



OUTSIDE THE BOX

We were at my mother-in-law's apartment in New York. It was six thirty, and Larry, my husband, pointed toward the television set.

"Lynn has a story on the news tonight," he told her. "Let's watch."

Diana Hilford smiled with anticipation. By then in her late eighties, after a lifetime of success at a business she had created, her body was failing and she rarely left home. A visit from her son always lifted her spirits; the two of us together made her beam. I was in awe of her guts and her accomplishments, and I loved making her happy. Letting her know when she could catch me in action on television was one of those rituals that just made me feel good.

But I'd never before been in the same room while it happened.

As Larry clicked on the TV, I stood aside, watching Peter Jennings open *World News Tonight* and trying to recall where in the lineup my piece was running. It had been finished much earlier in the day and was safely on videotape, which is why I could leave the office in time to watch with them. Finally I saw it coming and alerted Diana.

She looked at the screen, listened to my voice, saw me on camera. And

then the strangest thing happened. Clearly puzzled, she turned her head to look at me in real life. Then back to the screen. Then back to me again. Back and forth throughout the entire piece with a bewildered look on her face. I don't think she absorbed a word of my story. This incredible woman, who had escaped from Russia as a teenager, who had raised a child and run a company all by herself in America, could not figure out how I could be on the tube and standing in her apartment at the same time. Which "me" was the genuine article?

It's the kind of confusion that often results when you step outside the box.

I know because it's a position, maybe even a mind-set, I've adopted regularly as a reality check on this mighty medium. Call it self-preservation, or even call it mutiny, but if you can't keep straight which "you" is you, then neither one has a chance. Because in the public mind, TV trumps real life every time.

The flip side of the Diana story occurred during liftoff of the first space shuttle. I was assigned to the VIP viewing area, where I interviewed guests and celebrities in the dim predawn light. We were on the air live, and I was talking on camera to our anchor, Frank Reynolds, who was in the booth about fifty yards away. My producer had her arms stretched out like a giant bird, for crowd control, and we had a tiny, twelve-inch black-and-white monitor on the ground so she could check the shot and so I could see what was being broadcast. The monitor was angled half toward me, half toward the cameraman and the crowds. As I spoke into the microphone and faced the camera—no doubt delivering some vital nugget of information to the audience at home—I was pleased to note that the audience at hand was hushed, listening to what I was saying for news of the launch. But no one was looking at me. Even though I was standing three feet in front of them in living, breathing real life—and in color!—their eyes were all directed downward as they watched me on the teeny gray monitor. TV was the reality; life, a mere bystander. Outside the box simply didn't matter.

IT CAN BE A very humbling profession.

As a local TV reporter in New York, I got a call very early one morning from our assignment desk, directing me to a story out in Brooklyn. There had been one of those miraculous microsurgery operations, during which a

man's hand had been reattached to his arm, and a press conference was scheduled for nine o'clock. I jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes, met the crew, and drove to the hospital. It was February 1973, and at the time I had been on the air for only about five months. As I was walking through the lobby—clearly a TV reporter, since a camera crew was trailing me—an elderly gentleman came right up to me, stopped, stared, and said, "Say, you're on television, Channel 2, right?"

I smiled proudly and said, "Right."

"And you're Lynn Sherr," he said. "Right?"

"Right." I was thrilled at the recognition.

"Well," he said, squinting up at me, "you look better on television."

I sprinted for the ladies' room and put on some makeup.

After I left that job and had been off the air for a few weeks, someone stopped me on the street and actually said, "Didn't you used to be Lynn Sherr?" How does one respond?

Comments like that make for great dinner-party conversation, but they also serve to bring us, or at least me, back down to earth. As the anchor of most of the crack-of-dawn launches of the space shuttle in the early 1980s, I had to be in place long before the sun even thought of rising. One time my husband came down to see the liftoff (and me) and found himself driving me to the press site on a hot Florida morning in the pitch-black at two o'clock in the morning. While he struggled to find the road, I went over some last-minute notes. As we made our way along the highway, he turned to me with eyes barely open and said, "Thank you for sharing the glamorous part of your life!"

REPORTING THE NEWS ON TELEVISION can be glamorous and it can be frustrating; it can be energizing and debilitating; it can puff up the ego and it can make you feel like a dope. And every now and then it can be really satisfying, because you straighten out the facts or catch someone lying or maybe, just maybe, save a life. This book is about all of those sensations as I've experienced them in more than forty years as a reporter, most of them on television.

It is also about the subtle distortion of reality that the box can produce, a disconnect that has struck me throughout my career: the gulf between television and real life; between the images and the messages we send out

and the truth behind the camera. Sometimes that truth lases clear to the core and illuminates an issue for the first time. Sometimes it obscures the issue or exaggerates it or has nothing to do with the news at all. All of it gets on the air.

If you're in the news business, or just starting out, I hope this book will give you some insights and history lessons to help form good habits. If you're not, I hope it will demystify some of the things you've seen and heard. An informed viewer is our best backstop.

Someone at a Jewish newspaper in Philadelphia once asked me whether my background had contributed to my choice of a career, since Jews are always asking questions—and answering questions with another question. I asked him whether he was serious. In fact, I became a reporter for a very corny reason: to tell the truth. To go behind the curtain and expose the wizardry; to find out why and when and where; to help make sense and thus bring order to a distinctly disorderly world. I don't know for sure that there's a wonder gene, but I am convinced that I have it, because curiosity is the prime prerequisite for a journalist. You can learn almost anything in this business—in any business, I guess—but passion and drive are not acquired skills, and I was lucky to locate them early on. By an accident of timing, my entry into the field coincided with a renaissance of public demand for honest answers about government, big business, and, occasionally, celebrities, and with the primacy of television news as the source of daily events for most Americans.

As a result, I've lived the glory years of TV network journalism, when news was still recognized as a public service and getting the story was the only thing that mattered. When *we* were reality TV. I've also felt our influence wane as priorities shifted, profits ruled, channels proliferated, and new outlets splintered our audiences and diminished our power. Through it all I've seen the best and the worst of police work, courtrooms, science, medicine, and the gee-whiz stories that make your jaw drop. I have also helped track the sea change in American politics as the smoke-filled rooms of the party bosses gave way to the will of the people during earlier and earlier primaries and the new kingmakers called caucuses; as television superseded voters as the only audience campaigners cared about; as political conventions lost their clout. Too bad. Conventions were cool.

And as one of the first wave of women in the business, I've not only covered the feminist movement; I've been part of it, stepping into jobs that didn't exist until I got there, and then chronicling the social revolution that

has literally changed the rules of American society. At ABC News, I've anchored and reported for almost every program, gladly broadening the résumé of the only role model some of us once had: a cartoon reporter named Brenda Starr.

In the process, I've collected some brass and glass statues and some other honors that genuinely make me proud. I've been a question on *Jeopardy!* (twice) and an answer in the daily crossword puzzle and was photographed for *Playboy* magazine. (Yeah, yeah, fully clothed. It's my mind, not my body, they appreciated.) I've thrown the first pitch in a minor-league baseball game (and easily reached the plate). And I've performed on the stage of Carnegie Hall, reading words—my words—not music. In a “Most Intriguing People” issue of *People* magazine, someone said I had “real long-range potential.” I hope there's no statute of limitations on potential, because that was 1979. Once, I was horrified when a newspaper columnist described me as a television personality rather than a journalist, but I got over it.

And there is more.

Stepping outside the box also means uttering the unspeakable in my business: Sometimes it's not about television. For one thing, I was a print reporter for many years; and writing is my first instinct, something I learned to do on a large, clunky machine called a typewriter that worked without batteries or electricity. For another, I have a life apart from journalism. As a second-generation American blessed with a loving family and good reason to be optimistic, I have enjoyed unprecedented opportunity even while living through a staggering array of upheavals—social, political, technological—that transformed the traditions that defined my childhood. When I was growing up, girls let boys beat them at tennis, moms mostly stayed at home, and many colleges didn't admit female students. Television sets were bulky boxes with tiny black-and-white screens, and the only thing to watch after midnight was an eye-numbing stationary test pattern. Red was the color of Communism, not Republican states, and working out was something you did to a problem. You didn't say words like “cancer” or “breast” in public. We wanted to be cool, not hot, and hot flashes were ideas or news bulletins, not something to endure. If all that sounds like ancient history, it's not, which I know because at college I majored in classical Greek, which really is ancient history, an eclectic addition to my credentials that has made me the poster child for studying the classics. (Do it. It will make you a better person).

At a friend's recent preretirement party (now, there's a term that could

only have been invented by an optimistic generation), someone said definitively, “Change sucks.” Well, maybe. As a sappy sentimentalist who hoards family mementos and weeps when the flag goes by, I want to preserve what I know. But as a pragmatist who recognizes the energy of evolution, I welcome the changes that have both improved my life and made it more challenging. That goes for both life and television, although I grant that the distinction between the two has not always been obvious in my own case. When my husband asked me to marry him, he anticipated my response by having a fake tabloid front page printed up with the banner headline:

LYNN SAYS YES!
FILM AT 11!

I’ve had a very tolerant family.

I have also faced the heartbreak of deaths too soon and come out the other side. I am a cancer survivor. And if you want to know where to find me when I’m not trolling for news, you might look for water to swim in, giraffes to feed, or something purple. That’s part of my story too. It’s arranged in roughly chronological order—“roughly” because while my life has of course unfolded along a linear path, whenever I try to make sense of it, I tend to think topically. That’s how I’ve arranged these chapters, by the themes and currents that have shaped me during wondrous times. I’ll start with the people who made it possible.