

Discovering America on the ground

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View from the West



Ethan Casey

Ethan Casey's book *Alive and Well in Pakistan: A Human Journey in a Dangerous Time* (UK & US, Vision 2004) will be published soon in Pakistan and India.

the family and politicised the situation. (Meanwhile, Bush's decision to sell F-16s to Pakistan did earn a front-page headline in Saturday's *Washington Post*.)

For my part, as a citizen what I've found myself resenting almost as much — although I admit it's ungenerous of me — is the family's presumption in allowing their thoroughly unenviable but surely private conundrum to claim the attention of an entire nation of nearly 300 million people, at a time when this

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nation and the world in its turn presumes to have any number of other serious things to worry about. Even when America finally bores of Terri Schiavo, at best it will turn back to Iraq, that festering open sore of our own making. Iraq has become in America a proxy for the outside world; noticing what happens there serves as an excuse for not noticing all that's happening elsewhere. So in Haiti and Nepal and God knows where else, human beings are dying without most Americans even having known that they lived in the first place.

As a journalist I've spent years learning, from the examples of role models and mentors and my own experience, the importance of giving priority to un-

derstanding over interpretation or judgment, of discerning general truth only via the accretion of many particular facts, of listening carefully and staying on the ground. "There's no substitute for the sniff on the ground," my friend and senior colleague Anthony Davis once said.

This working principle stands a reporter in good stead in places like Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kashmir, indeed Pakistan, where everyone knows that just ferreting out "mere" facts can be arduous and time-consuming. It ought to hold true anywhere, including America. The problem here is that everything is so hyper-mediated that it is not feasible to understand or communicate with this society without coming to terms with the fact that most of what most Americans know or think we know is what we (as the humourist Will Rogers famously said) "read in the paper" or — more to the point — see on television. And when Americans sink their teeth into an ephemeral obsession, be it Terri Schiavo or Monica Lewinsky or O.J. Simpson, it can be pointless trying to get a word in edgewise about anything else.

Come to think of it, it would be an interesting exercise to travel around the United States and write about it without writing about anything whatsoever that's covered or discussed in the media. What a different America might be revealed by a writer who travelled notebook in hand, eyes and ears open, and determined *not* to watch television, listen to the radio, surf the Web, or even read newspapers. He or she would of course be exposed to plenty of media at second hand, through conversations and interviews. But what such a writer would glean, by listening attentively and self-effacingly and exclusively to actual human beings, would surely be a great deal more interesting and telling than the frighteningly bland, soulless, monolithic and unreal country the world feels it already knows too well.

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A 41-year-old woman in Florida has been in a "vegetative state" for 15 years. Her husband, who says he loves her and wants what's best for her and what she would have wanted, wanted her feeding tube removed so she may finally "die with dignity". Her parents and siblings, who understandably are on poor terms with her husband, wanted a court to rule that her feeding tube must remain in place so she could remain, so to speak, alive.

As tragic as Terri Schiavo's plight and her family's gut-wrenching choice certainly are, are they of wider public interest? Apparently so, since they have consumed the attention of America for a couple of weeks now. Unprecedentedly (but then lots of unprecedented things are happening these days), the United States Congress railroaded through a federal law whose sole purpose was to override the authority of a Florida state judge, so that a federal judge could have the opportunity to overrule him on this one, particular, very specific matter involving a single citizen.

The president flew back to Washington urgently to sign the bill. But the federal judge declined to do the Republican-led Congress's bidding — that is, he upheld the decision of the state judge — and, notwithstanding damage done to the body politic and the venerable if not tattered Constitution, Terri Schiavo's feeding tube has not been re-inserted into her navel, and she is dying.

There has been much earnest debate over whether the "right to life" or the "right to die" should prevail, with medical experts, religious personages, ethicists, relatives of other comatose people, legal scholars and sign-wielding activists parading before the great American public via that most American of institutions, commercial television. After a while — my imprecise sense is that it's been about two weeks — the public has begun losing interest in its latest collective obsession, and even to express salutary disgust with the blatant and quite crude way in which right-wing interests have used