The Power of Place

November 19th, 2008
Tom Haines, *writer*

http://forum-network.org/lecture/power-place

Good evening. Welcome
to Camrbidge Forum.
I'm Peter Thomson.
I'm the Environment Editor at the Public
Radio News Program, The World.
At least, as of December 1,
I will be.
And I'm the author of
Sacred Sea: A Journey to Lake Baikal.
This week's Cambridge Forum
topic is The Power of Place.
It's a subject that our speaker Tom Hanes
is uniquely qualified to discuss.
In his six years as travel writer
for the Boston Globe,
Tom has visited and written about
more of the world's remote places
and communities, than most
of us will in a lifetime.
Traveling to dozens of countries
on five continents.
Tom has gone, among other places, to
Ghana to write about guns and cricket.
He's traced the impact of cultural
and economic change
at the far edges
of Europe.
And traveled to rural India
to explore Gandhi's legacy.
And wherever he goes, Tom brings
back rich and often riviting portraits
of people and cultures that are deeply tied
to the patch of earth that they occupy.
Even as they're often feeling the
profound effects of global events,
trade, and technological
change.
This work has brought
Tom considerable acclaim.
Including having been named
travel journalist of the yearthree times
since 2003.
And his work's been featured in The Best
American Travel Writing of 2004.
Although he's only 40, Tom has a
classic old school journalism resume.
He started out on the police beat
at the Idaho Falls Post Register.
Then he moved on
to the Seattle Times
where he was a general
assignment reporter.
And also covered federal
courts, and it being Seattle,
of course, technology.
He then spent two years
overseas reporting from
Ukraine, Georgia and other countries
before arriving at the Globe in 2002.
Tom is a native of Pittsburgh
but he assures me that
his two kids are full citizens
of Red Sox Nation.
Talk about the
power of place.
Please join me in welcoming
Tom Hanes to Cambridge Forum.
- Thank you Peter
for the kind words.
Thanks to the Cambridge Forum
for inviting me here.
And thanks to all of
you for coming out.
On the note of Red Sox nation, I notified
my six year old son this morning
that Coco Crisp had been traded
to, I think the Kansas City Royals.
And he looked at me and
said, "Who'd we get?"
So I think he's going to be
just fine for the ride ahead.
I'd like to start by taking all of us fromthis November
night in Camrbdige
to the inside of a simple home,
in one of the world's largest,
most densely populated,
metropolitan areas, Mexico City.
The city is set in a
high wide valley.
And today it's neighborhoods climb
up slopes in every direction.
Home to 20 million
residents, they say.
And these neighborhoods

span extremes.
There are ritzy distrcits that match anything found in New York or London or Milan.
And there are hard
luck neighborhoods.
That you expect to find in a place
that is the center for so many.
But on this one autumn afternoon, in
this one particular home, south of the city,
Angela Gonzalez Sonovia, a 40 year
old mother of two young girls,
is talking about a journey she
had made several months earlier.
Angela is a sturdy woman.
She has soft features but
a very strong disposition.
And she tells about how she, her husband,
her brother and some relatives,
hired a "coyote" ,
or a smuggler,
to lead them across the border,
into the United States.
The plan was to earn some money to help her children have a better life back home.
Now the 'coyote' did not tell them
what waited across the border.
And so they walked, with
little water, for one day.
Then two, then three, then four,
into the desert of southern Arizona.
Now after 4 days, dehydrated and desperate,
they lit a fire to draw the attention
of the INS and they were caught and returned to Mexico.
A Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, winner of the Noble Prize,
wrote about time and place and opportunity.
He described what he called
a deceptive tomorrow. And the moments before it, in which time comes to a,
"Full stop. Offering a complete and perfect today. Full of dancing and revelry."
So as Angela tells her travel story in her home, in Mexico City,
on this one afternoon, the moments of the present at least, are pretty near perfect.
She has finished her rounds in the neighborhood,
peddling her cart... She peddles her cart to sell tortillas on the street.
And her 2 young daughters, Nancy, 6, and Lupe, who's 7,
have returned home from school and unshoulder their backpacks.
Their 2 room house is not much, it's a concrete floor, plywood walls.
It's a shack essentially. But there is food
in the shelves that tie the kitchen,
blankets on the walls of a common room, and then pictures and appliances
that make it fell like home.
And I'd like to close this introductory visit to Mexico City,
with an exert from a story that I wrote for the Globe that's called
"To Think Of Leaving Mexico",
in which the conversation in the room,
turns from Angela to her children.
"Lupe squeals and leaps from bed to chair to bed, between turns at homework.
Nancy watches a cartoon on a small colored television.
Lupe writes numbers 1 through 10 on her way to 300.
She reaches into a blue and purple backpack,
for samples of her cursive handwriting,
shyly, playfully, she decides what she wants to be when she grows up.
'A marine!' she says. 'A policewoman! Umm... A nurse.'
What about where those jobs might lead? A different kind of home,
in a different place.
Lupe's eyes drop to her notebook.
Nancy says 'she wants to cry'.
Lupe is not ready for a tomorrow, deceptive or not that takes her away from here.
'This,' Lupe says, ''is where I was born.'"
'Is where I was born..' I began this talk in Mexico City,
because I think that the encounter with Lupe,
and the attempt of trying to get inside,
if only briefly,
the mind of this child, confirms kind of the hard-wired power of place,
that remains in so much of the world today.
I want to ask a quick question.
How many of you, in the audience, how many of you still live where you were born?
If not in the same house, in the same city?
Ok, a few, but it's fair to say,
very few. A minority. And that's definitely the case with me,
and I think it's true that in much of the world,
things can feel a bit uprooted or unrooted, and merged.

I spent 18 years of my life, under one roof
in Pittsburgh,
but since then lived between dorm rooms, and
apartments, and temporary internships
and longer term jobs. Between the ages of 20
and 36 I think, in 22 different places,
I called home. I have for
the past 7 years lived in one place,
but during that time, as travel writer for
The Globe,
I have journeyed time and again, away from
my own home.
My own wife and two young children,
to Sudan and China,
Turkey, Romania, India, Cuba and elsewhere.
Into the Amazon and the Andes.
And I've been drawn, again and again, toward
individual people,
and their lives, in homes that are so
clearly defined by this power of place.
Of culture and terrain, of time and
distance.
And I have seen, among those living there,
the love that flourishes through happiness,
and hardship.
So tonight, I would like to take 2 more,
quick but intense trips.
Encounters that build on this idea of little
Lupe, and her love for a home
she shares with her sister, mother and
father.
And these next journeys they begin where
jet flights end,
and continue towards the edges of the modern
world.
The first will move by tank, into the frozen
Tundra of the Russian Far East,
into a reindeer camp there, and the second,
by 4x4,
and then by foot into erred stretches of the
great riff valley.
And a village in Southern Ethiopia.
So off we go, into the arctic.
This journey begins in the city of Anadyr,
it's the capital of Chukotka.
It's the Eastern most province in Russia.
It's the tip that ends at the Bering
Strait, and it unintentionally,
through no doing of it's own, landed in the
news during the campaign season,
because it's the part that Sarah Pallin can
see from Alaska.
If she looks across. Not really. But if you
could see it, it would be Chukotka.

Anadyr, the capital, is a very isolated and
industrial place.
It was built up during the Soviet years so
there's lots of these hulking Soviet style
apartment buildings that kind of crawl
up from the bay.
Broad streets, hot water pipes that snake
between these big buildings,
because they're all above ground, because
under ground is permafrost.
In an April day, it's the end of a long
winter,
and the daylight is starting to return, but
the snow has not yet gone,
so it's all grey and frozen. And late in the
morning, we'd make our way
to the edge of the town to meet Yevgeny
and his tank.
Now there are flights that can get you
around between major cities,
between lets say the capital of Anadyr and
out to Lavrentiya,
which is the city on the bearing straight.
But if you want to go out to the Tundra,
you pretty much do it by tank.
And these are old military machines,
Soviet tanks,
sort have sort of been retired. They've cut
off the gun turret,
put a big box on top, and they're trucks.
And that's what Yevgeny was,
was a truck driver. And so we climbed into
the back of his tank,
and off we went into this vast white-blue.
As far as the eye could see, sort of this,
this merger of land and sky, only in the back
of the tank,
it was all diesel fumes and exhaust.
And after two hours,
we arrived in Khonchulan.
It's a smaller version of Anadyr.
Straight streets and styled apartment
buildings, sort of staggered
on a sea of white as you approach it.
Now after the Russian revolution,
to skip back in time a bit, Soviet control
began to reach out,
and eventually made it all the way here,
to places like Kanchelon.
Scientist and soldiers, teachers and
bureaucrats,
arrive from 11 time zones away.
A centralized life in economics.
And pretty much everything. And that meant,

the long pneumatic Chukchi natives,
who had been living for centuries, moving
with Caribou on the Tundra.
And they had been settled into towns like
Kanchelon where the herds were collectivized.
But, with the breakup of the Soviet Union,
the long arm pulled back.
So the buildings still stand, but they're
battered, and it's not an easy place.
The mayor of Kanchelon pointed Yevegeni up
a river,
and he said 'drive that way for 2 hours,
and you'll join the herd.'
Out in the Tundra.
So we did, and after 2 hours we arrived
at a low rise at this another vast expanse,
there are vast expanse out there,
and we found
several hundred reindeer,
2 tents and 12 people.
Within minutes of stepping out of the tank,
we've been invited in, warmly, into one of
the tents called a 'Yaranga'.
And it was like stepping back in time. There
was fire and smoke...
There was a fire in the center and smoke
rising, the skins of the tent,
you know, were sort of taut against the wood
frame, and there were cuts
of reindeer meat that were curing in the
smoke. The conversation among
the herders, was in Russian, but more often
in Chukchi,
the native language.
But they were making tea,
and serving it around in cups, and a
group of woman.. Young women,
who had butchered a reindeer in 46 minutes
flat.
Every... You know.. From the time that it
was killed until the time that,
the meat had all been prepared, and ready to
cook. They had said about
roasting and boiling meat, they were iron
pots, but it was one of the sort of few,
modern conveniences. Some of the men and
women wore sweaters,
or jackets with zippers, but almost
everyone had these reindeer skinned
clothing on top. And among all this scene,
was an older woman in her 60s,
she was stooped and was moving around very
quickly,
she's putting some sticks on the fire, she
puts the meat in the pot,
she's always giving orders, she would
chase the dog back out the door,
and before the meal was over, when everyone
else had settled to eat,
she took off, and she went across to a low
hill.
And there she hunkered down on these 3 big
skins that had been spread out,
about probably the size of this room, from
side to side, maybe 30 feet,
and she held a long 3 sided needle in her
hand,
and she was sowing. Now she had some friends
with her, there were 3 little pups
next to her... Alive, sort of sitting there
all curled up.
And on her left was a dead reindeer calf,
that had been still born that morning.
and she had plans to make a hat out of it,
because, I mean,
since the collapse of the Soviet Union,
everything again
had come back to have a purpose. And yet
she didn't have time that day to make it,
so she was keeping it warm on the reindeer
skins until she can do that.
And she was working there that afternoon,
and I'd like to read an excerpt
from those moments, that appeared in a story
called Degrees of Separation, in the Globe.
And this will be the end of our visit to
this seemingly desolate place,
of the Russian far East.
"Zenida also hoped by days end to finish her
bigger sewing project:
A new yaranga, A tent that would be a
refuge from the other crowded with two young
couples. As she worked through the afternoon
the soup-thick sky cleared. The air warmed
toward freezing. The steady wind brought
silence.
Zenida told the story of her husband, Alexei
who had been celebrated by Soviet
officials for his handling of a herd of
3000 reindeer.
on July 12, 1985, Alexei did not return from
tending his reindeer.
Search parties canvassed the banks of
swollen rivers and meadows
thick with wildflower. Helicopters
circled.
Zenida set off on her own search,
walking for one month, then two, from

summer into autumn, long after Alexei
had been given up for dead.
Finally, she fell through a thickening layer
of ice and sank to her waist in frigid water.
"I hoped for a long time," Zenida said, her
fingers working the needle through the
thick reindeer skins.
At twilight, two teenage girls helped
hoist Zenida just-completed quilt of skins
onto the wooden frame of the new
yaranga. Zenida did not take time to build
a fire that night. Instead, as the sky above
an opening at the top of the tent turned
from cobalt blue toward black, she parted
the skins hanging around her sleeping
area and climbed in. She began to settle,
then thrust an arm back toward the dirt
floor. She grabbed the stillborn calf and
pulled it into the warmth of her bed."
So it is a long way from that Yuranga to the
dry stretches of Southern Ethiopia.
But that's where I want to head for the last
encounter.
The trip starts...
in Addis Ababa.
Which is, in a general way, sort of
a quint essential teaming
African capital. It also sits up at a high
elevation,
and hereto neighborhoods sprawl from the
boulevards and buildings
of the center. And the warrens of alleys in
this huge public market place,
that's said to be one of the biggest in
Africa.
Extremes are everywhere in the capital, but
perhaps none so much is near the Sheraton.
Shanties stack on the hillside just beyond
the fence but in the Sheraton there's a fleet
of black Mercedes in the parking lot,
several international restaurants,
are on the ground floor, and rooms come with
buttons for a butler.
In a central courtyard, there are these
fountains that sort of tear us down,
and at night a light show-dances up,
and something that literally,
is only probably seen at a place like the
Bellagio in Las Vegas,
and at the Sheraton.
We'll leave all that though,
in a 4x4, and motor out of town, and down
along the main Southern two lane highway.
And if there is such a thing as a cacophony
of movement, this is it.
There's trucks and buses, lurching to stop
speeding up,
donkeys in the road and on the roadside,
some are loaded, some are not loaded,
some are being ridden. There are women
sitting on the side of little villages,
selling produce, children in uniform in
their way to and from school,
markets busy with traffic, people stopping
for gasoline or chewing gum,
This is it. There's often a lot of richness
to Africa.
When rain falls and things work.
I've watched kids playing soccer at twilight,
along the banks of the Nile in Northern
Sudan.
Or saw 2 men playing chess in the shade to
escape the heat in midday
in an oasis in Egypt. In Ethiopia I've
shared coffee with some teachers,
who had basically performed what they
call a coffee ceremony,
where you spend a couple hours roasting and
grinding and boiling water and serving
this very rich coffee, part of which the
point of which is to taste it obviously,
but the other is to promote this
kind of fellowship of shared conversation.
But when things fall apart in Africa, it
happens quickly and completely.
After 3 hours on the highway, I turn left,
this is in the 4x4 again,
you turn left and head East in the great Big
Rift Valley.
The roads immediately are dirt and rocks,
hard and rutted.
The land rises and falls. It's a bit like
moving at a low level,
through the folds of a blanket tossed
on a bed.
You go up and over one fold, and then down
into another, and then rise a bit again.
And it's disorienting. You pass one village
and then another,
and then ultimately on this trip, you end
up in a place called Adera Lepo.
Adera Lepo is home to 1,000 people,
and during normal time,
there's enough wheat and fields to feed
families and to barter for vegetables,
or household goods or clothing. Or school
supplies. There's a clinic with a doctor,
there's a school with teachers, there's a

soccer field,
children grow up knowing their parents and cousins, their aunts and their uncles,
and when they're adults they stay.
That is what it had been like
for Gebi and Illina, a young couple and their 3 children,
Sheila, Abdo and Bontu. Until the rain stopped.
For 3 years there had been draught.
4 ponds and reservoirs
were used for crops and drinking water,
had dried up.
There was only one that still had water in the village.
Gebi, the father of this family could factor in his head,
that he had a donkey and a goat and some seed grain,
and he could figure out how long he thought his family could hold out.
Many families had already left the town.
Local government officials came
and offered a few lots for those willing to move 100 miles away,
but as those in the towns said how do we know it's going to be any better there?
For those with a donkey there was a chance to walk several hours
to an emergency grain distribution site,
pick up a 50 pound sack,
of wheat stamped USA, and cart it home.
One day we joined the hour long walk Illena makes with her donkey.
She ties cans to it's side, and she leads it to the watering hole.
Along the way she stopped and chatted with a woman who's an old friend,
they held hands.
She passed a hole in the ground,
where the government had tried to dig a well.
A couple of years earlier,
they drilled more than a 100 feet underground, and then the bit broke.
And people in the village said the bit was still there.
They just never found water.
Another day,
we detoured from that route into the center of the village.
It was more than 100 degrees, the sun beat straight down,
there was a bright wash of light. This part of the village seemed vacant.
Even though there were huts. It seemed uninhabited. Uninhabitable.
At one hut a door was wired shut, The 2 sticks at the door were wired shut,
the family had moved on.
So it was unexpected when rounding another hut, to find a woman.
Her name was Berdikan Abbe.
She was tall and gaunt, and had a slack expression.
At her side was her son, Assman, he was 2.
And he was wobbling on stick legs.
Berhanu, the translator who was with us,
talked with Berdikon.
I had a 10 month year old son at the time,
he was my only child,
and he was back at our home near Boston.
Berdikon said she had one more child.
And he was inside the hut.
So I'd like to end here.
with an excerpt from a story called Facing Famine.
That appeared in the Globe
"And this is what followed,
said she would take us to meet her one month old son. Nurhusein.
There is no turning back. Through the low narrow doorway,
in the darkness that guards cool by day, heat by night,
lies little Nurhusein.
In the huts little room
there is a wooden bench, but little else.
The food, furniture,
even a grandma and 3 uncles, have gone.
Now 5 people remain. Bertikon, the mother, age 19.
Abdurkadeer, her husband, 27,
Abduraman, his brother, 16.
And the children, Asman and Nurhusein.
They have no animals and no money,
neighbors share hard bread and flour.
'I have nowhere to go.'
Abdurkadeer the father says. 'I will die here.'
From behind a curtain in the huts back room, comes a rustle of blankets
a whimper, a soothing voice. Sounds of a mother gathering a baby in her arms.
Nurhusein emerges. His head resting in the crook of his mothers left elbow.
A soft cotton blanket opens to shocks of slick curly hair.

Tiny fingers reach in the air.
Nurhusein bleats softly.
His lips often latch on to a dry breast.
'Nurhusein has a small stomach ache.'
His mother says.
The bleeding rises, then falls,
just beyond the blankets edge.
Nurhussein is too wise.
It is as if he knows. In the hot sun,
looking from hut to hut,
from face to face, the problem had always
seemed too vast.
I stare at Nurhusein. I can not look again
into his mothers eyes."
So that's...
That is the end.
Thank you.
- This one now?
Ok.
Terrific stuff. Thanks Tom.
This is Cambridge Forum,
our guest is Tom Hanes, travel writer for
the Boston Globe.
So, this question of place, that you say
motivates you in the kind work that you do
and the kind of stories that you look to
tell,
I suppose that one might define it, or at
least I might define it as,
perhaps the natural, the cultural, maybe
even the emotional elements,
of a location or a community, that give that
place a particular resonance,
and that sets it apart from every other
place.
How does that weave through the stories that
you've just told us,
your encounters in Mexico City,
in Chukotka,
and in the Rift Valley in Ethiopia, and the
other stories that you look to tell.
That deep attachment, the things that
define
the people in the environment in which they
live.
- It varies greatly and I think that...
I mean, one of the things about this idea,
places is that there is in someways no
definition for it,
or that it, it changes. It can be literal,
in terms of terrain and nation,
and culture. Or it can be sort of abstract
in terms of a place in history,
or a place in time, or a persons place in
their own life.
And I think one of the things that is
interesting about travel writing,
about going in and writing these types of
stories, is that,
you can kind of react to what exists
in a...
You can react a bit to what exists in a
particular place. And so,
a lot of times it'll just be determined by
what we find.
I mean we try to...
These stories often begin
as very general concepts, as lets go into..
The Chukotka piece for example,
was part of a series in which we were
traveling across geographic
and cultural divides. And that was it. That
was sort of the guiding theme,
and then what we found when we were there
determined that.
And so that... Just to sort of give an
example of the place, that thing quickly
became sort of a historical economic in some
ways about the collapse of the Soviet Union.
And in other parts of the world, it may,
it may have nothing to do
with money, or with history, and just more
sort of the lives that are being lived there.
- So you're saying sense of place isn't
part-determined by what you find,
how do you decide what to go out
and look for?
I mean your beat, is essentially the whole
world.
So how do you decide what little pieces of
that whole world
you want to go out and find and try to get
inside and bring back for the rest of us?
- It's sort of... Yeah. It's the blessing
and the curse, in terms of a job.
And that you can theoretically go anywhere,
and at the same time,
theoretically go anywhere. And, so it gets
sort of difficult to narrow it down,
and I think that the way I have tried to do
it... I was a news reporter for 10 years,
and that's obviously a very different
pursuit, in that you're actually trying
to almost sort of make your way through the
clutter of a place,
and get to sort of the events of that
moment, and to understand them
and communicate them back. And in this way,

I think one of the things that is,
is intriguing but also challenging is that
you're actually trying to go into,
the clutter of something, and not
necessarily sorted out, just be in it.
Away from the news and the events. And so,
we'll do it in 2 ways.
Either something like Ethiopia, that story
literally came about as...
I had been in this position for about a year.
And I picked up the paper one day, and i
was reading a story,
and I think it was my wife who sort of said:
"Yeah man, what is that like?"
You know, it was about the draught basically
coming on.
And it started with that idea of,
not voyeurism or something,
but sort of to approach it as, often times in
Ethiopia, to use this example,
you know by the time it gets to the news,
it's beyond the point of repair.
And it's water trucks out in the desert, and
AIDS stations or something.
Then the reality is that there's a very
normal life there,
in village life, in the culture, in
agricultural society,
and so the idea was to go into that.
And sort of try and get a sense,
both of the normal that exists, and
the extreme of,
what happens after 3 years of draught, and...
So I think some stories like that,
are very specific, others... There was a
series we did last year that was
called At the Edge of Europe, that was very
literal in some ways,
and that we were in Norway and Turkey, and
very figurative,
and that we were in Belarus and Romania, and
those are quite literally
the center of the continent,
but,
in their own ways sort of different edges.
Romania had just joined the European Union
and was sort of this new political frontier,
and Belarus is sort of this island,
at least politically isolated at the center
of the continent.
And so, again what is sort of difficult in
dealing with,
in conversations with editors and things is,
before we head out the door,
that's about as much as we have, and that's
intentional,
in the idea that we want to sort of keep, to
leave room, for sort of,
serendipity and defined things, and we'll
try to go into a place, so I'll say "Yeah,
we're off to Belarus what's the story there?'
It's this fairly isolated country
right at the center of the continent,
that has,
you know, Lukashenko who's said to be the
last dictator of Europe,
and what are you going to write about,
and we say 'Well we don't really know.'
And that's true. So we sort of work from
that idea once we get to a place.
And when I say we, I'm often traveling with
a photographer.
And so...
Yeah, again, that's it. So..
And also, just to add I guess, I do, do
obviously stories that are closer
to what you might find in the travel
section. And,
typically. And so those
are obviously,
can be much more focused, following the Tour
De France for example,
for a week, or whatever. And
there too, the story is a little more defined
then some of the cultural stuff.
- Well that brings me to the next question I
was going to ask,
and this'll be my last one for a while and
then I'll throw it out,
to the audience. But,
in large part what you do is very different,
than traditional travel journalism.
Certainly most newspaper travel writing.
And, most of that is about tourism. Where
do you go, what do you when you get there,
how much does it cost, how do you
get around, those kind of things.
But you write about places that few of your
readers will ever visit,
and that perhaps, even fewer would really
want to experience,
in some of the instances. For instance your
story, In A Day in Lofo,
A Day in Leifo. So my question is, why do
you take this very different approach
to travel writing? What do you hope will
come of it?
- Yeah, as one of my friends said:

'You go there so we don't have to.'
And I guess that is in some cases true. I
think part of... There's 2 reasons,
one is perhaps my own background, being a
news reporter I was more drawn to,
sort of how things work, sort of the reality
of life and places, and so,
the travel writing post 7 years ago, came
along more or less accidentally,
in that I was visiting the Globe, and met a
young editor who had just become
the travel editor, and he said 'I'm
looking for a travel writer', and,
I said 'Well you know, I don't really want
to do the typical...
I mean I could do some of the typical stuff,
but I don't want to write about
just the three best beaches'. But if we could
use it as kind of a cultural,
reporting position, and I had just come back
from a few years in Europe,
News reporting, and he was open to that.
And, so,
it sort of evolved from there. And I think
my argument in that position,
has been that the travel journalism industry
is pretty thriving,
and you know you can pick up any glossy
magazine in a newsstand,
or a lot of newspaper travel sections, and
there's a pretty steady diet,
of stuff that'll tell you where to go, and
how you can get there.
And I felt like if the Globe was going to
have one position on staff,
that was dedicated to this, it should be
closer to the whole other side
of the genre of travel writing, which is
sort of this history of travel literature,
or trying to get at what it is like,
to be in a place.
And so that's done that. Sometimes it works.
There was one editor that commented
that after the Ethiopia story that ran on an
Easter Sunday that they said:
'That might have pushed the envelope
a little bit.'
So it's always a process to figure it out.
- Well you just answered the following
question I was going to throw in,
Which is, how do you convince your editor to
let you do what you do?
Ok, let me throw it open to the audience for
questions.
If you got one for Tom, please line
up here at the microphone.
Just a couple of ground rules, please keep
your questions brief as possible,
and please let everyone who want's to ask a
question do so, before coming back up
for a second question. Also remember that
this is being recorded for broadcast,
so please be sure to speak clearly and right
into the microphone.
Questions? I've got plenty more, but...
Yes.
- My question comes with a lot of respect for
what you write,
so I'm trying to be in anyway
negative. But do you have any...
Are there ever ethical problems with the
people you relate to,
because you tell such personal stories, the
one you just described tonight for example,
that ones I read. They're so personal.
And yet, they're not...
Maybe they are, maybe they do read it, you
know, if you write for The Globe,
and your writing in Dorchester for example,
you know the person
you will come out, and if I didn't like it,
I would call you. You know?
I'd say 'You didn't do it right.'
But,
your distances so far to the people you're
in relationships with
you have established this obvious recur
to open up these kind of things
for those. They're not around to complain.
If it doesn't come off right.
So, I guess I'm trying to understand the
ethical...
Is there ever a time when, for example,
you've think you've gone too far?
Something that is very important to tell,
but if you told it,
it would reveal a private moment, or a
desperate moment, or something,
that would, you know, kind of be
counterproductive?
- Yeah, no, thank you.
Absolutely, I mean that is,
perhaps it's because these people are often
so far away,
that I feel, even... Maybe not more of an
obligation as a journalist,
because when I use doing local news you feel
an incredible obligation to get it right

there too. But, I mean just as a practical
matter a few things,
I mean we always try to.. And it's amazing
to me how welcoming people are,
and we arrive from, you know, somehow in
their life and say,
I say, you know 'I'm a journalist.. I'm a
writer and this photographer and we're here,
and we want to sort of see life in your part
of the world and talk to you about your life'
I mean in so many words, we sort of have this
conversation as we get to know each other
and it's always amazing to me how people
just open up.
I mean, I think if I were raking leaves in my
backyard,
and a Chinese journalist and photographer
approached and said:
'You know, we're in the United States writing
about your country,
and you're raking leaves and it's a
beautiful fall day in New England,
hey this is what you guys do... And can I
spend sometime with you,
and learn about your life?'
I mean 9 times out of 10 I would probably
have some excuse as to why,
you know 'Hey, I can help you find somebody
else raking leaves,
but I'm not available right now.'
And yet we almost never come against that.
And so, I think,
that generosity of these people, I think,
to sort of open up,
is, you know, definitely brings a respect
for that.
But second of all I think, you know, in
writing,
on one hand these stories are incredibly
intimate.
And certainly Zenida, with her story of her
husband, looking for her husband in a way.
But in a way, I think these are the stories
that in some ways, and often times
I'll have this conversation with them,
they would want to be told.
You know, at the end I would say..
At one point, Zenida,
I remember... Again there was a translator
there,
and she looked up and she said:
'Why do you want to know so much about this?'
Because she had just started to tell the
story,
to the translator, almost as in a
side, and he started to tell me,
and I said: 'Wow, this is pretty
interesting. You know, her husband,
he was a reindeer herder, and then he got
lost, and she walked for 2 months,
and there was sort of this language barrier
disbelief thing going on at first,
'but you mean, so she didn't walk all at once
for 2 months,
she came back to the village?'
No, no, apparently she got some supplies
and she lived off a land and she was
searching for him.
And you know she kind of became curious as
this was being unfolded,
and says: 'Why do you want to know so much?'
And I said: 'Well, this to me,
is, it's just a compelling story. It says
a lot about you and about your life out here'
And she in fact then became more eager to
tell me the story. You know,
so I think... You know, I'm sure that if
you sent all the stories I've written
to all the people I've written about,
they'll probably be some complaints,
but hopefully not many, and...
And also on a practical matter,
a lot of times they do see them. Because of
the internet we can,
or I work with translators in countries
that...
We were in a little valley in Northern
Romania, very remote place.
And spent a day with a family. Kind of a
crazy scene. They were butchering their pig
just before Christmas, and the whole village
was dropping by,
and there was lots of plum brandy involved
and, and sort of cooking,
and feasting. And afterwards... Yeah, the
guy said 'Please, please send us a copy
of the paper. So we sent it to the
translator and who sent it to the family.
And so, you know, it sort of works itself
out. But, you're right.
I think that, I think any writer or
journalist would tell you that,
they don't get very far without sort of the
generosity of people
sharing their stories, and being
vulnerable, to the journalist,
not doing a good job with it. You know, and
I think that... That's the challenge.

- That's perhaps a good lead into another
question I was going to ask you,
and again, anyone else who wants to come up
and ask a question.
Please do so.
So, sort of a flip side of that, is that,
that newspaper journalism,
generally, whether it's traditional
straight news or travel reporting like yours,
is by nature, episodic. Rather than
comprehensive, you have a fairly
brief engagement with a place, and
a community, set of issues.
And then you have your deadline, and then
you're on to the next thing.
And at the same time your job is to be able
to come back with a story,
that's both authentic and emblematic of
this place,
and the circumstance in which you're
reporting.
Something which you are clearly quite
good at.
So my question is how do you make sure that
you have a credible engagement,
with the place and people, in place, that
you are only visiting very briefly,
and may never return to.
And bring that home,
and feel that you've done justice to them,
and to the place and to your readers.
- It's the source of a lot of stress. Because
when you're in a place,
you know the clock is ticking. We will often
go someplace and will be there for a week,
or 10 days, or 5 days, and you know you have
a return ticket, and,
you know you have to sort of have a story.
And so I, again as a practical matter,
it means that they'll be a lot of long days
where sometimes things work out,
and you find yourself... I work with a
photographer, Essdras Suarez,
at the Globe, a lot, and
we have this sort of almost, a system,
where we'll arrive somewhere and almost kind
of get to know,
a town or a village for an evening, and hang
out, and not really be reporting.
He won't really be taking pictures, and
it's more. It'll be with a translator,
and we'll sort of get to know people. And
sort of, then we sit back and say
'Ok, what's sort of interesting here? How
does this fit into our story?'
If we were in Belarus for example,
you know, it had been sort of this story of
political and economic kind of tension,
and we were hanging out with young artists
in Minsk,
this kind of very hip scene of protest
artists, and then we headed up,
we headed towards Russia. And ended up in
little villages, with some elderly,
an elderly couple who were farming along
the border of Russia.
And sort of again, they had sort of felt...
This is coming back to the Chukotka story,
about shifts of history and communism to
capitalism and stuff.
And, you know, we'll arrive at night and we
met this couple,
just as we were driving down the road, we
stopped and started talking to them,
and they invited us to have a meal at their
house. We have a meal at their house,
and then they say 'Oh you have to sleep in
our farmhouse tonight.'
And so in that moment we're not really
reporting, literally,
but e say 'Ok, this is.. We're going to...
I just made a decision,'
this is going to be a big part of my
story. And so, for the next 24 hours,
it's pretty much, with the exception of
sleeping, writing everything down.
Talking to people, talking to the couple, and
even sort of a couple false exits,
where we think we're ready to go, and I'll
say 'You know what?
Actually I need to ask a few more questions,
to kind of make sure I understand something.'
Having said that, you know that's the one
pressure, is that you're leaving
and that you don't know when you're going to
have an accurate portrayal.
The other thing that is very liberating
about this kind of writing,
as opposed to news writing per say, is that
by moving in and out,
you're almost.. I don't want to sound too
like, abstract about it.
But it's almost like you're creating in the
story, you're own new reality.
You're sort of, this idea of an outsider
moving in, and observing a moment,
and connecting with people in a moment, and
then being gone.

You want to get the facts right, and I'm
not saying you sort twisting things
and turn them around, but the point being
that it's authentic,
in as much as it was. You know? And maybe it
wasn't, what happens sort of everyday,
but you try and get things like that. But,
I think that,
you know in the writing and how you
frame things,
that's what gives it it's authenticity, I
think. Is this movement in
and connecting with them and moving on.
But, there's a risk
that people don't connect to the stories.
And I know,
I love to hear afterwards people say:
'That didn't work for me' or whatnot,
because, you know, what I'm sort of trying
to do is sort of tighten the lens
very tightly, so that you get into these
lives. And in the process of doing that,
you're sort of shaving away context and
explanations and things,
to keep that lens tight. And sometimes that
becomes too much.
And so, it's you know... And when you've
been there,
and you're writing for people who haven't,
who didn't witness something,
it's always a balance. So...
- It strikes me that your stories are a lot
about people,
and... What is the link between people and
place? How do you.. You said,
you tighten the lens, you shave away the
context.
How do you make certain that the connection
between the people
and the lives that they're living, and the
lives that you're telling,
and the place that's creating those lives or
shaping those lives, is clear?
- Yeah that too.. That's another one of the
challenges. I think that...
I mean it depends. One of the things in the
excerpts of these stories that I read tonight
I focused it even more, into the sort of,
the very moment of conversation,
or the moment of a scene. And I think that...
One of the things I do try to do in a story
maybe.. I'm trying to think if this will
answer the question.
Is I try to sort of, at the one hand tighten
the lens, and also back up, and pan out.
So you're kind of changing the perceptive
in terms of,
in terms of context and again I'll talk about
stuff I read tonight, just because that makes
sense for the audience. But the.. Ehtiopia
for example. In between this encounter
with Nurhusein, was actually kind of a
looping narrative.
There were... There were the first couple of
paragraph,
where Bertikon says 'my son was inside'.
And it's clear we're going to go meet him,
and then I back out and there's a whole 1000
words about getting to this village,
and why are we in Ethiopia in the first
place,
and they're sort of dropping in history, sort
of dropping information about
the draught, and about relief efforts and
things. And then you're back in,
there's another section where you go closer
into the hut.
And then back out again, and we walk with
Ilina to get water,
and along the way there's sort of
information about the clinic
and the coffee ceremonies and the happy
things of life in the village.
So that, hopefully you know, in this kind
of tightening and backing out,
you're kind of creating a balance, that..
You know, on the one hand right.
Because on the one hand the individual
is meant to sort of embody
what life is like there, and on the other
hand it's one experience, and so,
you know I'm trying to sort of back out
enough to sort of talk about
things more generally. That you either see
that person as emblematic of the place,
or maybe as an exception of the place.
But more often than it hopefully is,
something that is sort of more common.
Of an experience.
- I just wondered what your educational
background is, because I don't remember
hearing that part... Maybe how you got your
job except that I know,
you explained a little bit about.
- I was a history major in college,
which.. You know, so again, was sort of not
unlike this job, in that, you know,
took the course in 20th century American

History, and in the Boxer Rebellion in China
and Middle Eastern History, sort of moving
around.
And then I worked for a couple years as a
consultant, in business,
which helped to pay off some loans, and also
to make me realize that's not what
I wanted to do. Although now, it wouldn't be
a bad thing to be doing. Maybe, 2 young kids.
But, in terms of money. But no... And so I
went back to graduate school,
out West, and got a masters degree in
Journalism, which...
You know journalism is one of those
interesting... It's a type of career
that you can do everything without it,
or, without an advance degree,
or you can go and get one. And I
went,
simply because at the age of 24 I hadn't
really written anything,
and was very unplugged, and it was a great
way to dive in.
And, so in introductory news writing
classes and magazines...
The school I went to was out in Berklee,
there was a magazine writing class that,
went to Guatemala. And so one of the first
international story I ever did
was about the repatriation of the refugees
from Southern Mexico into Guatemala.
In 19... That would have been 1993. And so,
you know, it was a great immersion
and a place to kind of learn, and then off to
newsrooms in Idaho and Seattle, and...
There's another question. Yeah.
- I was just wondering. Do many of your
stories deal with the news of today?
- Yeah. They try to. In fact, well it's
interesting. One of the things is,
you know obviously there's a whole news
operation that that's their job,
and so in some ways my editors prefer and I
prefer if I'm sort of away from that,
in the sense of, you know, really the big
stories of the day.
You know, they wouldn't send me into,
to journey across Iraq for example.
Or to cross Afghanistan. Nor would I
necessarily go.
But the... But in my own life, it's always
coming back. You know,
these stories. I was in Iceland in May, you
know pick up this paper
and there was a big collapse of the Iceland
economy basically.
And, just today on the way in I saw on a
news rack, US Today...
Is it Jones Town Massacre anniversary? I
don't know, 20?
I don't even know how many years, but I was
in Guyana, and we were in the capital, but,
you know, so there's these things that keep
coming back.
And often times it does happen in a way,
that Dove Tales,
when I'm writing the story, so that you can
see something.
I mean we were in Turkey.
In Eastern Turkey,
in, would it have been... Spring of last
year. Spring of 2007,
and sort of the whole point was to kind of
move out,
through the Kurdish region and end at the
Iraq border,
and it's, I mean this epic place. You've got
mountains across coming from the East,
and you go across the Tigris river and sort
of drifts away,
and then the land just shoots up into the
Kurdish region of Iraq.
And we're in this, I think it's called Salopi
we're in the last little town in Turkey,
and we're sitting with these two guys in a
cafe, and they were just telling stories like
'Yeah man, the military has been on a
movie.' Or 'The Turkish military,
they're moving in tanks, they're moving in
airplanes, it's going to get...' You know
the rumors are it's going to get hot. Sure
enough 2 months... And obviously,
there are foreign correspondences who are
getting this story in other ways.
But, I don't know if you remember but last
summer, there was a lot of,
Kurdish separatist attacks from Iraq, into
Turkey again.
A lot of Turkish bombing areas are into
Northern Iraq, that became a huge
diplomatic incident, and so there are ways
like that, that,
yeah, you kind of... In that way it's a very
small world.
In that, things overlap quickly, and
yes, so...
Hi David.
- I guess I want to observe

that you write about the impact of, you
know, enormous forces.
On peoples lives and Cultures. For example,
you write about the impact of famine
on Ethiopian families and you write about
the, I guess, the disappearance,
or the remote force of the Soviet Union on
the lives of these reindeer
herders in the Eastern Soviet... What are
the new frontiers for you,
what are the new places in the world that
you sort of are keen to investigate
in coming years, and are you beginning to
observe the impact, of say climate change
on ways of life, that you want to chronicle.
- Yeah.
Yes. 2 answers. The immediate frontier to me
is the United States.
Partly because if after a lot of
trips abroad,
I've done a lot.. I've done reporting in the
United States in this position,
and I reported travel stories from things as
sort of as fun as Bluegrass in North Carolina
to, sort of a story about wild horses in
Nevada in a valley. And kind of what is wild.
What the story kind of became about.
But in the short term I will probably
be doing a number of stories of the US for
the next..
Sort of the foreseeable future, and part
of that also, is just,
the economics of the newspaper business, is
always changing. Which is another frontier.
As far as... Sort of climate change...
Yeah, I would say one place that, that came
very much the forefront,
was in Norway. Last summer we were in an
area,
the Northern most town called Vardo, of
Europe, and they were scientist who were
studying permafrost. And there were kind of
like quasi Permafrost,
called pulses that are there, and I'm not
a scientist, but this is what they tell me.
And were the scientist from the Smithsonian
and from a Norwegian Institute,
and they were looking at basically, as that
warms, how fast does
carbon release into the atmosphere. And the
point being that as the real permafrostic
across all of Russia and everything. If
that were ever, to kind of accelerate,
you know, as the one scientist says:
'It accelerates faster than we think,
then all bets are off as far as the big
picture.'
So there are you know...
It's, you know, maybe an over statement,
but it's almost everywhere you go, you can
find certain elements of the story
playing out, and so, you know, I think I'll
just keep an eye.
- What is it about edges or frontiers or
isolation,
and distance that attracts you.
Why do you write so many of your stories
along those fault lines?
- I don't know. I mean I've done a number of
stories in big places too.
In big cities, in Mexico City or in
Shanghai,
and in New York. And you know, obviously
there's an incredible richness
writers... You know journalists can spend
their whole life on one block,
telling stories. But for me there is
something about the idea of the spareness.
That things are somehow more accessible, and
that as an outsider moving in,
maybe this gets back to the question of
authenticity, and place,
I feel that's it's more manageable
and more realstic,
maybe through this idea of movement, to
understand things, a little bit
and to connect to things. And there's a,
there's a,
I would say in a lot of these places there's
also just,
a pace to human livfe and to human
connection that is maybe more respective,
to engagement. So that I can.. That if I'm
coming, and a photographer,
I mean we did a story in Northern Sudan,
and we were traveling by 4x4,
with a translator, because you have to
because it's the desert, and,
but we would come to these little villages
along the Nile,
and it was literally sort of time stops. Date
trees,
and farmers out at twilight bringing in
crops and things,
and we would arrive in a village
and the translator would present himself,
and say his name is Mahmud and he was an
archeologist from Khartoum, so he was

an Arabic Sudanese, he would say,
you know, literally he would say:
'We're travelers, and we're weary, and it's growing late. And the sun is sinking, and we need a place to sleep tonight. And before he could even finish this sort of introduction of course,
'Well come, come' you know. They wouldn't ask 'Well who are the two guys in the car?' You know they always know.
'What's up with these, they got a car, what they can't afford a hotel?' You know, it was 'Come, come, into the village.' And then soon, from the different houses,
an older man would walk with a tray with tea and a pot, and some goats milk and tea.
And then another, and another
and this would continue for an hour.
Village after village, for you know 7 days in a row.
And that's just an example, I think of that's what like, is that sort of a facility of connections, that allows you to maybe get to the stuff of life.
To Zenida talking about her husband being lost in the Tundra, or to,
to these scenes, where you can feel as an outsider at least,
that you can get this connection a little more cleanly. And it can happen in big cities and it has happened for me,
but it's much more overwhelming. So..
- I'll pop up with another one.
- Ok.
- There was an earlier question about the esteem of your work,
of people being affected by huge remote forces. From climate change, to famine.
Of course there are also huge forces that are affecting people, perhaps more intimately in their lives,
the result of trade, of telecommunications advances, the internet, cable, satellite TV and the like...
- And you know, depending on how you approach the place, you can jump in a taxi, and be in a hotel, and be sitting and having a beer, and dinner,
and the people you're talking to maybe are speaking English, and not much
has changed. So obviously, the closer you are to that international orbit of communication and commerce,
I think, you lose it, and yet, if you get out
I think there's just much more awareness, either, specifically to a religion or to traditions, but also just to a pace of life,
is different, and I think maybe that is what is the biggest change, that I see anyway, going back and forth is...
The farther you get away, the more things slow down,
and just the more rooted they are. Yeah.
- Yes could you tell us a typical day for the Chukchi? The temperature they have to endure, the hours that they have the reindeer?
- I can tell you the typical day that I saw, for sure. And it is interesting
because what's happened now, is that there had been the traditional method pre Soviet times. It was much more pneumatic, and it was much more run by a family unit.
Then all that was centralized into villages and collectivized, and the government took control of the herds. So the Chukchi's essentially became employees
of the government and my understanding is, and this is before we were there obviously, that life became much more centralized, they moved into apartment buildings, in the city, in this case, of Canchelon.
After the collapse, they were sort of forced economically back out on to the Tundra,
and so in the case of this group we were with, essentially there were, I believe they were all members of the same extended family.
There might have been a few friends in,
but it was primarily.. You know there was a patriarch, and then Zenida, her husband had passed away but her son, was in this group and he was sort of the chief herder.
And,
it's a long day. They.. I mean again,
as the light comes back, it changes,
depending on the season.
But in April, it's frozen so they're moving them a lot. They had separated the 2
herds. The males were near the tents, and the females were up and over a ridge,
and you know the guys were out in the morning, they were practicing.
They were taking some and breaking them to pull sleds, so there was sort of a domestication thing going on.
And they were also feeding salt to some, to sort of tame them. Sort of the first stage of that process.
The reindeer that was butchered, it was

unclear, whether that was done because we had arrived, or because it was..
I mean they clearly do it, to get their food, but it was unclear, because we had arrived or because that was just what they were doing that day.
But essentially, you know they are out for.. the men were mostly with the herd, and the women were doing everything else around, as far as cooking,
and as you say, Zenida sewed her own tent, which was I mean I didn't do it justice it's an incredible amount of work. I mean, she's got this one needle, and a very strong thread, and these skins, you know, it's just the sewing, I mean her fingers, her bare fingers, and it was maybe about 20 degrees that day. And I think at night, when we were there it was around zero at night, and warmed up towards freezing, but in the day, it was sort of you could feel the end of winter coming on. Now, having said that... Well, in the tents, I'm sorry, in the tents there were effectively all the comforts of home: they had food and warmth, and one... We were actually in one tent.
Actually, this was... We often travel with translators, and one situation happened where the translator's off with the photographer, and I went in to another tent, because this woman was there cooking and she said: "oh you know," she signals to me, "come on in, come on in." She knew, the word had gotten around that there were only 12 people that were journalists and were here, so she said, 'you can..' you know, sort of signaling to watch me cook. So I was just sitting there, frankly sort of warming up and hanging out, because I can't speak to this women, and all of sudden this guy comes around, and turns out, I think he was maybe 85 or so, comes barreling around the side, in =to the door, he's got, covered in reindeer skins, and he's been out with the herd, and he just drops, and she puts food on a plate, and he just ate, and... Never have I seen anyone happier than that moment. And that basically kind of sums up the routine out there, you know? You're close to the land, you're working, burning the calories, you come in you eat there's not a lot of idle time. They do still return into the city though... Into the town of Canchelon.
That was sort of a discussion we had with some of them. Some were sort of saying: 'Yeah man, we're actually quite happy to sort of be back to the older ways' and wanting to be out on the Tundra. And there were sort of gossip among them about people that weren't there, who were in town, and were lazy, you know, they had gotten used to kind of living off the government, and now they weren't tough enough to be out. So there's sort of this mixture going on.
But it was definitely, definitely hard and yet some support in the sense that you could head into town if things got tough.
Yes.
- I have lots of questions, and I'll take advantage to ask another one, and this is kind of a process question. You're out with a photographer almost always, and with an interpreter when you need one, and you see a lot of things and you hear a lot of things and you smell a lot of things, and you are assaulted by unusual scenery and people and images. How do you turn all of that into a written piece? How do you divide the work up between the photographer with his images, and you with your words that are English words, that are not the words that you may have heard.
And, you mention, you know, the economics of newspapers are changing. How would you do what you do, in a multimedia kind of universe, and internet based universe?
- I'll talk about sort of the before and after the multimedia in a sense of, how we do what we do in a lot of the trips we're talking about tonight,
I like to say I typically work with a photographer named Essdras Suarez, I've worked with several others at the Globe. And the following sort of speaks to what I've done with Essdras, but it's true sort of for everybody. In that we have what I would call, kind of, like a complimentary but not necessarily connected relationship among reporting. And so when we come into, let's say the reindeer camp, we kind of communicate to each other, but we're pretty much doing our own thing. You know, he's sort of telling a visual story

And we know that this is going to be a scene in our journey across this part of Chikutka, and so, you know, for an hour or two, he's off shooting whatever makes a good picture, and it's almost never the same thing by the way. You know, when I'm talking to somebody, like getting the good word story, or the history or the facts, you know he clearly, and rightly so, is more interested in being...
There's an amazing photo.
The Crossing Divides is still on Boston.com you can Google it, but there's an amazing photo from this story, of a guy, a young herder pulling a reindeer across the Tundra, with a rope and he's trying to get him up to separate back. He kind of mingled over. I think It was a female or a male, but the wrong one, and they were trying to get it apart again, and it's just sort of like, the incredible light, and the angles, and I was nowhere near that. You know Essdras had sort of wandered off, and this is one of the most powerful images of that whole scene.
And so there is... And yet we'll say, by the time I was sitting down with Zenida, I sort of say to him:
'Hey, I'm going to spend a lot of time with this woman, she's going to be pretty central.'
So he then, you know will focus on that too.
So there's that collaboration.
As far as the writing goes,
I just write and write and write. Again, as many details as I can, as many images as I can, as many things. And it's amazing how much you don't use in the end.
Moving to the multimedia side of it quickly, I think that will change in it's techniques, and that now increasingly we're carrying audio recorders, carrying little flip video phones... Cameras, which you can.. I think it's a 140 bucks, you can get these video cameras that fit in your pocket.
And so as a writer I do that, photographers are carrying more video, but the fundamental approach I think is still very similar. And that we say... We sort of,
you know... I'm going to be telling my story in words and maybe collecting some sound.
The photographer, he or she is going to be telling their story in images and visual.
And so, the techniques are changing, but, the mission, I think, remains the same.
- Thanks for an opportunity to ask a second question. It's small audience, so I'll try to sneak in another one. I'm actually going to divert it to Peter, because I'm wondering, Peter you might say a word about your book, Sacred Sea focuses on the power of place.
And I just want to know what part of the processes as Tom is describing it, resonates with you most, and, or is there a bit of attention there.
Do you have a... How would you contrast your own documentary style of writing about places with Toms approach?
- I think there's tremendous amount of overlap and similarity, although my project turned into something that was considerably more in depth as well.
But certainly going into a place, with which I was fundamentally unfamiliar first time visitor, and trying to get my bearings and trying quickly to evaluate what's important. What should I follow up, what should I look into more, what can I ignore? And really sort of find touchstones, I think, was an incredible challenge, and it was really the first time I'd done anything like this.
And actually I wasn't there, primarily as a journalist. I went primarily as a dropout.
I had quit my job and was taking off for 6 months to travel around the world, but I'm a journalist, through and through, and I couldn't leave my recording equipment at home and not try to get something, and just see what might come of it.
But I got very lucky, and I think that probably I had a few experiences there that are very similar to what Tom probably has, every time he goes out, which are these kind of magic moments.
Where partly through, happenstance and accident, partly through some kind of intuition and some kind of good planning although you don't necessarily know that you're doing that, you find yourself in a place, and with some people, and it just, hits you. You know this is

something powerful. This is something
that's more than you expect to get, more
than...
For myself, again, I was there as a civilian
not a professional.
But there were several moments In
which I knew that I had something that
was bigger than my experience and that
other people were going to want to hear.
And I was going to have to try to make
sense of, and I think that that happened,
you know, for everybody who does this kind
of thing. You know, of course then,
Tom has the luxury of a lot of space
in The Globe, 3,500 words sometimes,
used to, right.
I had to come back and write a book of a
110,000 words, and I had to go very deep
with a lot of research that I mostly
had to do after the fact,
to fill in the huge blanks spots.
Because the question of authenticity,
is fundamental as Tom said.
To doing something that's credible to
your audience, and that doesn't undermine
your reputation as a journalist.
And when you go into these places,
where you're a stranger,
you're really susceptible to all kinds of
land mines, So...
- I would just... I agree with Peter, and I
would just add, the way you were talking
about these moments, It sort of,
come to think of it, is manufacturing
serendipity where you know you sort of
try and put yourself. I was watching ESPN
a long time ago, and Bobby Knight the
basketball coach,
and someone said: 'Coach are you guys
in position to make the playoffs?'
to win the championship when I was at
college, and he said 'I think we're in
position to be in position.' And the idea
being, that you sort of are out there
moving around, and often times,
you would have hoped that moment
would have come, and it has.
And just one quick anecdote.
I was in St. Petersburg, Russia, and I was
supposed to meet this young politician,
who was sort of seeing...
He had been with, a famous politician
when she was assassinated. And he
was..
Someone had told me that he would take
these walks in St. Petersburg at night on
his way home from the office.
And that he's sort of the idealistic young
guy looking for corruption after dark.
You know he sort of works in the precinct
or whatever, and he would see
why are there people taking stuff out of
that building. You know.
Why is there demolition going there,
there's no permits, and this kind of stuff.
So I'd arranged to join him, I thought this
would be an interesting way to see
St, Petersburg.
And as we're sitting there,
this guy comes in, with a beard and a
black hat on, and a sport coat.
And he kind of barges in this moment
we're about to leave, he says...
And the translator is telling us 'Oh, he's
coming with us,' and I say 'Oh my gosh,
this guy is going to bluster in, and take up
the young politicians time.
And we step outside and he says:
'I want you to look East, because now
we're going to India, because that's
where Hitler wanted to go!' And he starts
spinning these tails and it turns out he's
this philosopher historian, who knew
everything about
St. Petersburg. And he marches me
through the night for five hours,
until 5 in the morning, finally to this
monument of Dostoevsky, and he said:
'What did Dostoevsky learn here?'
You know, and he was... and what did
teach us,
and he was the whole story in the end.
And it was.. It started with this moment
of intense frustration near midnight,
when I thought
'Why is this guy', you know,
'barging in to this carefully plotted scene'
Anyway...
- And you knew...
- To go with it.
- To go with it
There's a wonderful quote that I actually
use in my book addressing this very question.
Comes back to a sports metaphor.
It's from Branch Ricky, who's the general
manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers.
He says 'Luck is the residue of design.'
And that's really a lesson I learned,

in my travels, that turned into this book.
If I hadn't before, it's unforgettable now.
- Yes. As an American writer, in different countries, what do the people,
ask you about America?
- It's interesting. I mean just as I'm always overwhelmed by how generous they are,
I'm often overwhelmed,
by how uncurious they are in return.
And I don't know... Not to say they're not curious about life, they're incredibly curious about their own life.
Maybe it's because part of the conversation transaction is,
I'm the journalist and I'm asking them about their life and so..
But when it does sort of break down more, and we're just sitting and talking,
and getting more personal,
there's 2 things. There's sort of... You find some of the political level of 'Why, what's going in America, why is America doing what it's doing?'
But incredibly little of that. It's often much more, connected to like 'So what it's like for your family?', 'Tell me what your house is like.' You know, if I was somewhere in a village, they'd say
'You're kids,
so do your kids... Where do they go to school?' Or 'What's ... ' These kinds of questions.
This one... Again we were in Sudan. This kind of this epic moment.
We're on the banks of the Nile, waiting for a faerie, and these 3 women were there, and one was holding a baby.
And the photographer of course just is like... It's just an incredible light,
and he's shooting these pictures and...
The translator hadn't really told the women what was going on,
and so they kind of started laughing.
And we all introduced ourselves, and I said:
'So who.. So how old is your baby?'
She says 'This isn't my baby. This is my neighbors baby. I just brought it down to get a little fresh air' in this little calm,
you know, 4 month old.
And so we got to this conversation,
'cause I said 'Gosh, I wish my neighbor would just come take my 10 month old for a walk,
take him down to the river for an hour.
Get some air, and I can pass out.
And so, You know.. Which is rich of me to say when I'm in Sudan, and my wife is at home trying to keep the baby going.
So, the... But the point being that we often come down to conversations just about the little things. You know, 'how does your life work? How much money do you make?' You know.
Or you know. And then, 'How much money does a doctor make in America?'
And when you say it of course, it's a staggering sum, and then you start to say how much money an apartment costs.
And how much a car costs.
And you know. So we get into a lot of stuff, depending on where you are too,
the number one question is:
'How do I get a visa?' And 'Can you help me get a visa?' So, there's a lot of,
that. Which, you know...
I can't really help with that.
- Unless there's any others from the audience, I'll ask one last moderators question,
and then I guess maybe there's one last short reading you'd like to do.
Actually a little bit related to the previous question.
And that is that, I imagine that moving back and forth between,
these often far away and more traditional communities on the one hand,
and your home in a modern American metropolis on the other hand,
that you reflect occasionally on the differences between these places,
and your own place here in the US.
And in New England.
So I wonder if you were to take a week, or a month, and just stay put.
And you travel maybe with your neighbors, to their jobs. Or to a school, or a sports event, or even have a meal with folks.
And then write about that, what do you think you'd write?
What do you think would be some of the reflection on place of a traveler,
staying at home?
- That would be a tough assignment.
Wow, that's kind of a mind bender.
I think what I would find, and that has

been one of the pleasant circumstances of these last years, is that while this has been going on, I've been living in a little house,
near the center of Ipswich, with my wife and 2 kids. And so I come home,
and so we have this sort of very,
settled as much as you kind of can,
near a major metropolitan area of a town life. You know, you can walk 2 blocks to get a coffee at the cafe, and I can bump into people I know. And, or more likely people who know my kids, because that's just the way it works I guess.
You know, So I can get feelings of that and I feel like I am at one sort of part of a community.
And so I think I would be drawn, if I were to...If someone.. If I were to spend
a week writing something, I don't know the specifics, but I'd be drawn to ways,
in which....
I did a story in Maine, on the Big Black River which flows into the St. John,
and, one of the guides, Dawn Merchant,
was talking about, he said.. He was maybe in his late 50s, and he said:
'You know, when I was growing up in Maine,' He grew up in central Maine, in a farming town. He said, 'You know kids were rooted, and there was like purpose. You would get up. and they had chores to do, and there was sort of... Everything kind of... Now every thing's so disconnected.'
And I think, you know, there were some kids,
in the town or something that were having some problems and he kept saying:
'There just isn't that connection anymore.'
Because they're not connected to the land, and the farm and life, and sort of how we survive basically. You know, and,
how you.. In any one day.
And so maybe I would try to explore that.
To go in, to hang out with people and their lives, and look at these points of connection and disconnection between place, so it comes back to, you know...
How is there living
connected in Ipswich? That might be easy, I can hang out with some clammers, you know,
and take off into the flats.
But then by the same token, the
next day maybe jump on a train with somebody into North Station.
You know, going to the financial district.
And so, yeah, that's tough. But there's no shortage of material.
Obviously. No shortage of material there.
I will close with,
one brief reading, and I was telling Peter the best thing about this reading is that it ends with a paragraph written
by John Steinbeck, which is always a good way to go.
And when I started at the Globe,
this editor Joe Yonen, who hired me,
I came in, in January 2002, and the first thing.. I had just come back from Europe.
And I had never really done any travel writing. I had done sort of,
feature narrative writing. I guess. The kind of the stuff we've been talking about.
But never literally travel writing.
And so I began with an essay, about sort of traveling to understand, which at the time was sort of this theme.
I thought, 'Ok, what am I going to try and do for readers? I'm going to try to go into places to help them understand the world.'
I mean, if that's a general goal.
Whether it works or not.
And Joe said 'That's great, work on the essay' and meantime I needed to go do a story, and it's the 100th anniversary of Steinbecks birth. I think he was born in 1902, so he would have been turning 100. And he said 'You know there's a museum in Salinas, California and there's some things going on, and can you go out and write about that?' And so I did, I met with a professor, who's sort of one of the authorities on Steinbeck, in the area, in central California. Susan Schilen,
and I went to the museum,
but then I ended up kind of kicking around, the central valley, and I read a few of his books, I read Grapes or Wrath, I reread East of Eden and some others.
I went to a place in the mountains to the South where he had set some of his early books, and I went, and I thought
'Well Steinbeck would probably hang out today, with farm workers.'

So I went and met with some farm worker housing, advocates
And this one guy, Sabino Lopez, and he said... We didn't talk about Steinbeck at all, and he took me to see some bad farm worker housing, and then some improved farmer working housing.
And to introduce me to some farm worker families, they were migrant families.
That would move around with the crops.
And on the way back, he never talked about... And on the way back, he just turnsand we were driving along this road, and,
he says: 'The thing I liked about Steinbeck, is he wrote about the things nobody wanted to talk about.'
And so it turns out, Sabino had also this rich.. We then went on and talked about Steinbeck. And the story ends, after that quote, with these few paragraphs, about Steinbeck, so.. Who I think, was obviously very influenced, by growing up where he did, and then writing about it.
"During his last visit to the Salinas Valley, in 1960, as he wandered America with Charley the poodle, Steinbeck turned again to the land. He drove the road that climbs past the cattle grazing the soft hillsides, up along the dry ridges and into the pines of Fremont Peak. There, he mounted the 'last spiky rocks to the top,' and surveyed the valley. When he wrote about this moment in Travels with Charley, Steinbeck did not mention the hot Dust Bowl days or the simmering sagas in the town of Sarinas below. He did not mention the criticism or the praise.
Instead, he gently told Charley about his mother handling a gun, about his father branding a tree, in what was once, before he wrote about it, before it caught up with the outside world, its own place. Then, Steinbeck wrote, he took a last look:"
And this is a quote from his book:
"I printed it once more on my eyes, south, west, and north, and then we hurried away from the permanent and changeless past where my mother is always shooting a wildcat and my father is always burning his name with his love."
And that is the end
Thank you.