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Honour. By Robert Walker

There is something morbidly ironic about it. To protect virtue and purity, one must murder. Honour is something that can be tarnished by as little as words, but only restored through violence, warfare and death. In the 19th century, duels between gentlemen in the United States and Britain were a way to settle scores and repair lost honour. In the 20th and 21st centuries, countless women throughout Africa and the Middle East, and increasingly in Europe and North America, have experienced horrific domestic abuse, torture and even death for “dishonouring” their families.

And now honour has come to Canada.

On Sept. 19, 2006, 20 year-old Khatera Sadiqi and her fiancé, Feroz Mangal, 23, were shot to death as they sat in a car. They were murdered by Ms. Sadiqi’s brother, Hasibullah, who was angry his sister had moved in with her fiancé before marriage. It was an honour killing. In the parking lot of a mall in Ottawa. It was an honour killing, five minutes from where I live and go to school.

Hasibullah Sadiqi likely killed his sister and her fiancé because of “honour.” This young man saw honour in one very narrow definition while neglecting the wider view. He saw his actions in “honour” as the preservation of family purity and chastity, but neglected the other, perhaps more important definition, of honour as a sense of ethical conduct and doing what is right over what is wrong. In order to protect one definition of honour, he grossly violated another.

And while we can condemn Mr. Sadiqi for murdering his own sister, we’re traveling precariously down the same path. Canadian journalists share some qualities with Hasibullah Sadiqi and those who commit “honour killings.” For us, insistence on pure objectivity in journalism in all cases and circumstances is to mirror the selective and absolutist definition of “honour” killings – a feeling of maintaining purity while at the same time blatantly ignoring our sense of right and wrong in order to achieve this impossible goal. His “honour” is family purity; ours is journalistic purity.

I am a journalist, and I was always taught that we exist for the good of the public. Our purpose was both to educate and to entertain, but more importantly, to equip the public with the information they need to maintain our democracy. We play the role of society’s watchdog, ensuring that Canadians are not cheated, stolen from or threatened by government, business or anyone else. However, we have found a curious way of doing this. We are holding ourselves and Canadians to honour – the same kind of “honour” that killed Ms. Sadiqi and her fiancé: the preservation of a complete, mythical purity. And at

the same time, we are unfortunately all too often dismissing the definition of honour as the sense of right and wrong.

“There is no such thing as objectivity” in journalism, according to cinema professor Simon Davies of Montreal’s Dawson College. “It’s where you point your frame of the

camera, it's the kind of questions you ask and what you write down-it's full of opinion." [1] But why can't more journalists admit it?

When the Muhammad cartoon brouhaha erupted last year, only a small handful of Canadian publications reprinted them, and Toronto Star columnist Antonia Zerbisias railed against them, writing on her blog that "the cartoon uproar has merely added fuel" to the fire. [2] For Ms. Zerbisias, a journalist at Canada's largest paper, to argue against freedom of expression, is to argue in favour of pure objectivity, or journalistic "honour," the same honour that killed Ms. Sadiqi and her fiancé in Ottawa.

A dangerous infatuation with "honour" as journalistic purity and objectivity does not only help the public which we exist to serve; in fact, it hurts it tremendously. For a journalist, to instead define honour as ethical conduct would be to temporarily discard, when necessary, complete objectivity in favour of honest reporting. Honourable journalism would be fair; to work as hard as possible in uncovering the issues, concerns and threats that matter to Canadians. With the Muhammad cartoons, regardless of their merit or purpose (if any), talking about issues is the way to address them. In other words, the far too common definition of journalistic honour as complete objectivity is to not reprint the cartoons, not spur on a debate, and to neglect our role as journalists.

To be a journalist with honour who is working hard to be society's watchdog, we cannot forget our own values which have allowed free journalism to flourish in the first place. In all the public discourse on journalism, I rarely hear the argument that freedom of expression and journalistic rights exist not for the sake of their own existence, but to strengthen democracy in Canada and protect Canadians. And yet if we cannot recognize why our own profession is allowed to exist, and the underlying values, how can we be expected to do our job?

My ancestors came to Canada to be a part of a free society with a free press where they could live without fear of persecution and they almost certainly knew that journalists existed to protect that society. How would they feel today, when the same values they so longed for are attacked by many, and where the news media, society's watchdog, doesn't even notice?

Dawson College professor Simon Davies is correct. We insist on the purity and chastity of objective journalism to maintain the "honour" of our profession, even when doing so is a sacrifice to the very values we hold dear and is a contradiction to the very purpose of Canadian journalism in the first place. To protect the same rights that journalism in Canada exists to defend – freedom of thought, belief, association, religious practice, rights of women and minorities, to name a few – journalists in Canada would be wise to consider the other definition of honour: an ethical obligation to know right from wrong.

An ethical obligation to the rights of Canadians, not to the pure objectivity of journalism, is why we exist at all. And if we forget it, we forfeit it.