

Her letter  
Dear [unclear]  
(Ruth)

**Fred Friendly First Amendment Award – June 14, 2011  
Metropolitan Club, NYC**

Thank you so very much for this great honor. When Ruth first called me to tell me about this award, I was taken aback... I can only see Fred Friendly as I first met him – a figure so much larger than life, in fact, and in my memory – that the idea of accepting an award in his name seems quite implausible... I remember thinking then, just as I do now – what's a kid from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, doing in a place like this?

Well, I remember that kid when he first came to this country, in 1964, on an international scholarship, American Field Service, AFS. I was fortunate to live with a family for a year and attend high school in Newport Beach, California. (That was a tough assignment...!)

My first week in this big California high school was exhilarating and terrifying. No more so than when I was asked to join the AP English class. They had invited me because they were reading Alan Paton's "Cry, the Beloved Country". I'll never forget their faces when I had to admit to them that I had never read it.

That was because I hadn't been allowed to read it. It was a banned book in South Africa. It was a crime not just to read it, but to even possess it.

So I read it in California, sitting in the patio of my host family's home in Newport Beach... There I learned about the depths of the injustice, the cruelty, the inhumanity, of the laws in my home country... I thought I knew about them, but I had been shielded, in the way one is as a child, and by the structures, the separateness – that's what *apartheid* means – of that society.

And then I had to explain it, to my classmates. I had to do some research, read, ask questions, borrow encyclopedias, find a college textbook – and learn about how *apartheid* had come into practice. I learned my own history in another country, because I had not been allowed to hear it before...

I don't know how well I did, trying to explain not just the terrible injustices, but also trying to get inside the mindset, the attitudes, the awful logic of that cruel system, and the people who had turned

racial prejudice into a code of laws. What made them do it? And what would it take to change it?

I think, in that moment, I became a journalist. I didn't know it then, but it would be that impulse, that desire to understand, to get inside the story, to see the way the world works, and to explain it to others, that drives what I do today.

It was also my first, great lesson in American democracy, about what my high school civics class soon taught me was something called the First Amendment. More than anything else, I was amazed that I could even have that conversation, that I could talk about these ideas without fear.

After all, I lived in a country where there was no freedom of expression and, by the way, no television. South Africa didn't allow television... The government had decided that it was too dangerous, too full of ideas, too subversive... And so they kept it away from the people, until 1976, years after I left the country with my first film under my arm...

That experience in California is in many, many ways the reason that years later that I would leave South Africa, and then London, and come back and make my life here. So this is very precious. This award, in the name of a man who so passionately believed in that right.

Which brings me to meeting Fred Friendly... I had ended up back on the beach in California, and in 1976 I was tracked down by Peter McGhee, then the head of public affairs programming at WGBH, because of a couple of films I'd made. To cut a long story short, Peter was developing a new international documentary series, and somehow thought that this young, itinerant filmmaker/journalist might be worth talking to. He invited me to come to Boston to interview for a job as executive producer...

I arrived, I'm alarmed to say, in a black leather jacket with shoulder-length hair. I don't know what they made of me at WGBH. I was a bit dubious about the job – I didn't think I'd be very good at being an

executive producer – and really just wanted to make films, but I was passionate about the idea of combining journalism and filmmaking, kept talking, and then, suddenly it was announced that I should fly to New York the next morning...

There, I met Peter, Michael Rice, the then-General Manager of WGBH, and Roger Fisher, the Harvard Law Professor, over breakfast at the Algonquin Hotel... *What was a kid from Port Elizabeth doing here?* That's when Michael told me that, improbably, they had decided to offer me the job. More than that, we were about to go over to the Ford Foundation, to ask them for funding for the series!

So there I was, in my black leather jacket, going up beside that atrium at Ford, and into a conference room, with a table the size of a football field... I was terrified. We waited, and then, suddenly, the door opened and in came Fred Friendly... All of him.

Now, after all that, I should be able to tell you about the great conversation we had. I don't remember a word... If I'd been terrified before, I was now shell-shocked. I do have a memory of an oral exam to beat all oral exams. *What did Fred want to know?* What kind of a journalist was I? What kind of a series did I want to lead? What stories did I want to tell? Who are you anyway, and what do *you* know?

Somehow, I got through it. I wish I knew what he heard and what he saw in me, in my black leather jacket – this kid from Port Elizabeth, 31 years old – just as I wondered what had made Peter McGhee bring me from that beach in California...

All I do know is that Fred Friendly recommended that the Ford Foundation invest in this new international documentary series, called "World", and in me as its young executive producer... And after 5 years and 60 films, that series would mature, add more programs, and in 1983, become FRONTLINE...

(Let me just say, it would be out of character of course, for Fred to not remind me of that history – and anyone else who wanted to hear – whenever I saw him after that...)

But as I think about it, I realize that what Fred, and of course Peter, who became my mentor and friend, did was extraordinary: They trusted in their own judgments, and took a chance... And of course what they did is precisely the spirit of the enterprise they both championed – Public Broadcasting... If there's any place where you should take risks, where you should invest in possibilities, it should be in what we now call public media.

The place I came to work at in 1977 – WGBH – was a place which celebrated ideas. It had an extraordinary culture of enquiry – which valued debate in programs like "The Advocates" and took on tough subjects like "Vietnam: A Television History".

There was respect for a wide range of opinion, but it was also a place that respected conclusions, honestly come by. Journalism has an obligation to fairness, but when it uncovers uncomfortable truths, it has an obligation to publish without fear or favor.

In 1980, I wrote and produced a program for *World* called "Death of a Princess" which made very serious charges against a senior member of the Saudi royal family – in effect, it accused the King's elder brother of murder. It caused an uproar at the time, and lead to the breaking of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Great Britain.

There was a serious threat of similar action here in the United States. It was a time of oil shortages, and the State Department and members of Congress leaned very heavily on PBS to cancel the broadcast. At WGBH, my management was faced with their own pressures. The major underwriter for Masterpiece Theater was Mobil Oil, which took out ads in the New York Times protesting the program.



Then, I remember being called in to a meeting with Peter and Henry Becton, the station's president. Henry asked me if I was confident about the journalism in the program. I said I was, and that we could stand behind it.

Then he said, that in case the political pressures get too tough on PBS, we have rented space on the transponder of the satellite, and if necessary, we'll broadcast it to the country from Boston...

I've never been prouder of the place I worked for.

As it turned out, PBS stood behind the film, the sky didn't fall, and as Peter McGhee said later, "It put a chock behind the wheel of public television." It proved that the system could withstand great political pressure, and in many ways, laid the ground for FRONTLINE.

I remember Fred telling me how proud he was of that broadcast and those decisions. After all, he was the man who sat in front of a Senate subcommittee in 1967, and told the Senators:

*"Of one thing we can be certain: public television will rock the boat. There will be — there should be — times when every man in politics — including you — will wish that it had never been created. But public television should not have to stand the test of political popularity at any point in time. Its most precious right will be the right to rock the boat."*

That right, I'm sad to say, is under serious threat. Fred would not be happy about what's happening to public broadcasting. Leading up to that testimony he had argued that the new non-commercial system had to be insulated from financial pressures, especially from Congress. In fact, he'd proposed revenues from the new satellite distribution system as one way to finance the public broadcasters. If you wanted robust journalism, then you couldn't depend on something like the present appropriation process, where every two years or so, Congress gets to weigh in on public broadcasting's money.

There have always been politicians determined to silence the system, from Nixon to Gingrich, but the most recent round of attacks, especially on NPR, are particularly troubling. Fred would be fuming, and speaking out. There is a deeply chilling effect on the system, and on strong journalism, and it springs from the insecurity of funding.

You know the reasons – it takes so many complicated transactions with funders, and underwriters, memberships and philanthropies, let alone the Byzantine contractual demands of dealing with any federal dollars, to raise money, that the fact the system survives at all is astonishing...

Now hard times on the Hill and in the economy are putting extraordinary pressures on stations, on PBS and NPR, and on the producers who want to do good work, and the journalists who want and need the broadcast time.

The problem is that with all the concentration on fundraising, and without any secure and sustained funding sources, stations are scrambling. Journalism is far from their minds. And “rocking the boat” as Fred expected, is the last thing they want.

And the system’s leadership has changed over the years. Where once stations were lead by broadcasters and educators who believed deeply in the mission of public broadcasting, now as money gets tighter a new generation of leaders comes in, brought in by worried board members who almost inevitably turn to the person in charge of fundraising to help manage the station.

With that comes programming choices that are safer, and the pursuit of audience for the sake of audience, and membership for the dollars. Why do we find it necessary to attract members with pledge programming that has nothing to do with our core programs?

This is our deepest embarrassment, especially for public television. I have heard the arguments, and I understand the imperatives for local stations, but to have created such a schizophrenic programming strategy, is not just misguided, but will ultimately erode our identity and our mission...

After all, we were supposed to be an alternative to the rest of broadcasting. One of the reasons Fred Friendly resigned from CBS in

1966 was because he saw the beginnings of the network retreat from journalism... It's why he believed in public broadcasting's mission, and in our non-commercial identity, independent of the pressures of ratings and advertising dollars...

Now, all the talk in public television is of eyeballs and revenue streams and monetization...

It started on our websites, slipping around the FCC provisions which don't govern the internet, with what are euphemistically called "sponsorships", but which are essentially commercials all over public broadcasting websites, local and national, radio and television.

I believe we are threatening our special status as non-commercial media. I'm told that in surveys the public doesn't notice the ads online, and is not offended. I'm not surprised -- we all swim in a sea of commercialism -- but that's precisely why we need to keep ourselves clean of it.

Because one day, I'm afraid, when most of our work is going to be experienced on the web, we will wake up and the public will say we're no different from the rest of them. Why should we give you our membership money? And why should the government give you our tax dollars?

I don't need to wonder what Fred would think about this enterprise he called "broadcasting's last best chance". I do think he would have a few strong opinions and demand that we think hard and ambitiously, and do something about it.

He would argue against chasing the cable channels and their sort of programming. He would say we need to set high standards, and do what others aren't doing. He might say, let's reinvent ourselves, and let's do it around the mission of journalism.

Public radio has already shown how successful that strategy can be; television now has to step up and do a lot more. Together -- and that's a challenge for both institutions, radio and television, to work more collaboratively -- they could become formidable.

It's also the best hope for the local stations.... Join forces with the new local online journalism startups. What better way to embrace journalism but to bring it inside? Offer space in our buildings -- all those bricks and mortar built over years of capital campaigns -- and start recruiting a new media generation, and begin practicing journalism on air and online.

Some stations are doing that, and all it needs is a couple of dozen more, in regions around the country, for public broadcasters to begin a public media transformation. Some of those stations are now being rewarded with funding, encouraged by CPB and the public financing system to do just that -- live up to their public interest obligations... Otherwise, stations will, and should, become irrelevant.

Which comes to the challenge on the national level: What we need most in public television -- to match our colleagues in radio -- is great journalism. Much more of it.

So this is what I'd suggest: put together a Public Journalism Fund -- foundations, individuals, major donors, public money... And we go out and simply get together the best journalists we can hire. And make sure to bring in with them a new generation of young reporters who are used to the daily demands, the drumbeat of reporting in the digital world.

If we do this smartly, we will get a lot of attention. Public broadcasting will immediately become more relevant to the national conversation, attract some of the best talents in journalism, and we capture a key piece of the journalism landscape.

This is not one more collection of bloggers, but an editorial effort that will concentrate on enterprise reporting. That's going to be the most valuable commodity around in a universe of instant news and disposable punditry. As we join forces with other entities like the emerging non-profit investigative newsrooms, you have the sort of gravitational weight that will rearrange the universe of public media.

Compared to any other New Media startup, this has an enormous asset -- that network of local stations and community connections and their new journalistic calling.



And here's where we are different from most new media/journalism startups -- this has a business plan that works. It's been proven: membership. People give to public broadcasting in ways that few other institutions can match.

According to the Roper poll, public broadcasting is far and away the most trusted entity in the country. It's also a civic trust. That's because the government in effect says it is, and puts tax dollars down to prove it. There's an argument that that's why we as citizens in turn give to it in such significant amounts. That's a contract unique to public broadcasting.

So that's what distinguishes this business plan -- if you add in revenues from philanthropy, and both private and public money, you have a membership-driven, publicly supported, non-profit model for enterprise journalism.

And back to that issue of trust: we have a record of fairness. At a time when so many media enterprises, from cable news to websites, are becoming more partisan, there has to be some place for the honest broker. That's our real birthright as public interest broadcasters and journalists. It's becoming an old-fashioned idea, but I deeply believe it will become increasingly valuable. And it's the people who value fairness and honesty who will support it financially and politically.

But one more thing—we have to be prepared to Rock the Boat. Good old fashioned accountability reporting. Both sides of the aisle. It's our best guarantee of continuing support. Counter-intuitively, I believe, the more we rock, the less they will be able to cut us.

Fred Friendly would agree And this Big Idea is the kind of challenge he would love to rise to.

But of course without that secure source of public funding he wanted, this reinvention will still require a high order of political will within the system, the setting aside of egos, and unprecedented partnerships.

But it is essential, for our survival, and the important idea that has been public broadcasting. It's also important for the democracy, and for the ideals that lie at the heart of the First Amendment. Fred would certainly agree with that.

And for me, it's my best hope: that FRONTLINE will be there in the future, a part of something bigger, and proof that this sort of journalism still matters.

Thank you again, all of you, for this prestigious award....  
And thank you for listening.