

Newsman Jim Lehrer, Dead at 85, Was Known for Fairness and Guiding Principles

The Wired Word for the Week of February 9, 2020

In the News

Jim Lehrer, co-founder of the *PBS NewsHour* and known for his straightforward delivery of the news without flash, even as the world of media changed around him, died in his sleep in late January at age 85.

Following his death, news sources as far apart in political perspective as *The Washington Post* and *Breitbart* praised Lehrer for his integrity and his unbiased reporting. The *Post* headlined its report by saying that Lehrer "anchored TV news for grown-ups," adding that his style was "free of the modern curses of 'glitz' and 'edge.'" *Breitbart* said his "serious, sober demeanor made him the choice to moderate 11 presidential debates between 1988 and 2012."

PBS said that for Lehrer, "being a journalist was never a self-centered endeavor. He always told those who worked with him: 'It's not about us.'" Bret Baier, the chief political anchor for *Fox News*, called Lehrer "an inspiration to a whole generation of political journalists -- including this one." Jake Tapper of CNN described Lehrer as "a wonderful man and a superb journalist."

At the end of a *Washington Times* report of Lehrer's death, a commenter identified only as Arthur9633 wrote of Lehrer, "A real model for today. I watched him for years and could never really suspect his political beliefs. He and [his co-anchor, Robert] MacNeil, were a tour de force when reporting the news."

Lehrer, who had served three years in the Marines as an infantry officer, and was also a novelist, screenwriter and playwright, received several awards and honors during his career in journalism, including two Emmys; the George Foster Peabody Broadcast Award; a William Allen White Foundation Award for Journalistic Merit; from his alma mater, the University of Missouri School of Journalism's Medal of Honor; and others. In 2004, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Journalism degree by McDaniel College.

Lehrer was also known for his nine tenets, or guiding principles, reflected in his reporting:

1. Do nothing I cannot defend.
2. Cover, write and present every story with the care I would want if the story were about me.
3. Assume there is at least one other side or version to every story.
4. Assume the viewer is as smart and caring and good a person as I am.
5. Assume the same about all people on whom I report.
6. Assume personal lives are a private matter until a legitimate turn in the story absolutely mandates otherwise.
7. Carefully separate opinion and analysis from straight news stories, and clearly label everything.

8. Do not use anonymous sources or blind quotes except on rare and monumental occasions. No one should be allowed to attack another anonymously.
9. I am not in the entertainment business.

Lehrer is survived by his wife, Kate, whom he married in 1960, three daughters and six grandchildren.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Remembering Jim Lehrer. *PBS NewsHour*

PBS 'NewsHour' Host Jim Lehrer Dies at 85. *Breitbart*

Always Low-Key, Jim Lehrer Anchored TV News for Grown-Ups. *The Washington Post*

Applying the News Story

Although we at *The Wired Word* make every attempt to cover news fairly and without bias in the "In the News" section of our lessons, we do not consider ourselves journalists. We don't go out to cover news events and generally don't seek out newsmakers to get firsthand reports. Rather, we cull news from the reporting of other media outlets. Nonetheless, we find Lehrer's nine "rules" excellent guidelines as we write that section each week. (We make no attempt to eliminate our bias in favor of the Christian faith in the other sections of our lessons.)

Lehrer's rules might also be called guiding principles, and many of us have some of our own. For example, in his autobiography, *My American Journey*, Colin Powell includes a list of what he calls his "rules." He has 13 of them, but here are just a few:

- Avoid having your ego so close to your position that when your position falls, your ego goes with it.
- Be careful what you choose. You may get it.
- You can't make someone else's choices. You shouldn't let someone else make yours.
- Don't take counsel of your fear or your naysayers.
- Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.

And one of our TWW team members has a personal list of 10. Here are some of those:

- Pick your battles. You will be constantly upset trying to fight them all. But don't let everything slide. Pick the important ones and deal seriously with them.
- Do the hard stuff first. It will be out of the way sooner and you'll be able to enjoy the rest of your work without the dread of what is still to be done.
- Beware the path of least resistance.
- There are good solutions to many problems but no perfect ones. Some "solutions" just trade one set of problems for another set. Consider that possibility before making a change.
- Be honest and trustworthy. Follow through on what you agree to do.
- Be known more for the good things you support than for the things you are against.

In this lesson, we will look at some of the guiding principles the Bible offers -- things beyond the major teachings like the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, things that fall more into the category of wisdom for daily living, but which are biblical, nonetheless. And perhaps, in the process, you will be inspired to consider what ought to be on your list.

The Big Questions

1. What personal guiding principles are you aware of holding? How were they developed? How well do they serve you, and why?
2. In what interactions might you better reflect your commitment to Christ by following Lehrer's nine guiding principles? Specifically, which one(s) of the nine, and why?
3. Are the Ten Commandments sufficient as guiding principles so that you need no others? Why or why not?
4. Assuming you have some guiding principles developed from personal experience, what sometimes keeps you from implementing them in situations where they'd be helpful and would keep you from having regrets later?
5. How does your favorite news source do at following principles similar to those Lehrer identified? How do you know? When posting on social media, how do you do at following principles similar to those Lehrer identified?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 16:18

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. (No context needed.)

There are 915 verses in the book of Proverbs, and almost every one of them could be a guiding principle. We've selected Proverbs 16:18 as a sample, but many others could be suggested as model principles.

The book of Proverbs falls into a category of scripture known as "wisdom literature" -- essentially, conclusions about how to live one's day-to-day life as problem-free and harmoniously as possible. The wisdom sayings of the Bible are not anti-God, but their focus tends to be on how to relate to others rather than on how to relate to God.

Questions: In what circumstances might this particular proverb save you some pain, grief or embarrassment? What are some other proverbs you find on target for your life?

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. (For context, read 3:9-15.)

This is a guiding principle from the author of Ecclesiastes (which, like Proverbs, is classified as "wisdom literature"). We might shorthand this one as "Enjoy life while you have it."

Questions: Since this saying is from a book of the Bible, it can be called a "biblical principle," but is it intended for all situations? For that matter, are any guiding principles always applicable? Explain your answer.

Philippians 4:11-12

... for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. (For context, read 4:4-13, 19.)

The apostle Paul also had some guiding principles, some of which he embedded in his letter to the Philippians. He wrote that letter while imprisoned in Rome, so it probably comes from the time near the end of his life. In the letter, he refers to some of the things he has learned along the way. In fact, in both of the verses above, Paul uses the phrase "I have learned ...," which is a giveaway that whatever follows those words is likely to be operating standards he relies on for his life and work. Here are the guiding principles he mentions in Philippians 4:

- "Rejoice in the Lord always." (v. 4)
- "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." (v. 5)
- "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (v. 6)
- Dwell on the highest things. (v. 8)
- Learn to be content. (vv. 11-12)
- "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (v. 13)
- "God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19).

Questions: Which of these principles endorsed by Paul, if any, are distinctly Christian? Which ones, if any, sound more cultural? What might it mean to "dwell on the highest things"? (see verse 8).

Where do you think Paul learned the "secret" of being content? From devotional literature? By attending worship services? From participating in small group studies at the synagogue? In the school of hard knocks? As an itinerant preacher? As a pastor? As an entrepreneur (tentmaker)? As a traveling missionary? Defend your answer.

Proverbs 7:4-5

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call insight your intimate friend, that they may keep you from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words. (For context, read 7:1-5.)

This statement is both a guiding principle in its own right and advice to remember one's guiding principles -- to bring them to mind when you need them. The proverb writer personified both remembering wisdom and forgetting it as females, a comparison we probably wouldn't make today, but hear the writer's point nonetheless: Making one's guiding principles as close as a family member is a way of affirming the importance of recalling one's rules for living when you need them. Forgetting about one's rules for living during a time of strong temptation is a way of saying that such forgetting leaves one open for trouble.

The reason Proverbs warns against loose women is because the central core is a manual for young men, many from the hinterlands, who are training to become part of the royal court. If

there were a similar manual for women to become part of an organization, there would no doubt be proverbs that warned against unscrupulous men.

Of course, one problem with guiding principles is that life is a moving target, meaning that even some good principles don't apply in every situation. One of Colin Powell's rules that we didn't mention earlier is "It ain't as bad as you think. It will look better in the morning." That likely wasn't very helpful the morning after 9/11, especially since Powell was then part of the administration that had to decide how to respond to that massive act of terrorism.

But perhaps the most significant trouble with guiding principles is how easy it is to forget to put them into practice when we need them, such as when we are angry. We can get so bogged down in or overwhelmed by circumstances of life that our hard-won bits of wisdom don't spring to mind, with the result that we get into further problems that we might have avoided if only we'd remembered them. Memory itself does not automatically serve up what we know when we need it.

So yes, the trouble with guiding principles is that they don't cover every situation, and sometimes we don't recall them when we need them. But if, in the usual course of things, we periodically review our principles, seeking to be the person God calls us to be in each situation, we can count on God's help when we forget our resolves or life throws startling new curves at us.

Questions: What kinds of situations tend to cause you to forget your resolutions and guiding principles? What can you do to make them more "second-nature" responses?