Where do story ideas come from?

People who dream of writing, or creating any kind of art, often think they need a magic sense of inspiration to produce anything of value. They think inspiration springs from a well of some extraordinary talent that only a few possess. But there is nothing magical about inspiration or coming up with story ideas. It comes down to a little hard work, a lot of thinking, and training the mind to recognize those ideas.

Louis Pasteur, the great French microbiologist and chemist who developed the germ theory of disease, said in a lecture in 1854, "In the fields of observation chance favors only the prepared mind."

So how do you prepare your mind to generate good journalism?

You read, you observe, you write things down, you read some more, you ask questions, and you always ask yourself, "What don't I know about this?" This is like compost for the garden of your brain, and you will find that over time a web of ideas begins to grow.

The best reporters are voracious readers. They read news, they read history, they read about science and literature, they read novels and short stories and poetry, they read the backs of cereal boxes. It's amazing what sinks into your subconscious with persistent, broad reading, and it's amazing when you make a connection between seemingly unrelated issues or observations that rings the bell: "Hey, that would make a good story."

Every reporter should have a heavy daily diet of news. Reading a newspaper every day used to be the basic recommendation, but you can get your news in many formats — from large global or regional newspapers to news magazines, wire services, radio, television and podcasts. Get a broad view of what's going on in the world, and try to separate the straight news from opinion (which is more of a challenge than ever).

If you can find a good regional newspaper to read every day, you will begin to recognize the elements that make a compelling news story. "Spot" news stories which simply relate events; interviews with people involved in some activity of interest; investigative stories built from research and combing through documents; follow-up stories that revisit previous events and report new developments. The more you think about them, the more those possibilities will become evident.

I know getting access to reading materials in a correctional institution can be a challenge. But whatever you can do to feed your mind will be an asset.
So you may wonder just what kind of stories you can hope to find inside prison. As an outsider, I don't know. But, even though your universe is conscripted and governed by many strict rules, it is full of people, and people have stories. Your challenge is to find them.

In newsrooms, reporters are assigned an area of expertise, which we call “a beat.” A beat reporter might be assigned to cover education or the courts or an industry like retail or airlines. It is her responsibility to find out what is going on in the agencies, institutions and companies that fall under their beat. They cannot rely just on the press releases and public pronouncements these bodies issue. In my days as a young reporter, I covered city hall, city police, the county sheriff’s office, school boards, town governments, a local Veteran's Administration hospital, a community college, among other things. Every day I would visit some of them and see what was going on. As I got to know the officials and the lower level employees, I gained the insight I needed to understand the work they were doing and report on their activities in a meaningful way. I made some friends, I found out who doesn't trust the press, and I learned a lot.

Your beat is your prison.

You have the challenge of trying to find compelling stories within a system that does not afford you much freedom. But you can see what is going on. What's that new building going up in the complex? Perhaps you read about an educational program at another prison; is a similar program coming to your institution? Maybe you hear something interesting about another prisoner: his nephew plays in the NFL, he's a chess master, he's organizing a meditation group with the consent of the prison. Perhaps the prison administration is doing something unique, or a guard you know has an interesting story to tell. I have no idea what you might find, or what you can realistically write about, but there are always things you can find out and reporting you can do.

Don't focus just on controversy. Human interest stories tell as much about your world as the darker issues. Learn to see both.

Much of the writing for the PJP centers on hot current issues, such as COVID-19 vaccinations and Black Lives Matter issues. This is valuable stuff, for sure, but the challenge to a reporter is to get beneath the obvious and burrow into areas that hide stories that have yet to be told. Not secretly, not underhandedly, but honestly and up front. Feed your mind. Watch what goes on around you. Talk to people. Ask questions. Search for the truth. The point is this: the stories will come.

@@@ 

An experienced news manager once said to me that the best desk editors know when something is missing from a story they are editing. That may sound obvious, but it takes a trained mind to think past the elements of a story and detect that something isn’t being said. How does this apply to generating story ideas? When you read, always keep in the back of your mind, "What do I wish this story was telling me that it's not?" Sometimes that simple question will lead you to a story of your own.

Another tactic for discovering your ideas is what some call automatic or free writing. Basically, you take a notebook and a pencil, and you just start scribbling. Whatever pops into your head, write it down. Keep going for 15 or 20 minutes, or more if you have the time and you're having fun. The idea is that your
subconscious stores all sorts of things that are not immediately present in your conscious mind, and things can pop out unexpectedly. Of course, it takes a good bit of paper and pencil lead (I like the idea of a pencil because it’s simple and basic, but a pen will do), and it may not be practical for everyone. But it can be a refreshingly meditative exercise.

@@@

On April 27, The PJP published two long pieces of reaction to the guilty verdicts in the George Floyd murder trial. Each piece consisted of shorter pieces submitted by PJP writers from facilities around the country.

Some of the pieces described the reactions of prisoners and prison staff to the conviction of Derek Chauvin. Some were personal essays expressing the writer's emotions about the verdict. All were compelling, and some were surprising in the unexpected opinions and reactions they portrayed.

This editor is always looking for strong news reporting, and one submission that stood out was Kory McClary's piece from New Jersey State Prison in Trenton.

McClary's was a well-written eye-witness account of how people around him reacted when the jury's verdict was reported on TV. McClary set the scene by describing activity in the unit just before the verdicts were read, using explicit detail (a nurse walking in with meds, an inmate on the JPay kiosk) to build a strong visual setting for the reader. A prisoner named "Emo" shouts out the verdicts for all to hear. A Black female officer's answer to a question from McClary closes the piece with an observation that is, in a small way, rather uplifting.

The story, though short, gave us outsiders a glimpse into prison life. Some of the people quoted are identified, and those that are not (presumably by their choice) are described in detail, so they still come alive in the reader's mind. You get a feel for the relationships between incarcerated residents, and between the residents and guards in a more nuanced way than some depictions. McClary told what he saw, and while he did relate his feelings, he did so without dwelling on his opinions. Keeping your opinions to yourself is a fundamental precept of reporting.

@@@

**STORY EXAMPLE: By Kory McClary**

When the verdict came in, a nurse was just walking into the unit, carrying her medical bag filled with meds to distribute to the inmates who needed it. Inmates were beginning to fill the med line. One inmate was on the JPay tablet kiosk, and others were headed to the mess line. This was one of the busiest times of the day on Unit 3EE inside New Jersey State Prison.

I was just leaving my cell ready to hop in the shower, but I stalled, standing in front of my cell watching CNN. I saw a headline that said something like: "Jury Reaches a Verdict in Derek Chauvin's murder trial."
The white officer, from inside the booth, closed my cell door. I figured that if I took a quick shower, I could be out in time to catch the verdict.

Then I heard an emotional 'Emo' Blackwell yell, "They're reading the verdict!" The tier became silent. Every inmate stopped in his tracks. The white officer in the booth was glued to his TV. The nurse and the Black female officer that accompanied her looked up at cell 27, Emo's cell.

"Count one..." Emo yelled, "Guilty!" The tier erupted in cheers, high fives, and several "They got his ass!"

Through the noise I was straining to hear the rest of the verdict. "Count two... Guilty!" Emo yelled again. "Count Three... Guilty!"

I quickly surveyed the tier. The inmates all seemed happy and victorious, as if they were the prosecutors who convicted Derek Chauvin. The Black officer with the nurse was nodding her head, (just a little) to show her solidarity. The white officer in the booth was poker-faced, but his eyes were still glued to the TV. I wondered what he was feeling.

My feelings pinballed inside of me, bouncing from being happy and thinking, "We finally got justice," to being angry because the only way we get justice is if we have 10 minutes of footage. I was also surprised that they got him on all charges and even sorry, too. That human being may have to spend the rest of his life in a cell like me.

In the shower, the reality set in deep. I do not wish for a lifer's cell on my worst enemy. I decided to be the bigger man within, and as a Black man in America I forgave Chauvin.

Do I have this right since I'm not a relative of George Floyd? I do not know.

I asked several prisoners their perspective on the guilty verdict.

Santis "SandMan" Robinson, an inmate with 30 years in on five life sentences, said, "There is no joy in seeing another man being placed in prison, though the verdict was necessary."

"It was a good thing. But one guilty verdict doesn't satisfy Breonna Taylor, Eric Gardner and others," said Alturik Francis, who is serving three life sentences for murder and is appealing his case as a wrongful conviction. "What's next? We still have injustices taking place all over the country. While the George Floyd trial was taking place, the police killed an unarmed Black man just hours away. We need accountability across the nation."

Finally, I asked a Black female officer who worked in my unit, "Do I have a right to forgive Derek Chauvin even though I am not a member of George Floyd's family?"

Her initial response was a curt, "No!" Then she took a moment to think. "Well, I think that it's beautiful that you did that. But, he doesn't deserve to be forgiven. He intentionally killed that man."