six weeks old," she quipped. Goodman got tired of colleagues asking "who is taking care of your daughter?" and finally told one, "Oh, I just leave her at home with the refrigerator open and it all works out."

Easy to be glib 30 years later. But in a 1980 column she cut to the heart of the dilemma: "For years people condemned working mothers for neglecting their children and then swung around and condemned full-time mothers for neglecting their minds, their pocketbooks or their futures. We have now settled for the notion that whatever a woman decides is fine, as long as she truly chooses it. We give lip service to choice, as if the choices were free ones instead of tough ones."

Asked about changes that have occurred during her career, Goodman told her Colby audience, "Things at our paper have changed enormously. This week we had a front page where five of the six stories on page one had female bylines." While there is gender parity at the lowest levels at *The Globe*, there are fewer women editors as you go up the chain, consistent with the rest of the newspaper industry. The two explanations she offered mixed the personal and the political: "Some of it, I'm sure, is old-fashioned sexism, and some of it is new-fashioned conflict between work and family. . . . But I think things are enormously better." While there were virtually no women writing for the



PHOTOS BY SCOTT PERRY

nation's editorial pages when she began in the 1970s, there are many more now, but still nowhere near parity, she said.

Goodman won the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary in 1980. But earlier in her career, she observed, "what I write about—values, relationships, women's issues, families, change—would not have been taken seriously by the newspaper world." When Goodman's name was announced, Bill Kovach, chair of the Lovejoy selection committee and curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, said, "This year's Lovejoy award honors the integrity, craftsmanship and character that Ellen Goodman has demonstrated in her work. During a time of confusion and bitterness brought about by broad social and political change, Ms. Goodman's has been a quiet, intelligent, persistent voice appealing to reason."

Introducing Goodman at a dinner before the Lovejoy convocation, President Bill Cotter said, "The stunning thing about Ellen Goodman is the depth of her understanding of such a wide range of topics. Her analyses of complex subjects—medical ethics, civil liberties, gender dynamics—take readers where few commentators are able to lead. And her writing remains easy to follow through legal conundrums, political quagmires and technological thickets. It's clear and compelling and it crackles with energy."

The Lovejoy award, named for 1826 Colby valedictorian

Elijah Lovejoy, regarded as America's first martyr to freedom of the press, also celebrates courage, and Goodman's work frequently stands up to vigorous opposition, Cotter said. She has persevered writing columns about abortion despite the often frightening mail those columns provoke.

The Colby community, journalists and guests from all over Maine endorsed Goodman's selection for the award with their presence. "Not since 1973, when *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham received the Lovejoy Award, has the annual Lovejoy Convocation had a bigger crowd," Dean of the College Earl Smith reported in the campus newsletter, *FYI*. "More than 600 filled Lorimer Chapel to hear Goodman, whose address, like her columns, was crisp and insightful."

Members of the near-capacity crowd who knew her work expected wit and substance. Her address, titled "The Personal Is Political, The Political Is (Too) Personal," exceeded expectations with gamboling good humor and disarming unpretentiousness. "To be a columnist you need two qualifications: you need nerve and you need endurance," she said. "I have a colleague . . . who dropped out of this endurance contest some years ago, and he explained the business this way. He said that being a columnist is like being married to a nymphomaniac, because every time you thought you were through you had to start all over again." She judged that analogy "unenlightened, but fairly accurate."

## Getting the Inside Scoop

During a wide-ranging discussion of ethics in journalism on the afternoon of the Lovejoy convocation, Matthew Storin, editor of *The Boston Globe*, said he was delighted to discover one person present who had never heard of Mike Barnicle. That was a student from San Francisco who missed last summer's highly publicized ethics crisis at the *Globe*. The other two dozen college editors in attendance were eager to hear from the man who was at the helm when columnists Barnicle and Patricia Smith were dismissed for inventing people and fabricating quotes in their *Globe* columns.

Storin, along with retired executive editor of *The Oregonian*, Bill Hilliard, and managing editor of *The Orlando Sentinel*, Jane Healy, spent three hours in Roberts Union during the day of the Lovejoy convocation dispensing advice and fielding questions at a workshop organized by Matt Apuzzo '00, news editor of *The Colby Echo*.

College editors from Middlebury, Bates, Bowdoin and Connecticut colleges and the University of Maine at Farmington participated along with a dozen *Echo* editors. Journalism careers and ethics in the news business were the two hottest topics.



Bill Hilliard of *The Oregonian* and Angela Cannon '99 discuss journalism careers over lunch.

"Ethics dealing with plagiarism and fabrication are probably as high as they've ever been," Storin told students. "Ethics in journalism 25 years ago were demonstrably less than they are now."

Healy agreed, noting that reporters and editors are required to read and sign ethics statements. Recent generations have seen journalism become a profession; it used to be considered a trade, she said.

Hilliard advised students who pursue journalism careers to take care

that their egos never get in the way of honesty or ethical standards. "Never overestimate your own abilities," he said.

Apuzzo, who made all the arrangements for the event, said afterward that students were delighted to hear the three editors' unanimous advice on career preparation.

"It was excellent, getting to speak with real, live newspaper editors," said *Echo* managing editor Amy Montemerlo '99, who said discussions about editorial judgment were "very relevant to issues we face at the *Echo*." And besides getting career advice from Healy, Hilliard and Storin, "Ellen Goodman came down to the *Echo* after the address and I got to talk to her one-on-one about my career plans. It was extremely helpful."



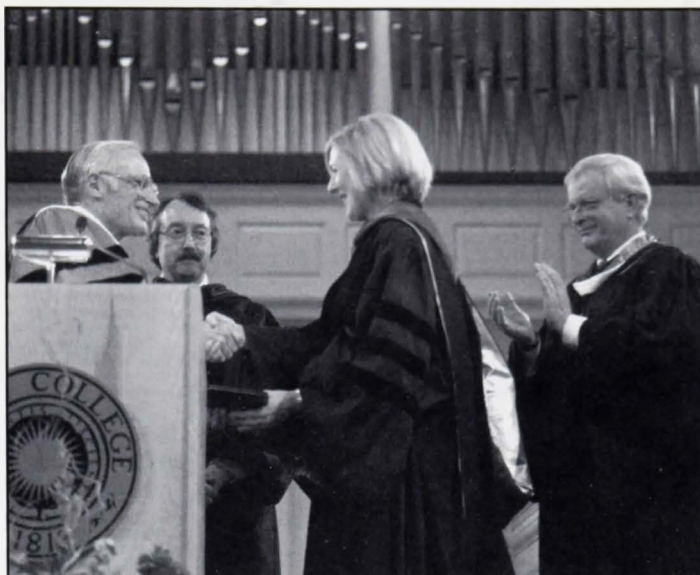
"The difference between being a columnist and a reporter," she said, "is that if you're a reporter, that's it. You reported what the police chief said today, you reported what the victim said today, and then you go home. But if you're a columnist you have to report what the police chief said, what the victim said, and then you have to say what you think. And there are days where you get to that point and say, 'Oh, well, I'm never going home tonight.' There are days when you think, 'Oh my god, there's going to be a big hole in the paper tomorrow.'"

Putting herself in the "what-it-means" end of the journalism business, Goodman offered a symphony of variations on a slogan popularized in the early years of the women's movement: "The Personal Is Political." As an early advocate of change in the way journalists cover political leaders, she recalled: "It seemed to me that we couldn't exclude the personal man or woman when we wrote about the political, and I was an advocate of change, of personalizing—even privatizing—our coverage."

"Well," she said, a month after newspapers published the Starr Report and a week before the Senate Judiciary Committee began impeachment hearings against President Bill Clinton, "be careful what you wish for."

"A half-century ago, Americans knew their president almost solely by public behavior," she said. "In Doris Goodwin's [64] wonderful book on the Roosevelt presidency, she reminded us that Americans almost never saw FDR in a wheelchair." The press corps took on responsibility for shielding Roosevelt, and that culture—"a gentlemen's agreement among the small and nearly all-male press corps"—kept John Kennedy's personal liaisons private too, she said.

"Slowly that agreement cracked as women cracked into the business," Goodman said. The ascendance of "the up-close-and-personal television lens" and baby-boomers' "irreverence for authority, their passion for spotting hypocrisy," also contributed to changing journalism's values and practices. In 1987, presidential candidate Gary Hart dared the press to follow him, and "adultery became a national issue." In 1992, candidate Bill Clinton survived the Gennifer Flowers story and was elected president. In 1994, "we had a contest in Virginia between Charles Robb, who had an extramarital massage, and Oliver North, who was true to his wife and false to Congress." All of these were but prelude to this year's "All-Monica, All-the-Time,



Goodman received the 46th Lovejoy award from Bill Cotter before a packed house at Lorimer Chapel.

complete and final reversal of how we had handled JFK," Goodman said.

Goodman's measured reasoning stands out from what she described in her speech as "the high-decibel politics of the yell" and "food-fight journalism" that thrive on shows like *The McLaughlin Group* and *Crossfire* and on talk-radio shows across the dial.

Matt Apuzzo '00 kicked off the question-and-answer session after the address by asking how to reconcile an industry driven by sales and "the bottom line" with the higher level of discourse that

Goodman advocates. "I love this. We have a nice, crass question right off the bat," she replied. "I think of it as having a franchise that you can lose very easily. There are an awful lot of people [in the news business] feeding down at the bottom, and some of them have been successful by that format. But there's this whole group of people out there who are desperate for vetted, trustworthy information. You have to maintain the franchise with those people, because they're the ones who are going to just drift away altogether. If you're talking about 'what do you have that they can't get on the Internet,' you have trust. You have something that they can believe. If you don't maintain that respect they're going to go to the free, open market for it anyway. There's so much competition at the lowest level right now that maybe the easiest place to be is at a higher level," she told Apuzzo.

And here Goodman leads by example. Her columns and her Lovejoy address stand out, in part, because they accommodate ambivalence. After weighing the pros and cons of expanded reporting on the personal lives of public officials she advised journalists to ask whether a particular personal behavior is relevant to the performance of public duties. "What is, after all, the reason for the public's right to know? Did we have more need to know about Ronald Reagan's health than about Bill Clinton's sexual conflicts?"

She also argued for self-restraint. "Though that may seem like a laughable concept, journalists have actually been restrained in reporting, for example, on the life of Chelsea Clinton. Someone at least is off bounds, and that's a decent model."

"We can learn to make judgments," she concluded, "the way porcupines make love. Very, very carefully."

"We have lost the sense that public policy has much to do with our lives—that politics matter. As the pendulum swings back, and it will—it must—that's the connection we have to restore. That's the still-unfulfilled meaning of the phrase, 'the personal is the political and the political is personal.'" ♦