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Scattered Clouds

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Rex Smith: Public scrutiny a biblical fight

November 21, 2011 at 6:00 am by [Rex Smith](#)

Not that I would know this from personal experience, mind you, but it is said that as you get older, the more you need brighter light illuminating what you wish to see. Even the Bible says so: "And it came to pass that Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim. ..." (Genesis 27:1).

Much of the Bible is metaphor, of course, so I consider Isaac's visual infirmity — he couldn't distinguish between his sons Jacob and Esau, prompting one to deceive him in the dark — as something akin to our inability in a mature society to view all that's essential to understanding what's going on. A lot that ought to be transpiring in bright view of the public is instead shrouded in darkness.

It's no surprise that a newspaper editor might complain about government's tendency to operate in a cloud. What's frustrating is that the lights are shut off at all levels — not just involving, say, the congressional supercommittee charged with solving the nation's budget impasse, but also the day-to-day operations of state and local governments.

Take, for example, the story in this newspaper a couple of weeks ago about the five-year prison sentence given to a Capital District Psychiatric Center patient for punching a nurse, leaving her brain-injured. The Public Employees Federation, which represents nurses, claims this is part of a rising wave of violence against medical personnel in state facilities, but when our reporter Cathleen Crowley tried to get more insight into the issue, here's what happened, according to the published account:

"A woman who answered the telephone in CDPC Executive Director Lewis Campbell's office said Campbell was at lunch and refused to take a message from a reporter. She directed the reporter to the state Office of Mental Health, which oversees the center. The OMH commissioner's office directed the reporter to the spokeswoman for the department, who does not take phone calls but only accepts email inquiries. The spokeswoman said, by email, the department could not comment because of patient confidentiality."

Think somebody is dodging responsibility there?

Most infuriating is the last sentence — the claim of "patient confidentiality," which we encounter all the time when we're really asking, as in this case, about matters of public policy.

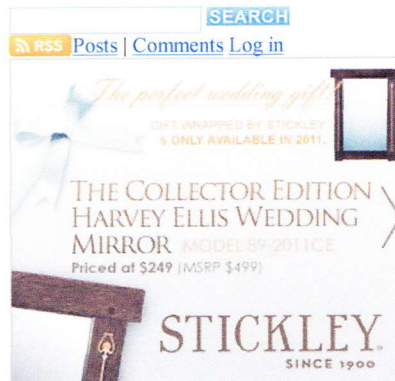
It's like the phrase "personnel matters," which officials cite as an excuse to clam up about anything involving a public employee. Mostly, it's a way for public officials to duck and weave rather than answer to taxpayers about matters that are every bit our right to know about.

The epidemic of obstruction in public access exists at all levels of public life, all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court, which still refuses to allow its sessions to be televised. It's a disservice to citizens.

Governments are complex ecosystems. Barriers thrown up to conceal their operations inhibit the kind of understanding that might contribute to better citizenship. This culture of concealment breeds cynicism.

It seems to have seeped into everyday governing from the political environment. This is hardly surprising. Much of campaigning for any major office nowadays is carefully scripted, with candidates' images shaped by advertisements and consultant-driven storylines.

On the presidential campaign trail lately, journalists whose reports have drawn those images into question have been targeted by campaigns, or even attacked individually by candidates, as supposedly biased.



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Reporters make great targets in front of a partisan crowd.

But an unscripted campaign moment can illuminate a candidate better than a dozen attempts to deconstruct ads created in dark editing booths.

Take, for example, the halting response of Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain several days ago to a Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel editorial board member's question about Libya.

Go online and check it out. It gives the viewer a clear sense of the extent of Cain's grasp of foreign affairs, beginning with his painful inability to distinguish Libya from other countries. "Got all this stuff twirling around in my head," he offers finally, with an apologetic smile.

An empathetic person watching the video could understand why candidates prefer to stick to scripted settings. And you realize that a candidate who has been burned by exposure to the light of public scrutiny will become, once elected, a secretive officeholder, and why that us-versus-them mentality toward the public's demand for information becomes part of the fabric of government.

It's part of the journalist's job to hold the spotlight for public scrutiny on corners that might not otherwise be illuminated. Since deception in the dark is as old as poor Isaac, though, it's a task that's obviously not going to disappear or, sadly, get any easier.

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