

“Going Undercover”
KUUF October 20, 2024
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I’ve been on a binge lately—binge reading, that is. Mostly memoirs about people disguising their identities for various reasons.

KGB agents masquerading as American citizens. CIA operatives tracking Al Qaeda in the Middle East. Government agents in this country, joining motorcycle gangs to bust up drug and weapons trafficking rings. But I’ll leave national security and crime aside.

Journalists and writers also disguise themselves to expose social problems, or—sometimes—to get a good story.

Going undercover, people have crossed many different lines—race, age, gender, class, religion, political ideology, nationality. White people have passed as Black, women as men, adults as teenagers. And more.

Back in 1887, “stunt girl reporter” Nellie Bly got herself admitted under a false name to an insane asylum in New York. The doctors there preferred flirting with nurses rather than seeing patients. The nurses were downright sadistic and the living quarters were cold and filthy. Patients got bread with spiders baked into it and had to use the same ice-cold bath water, one after the other. Nellie spent 10 days there. Her newspaper story in the *New York World* helped in the fight to improve conditions for the mentally ill.

In mid-twentieth century, John Howard Griffin, a White man, wondered—what was life like for Black people, especially in the Deep South? He took a powerful drug to darken his skin, and then traveled through Alabama and Louisiana. In 1961, he published his classic, *Black Like Me*.

Black people wouldn’t have been surprised at the findings. But Griffin was shocked at the cruelty and threat of violence he found on the part of White people toward Black people. Life on the road was a constant struggle. It was

sometimes impossible to find a place to eat lunch or a restroom he was allowed to use.

In a lighter vein, in 1967, 33-year-old journalist Lyn Tornabene published *I passed as a Teenager*. Tornabene got a new wardrobe and glasses to hide the wrinkles around her eyes and she entered a high school as an eleventh-grader. She made friends, went to parties, ate with her clique in the lunchroom. She even passed a physical exam by the school doctor. It really makes you wonder how carefully human beings even look at each other. The deceptions I read about *worked*. (Maybe that's because people mostly write about the successful ones.)

The ethics of this way of getting a story are problematic. At very least, there's an ethical compromise. You'll be living a lie. The Global Investigative Journalism Network advises reporters to seriously ask themselves: Is deception the only way to get the story? Is the story important enough to warrant deceit? Are you breaking the law? How about negative consequences for the innocent people you're lying to? Going undercover is—or should be—a last resort.

Two stories lately have made me think about empathy and truthfulness.

Writer Norah Vincent, a woman and a Lesbian, wondered—what was life like for men? She assumed it was better than for women, but she didn't know for sure.

So, for a year and a half, she became Ned Vincent. She was 5'10" and wore size 11 ½ shoes, which certainly helped her pass. She gained fifteen pounds, built muscle at the gym, and got a man's haircut. With the help of a makeup artist, she acquired a five o'clock shadow.

A voice coach helped her deepen her voice and an acting coach helped her with male gestures and gait.

Then she went into situations where it was strictly “No Girls Allowed.” She joined a men’s bowling league. She went with her new friends to bars and strip joints. For a while, she worked as a door-to-door salesman. Finally, she spent several weeks in a monastery.

Her findings came out in 2006 in a book called *Self-Made Man: One Woman’s Journey into Manhood and Back Again*.

Her experience was way more complex than she expected. She became more sympathetic to the men she met, most of whom were working class and essentially powerless. Had she been in corner offices and boardrooms, I’ll bet she would have emerged with a different point of view.

Rather, she observed how exhausted these men were after long days at demanding jobs. She saw how the cards were stacked against her fellow salesmen to make any money.

In her bowling league, she felt the solidarity between the men. They accepted each other (even if, as she was, they were crummy bowlers.) In sales meetings, she empathized with the way the men had to put up a good front. In the monastery, she glimpsed the emotional starvation and loneliness some monks experienced.

There was one surprise after another. She learned something about female power over men, experiencing the anxiety men face when asking a woman out and the humiliation of being rejected.

My second example has to do with crossing religious lines.

Kevin Roose was a student at Brown University, a liberal Ivy League School. His parents were Quakers, but what he called “church-phobic.” He had liberal political and social views and vague religious beliefs, pretty much agnostic.

Kevin had read that 51% of Americans don't know any evangelical Christians – even casually. So while his friends were planning study abroad, *he* decided to explore a culture foreign to him, right here in the U.S. In 2007, he transferred for a semester to Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, in Lynchburg, VA. Falwell himself, who died while Kevin was there, called it "Bible Boot Camp." Kevin's book on the experience, *The Unlikely Disciple*, came out in 2009.

Liberty was a different world from Brown. The rules banned smoking, drinking, R-rated movies, cursing, going to dances, and "improper personal contact" between students. The penalties for infractions were reprimands, stiff fines, and hours of community service.

Kevin didn't hide his name or change his appearance. What he did hide was his ideology.

His new dorm mates kept asking him—what was his relationship to Christ? Was he saved? How much time did he spend every day on devotions—reading the Bible and praying?

He found that in order to be accepted, he had to create a new—and false—religious persona and history. So, he lied. Yes, he said, he had been saved. He went to prayer group and Bible study and sang in the choir.

At Liberty, he was in for some surprises. Not all Liberty students were totally holy. The guys on his hall did in fact watch R-rated movies—behind locked doors. They told raunchy stories.

Liberty students were, outwardly anyway, the most friendly he had ever met. They were less cynical and more optimistic than his secular friends.

And their religious beliefs seemed completely sincere. They talked constantly about God, about being saved, about avoiding temptation. Boys complained that the girls walking around campus in tight-fitting jeans made it hard for them to keep their minds on God.

In some respects, Liberty reinforced Kevin's ideas about conservative Christians. He was revulsed by the rampant, obsessive homophobia of both faculty and students and the conversion therapy (to heterosexuality) that campus counselors practiced.

As for academics, in the classroom, professors insisted on the literal truth of the Bible. Kevin memorized such specifics as the size of Noah's ark—73 feet wide and 437 feet long.

One course called "History of Life" taught Young Earth Creationism—that the earth was created about 6,000 years ago, in six 24-hour days. Even in courses on other subjects, professors continually scorned evolution. The anti-science propaganda was incessant.

The course Kevin took on contemporary issues condemned homosexuality, abortion, and feminism.

Chancellor Jerry Falwell himself gave a sermon on how global warming was "phony baloney"—hysteria pushed by the United Nations, radical environmentalists, liberal clergy, Hollywood, the Weather Channel, the European Union, and Satan himself.

Liberty University was teaching lots of things that Kevin—and most liberals—oppose. It would have been easy to see the students and faculty as the enemy, publish an exposé, and quit. But as Kevin pointed out—evangelical Christians are a big chunk of the population. We all live in the same country. Ultimately, he did what *he* could to build bridges.

Going undercover is not easy. You worry about being caught. You have to be detail-oriented and plan carefully. You might be in physical danger...and you'll certainly be in emotional danger.

Prolonged deception can take a profound toll on a person. There's a lot of guilt at deceiving innocent people. Even a KGB spy admitted that he had a hard time lying to his mother about where he was and what he was doing.

The strain and guilt of posing as a man affected Norah Vincent so deeply that she had a nervous breakdown and never fully recovered. She was in and out of the hospital for depressive episodes. Tragically, she ended her own life in Switzerland in 2022.

Another interesting consequence of going undercover is the phenomenon of bonding with people on the other side of the divide. ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) agents made friends with members of motorcycle gangs and enjoyed hanging out and shooting pool with them.

Norah Vincent liked the guys on her bowling team and the monks in the monastery. They had authentic personal conversations.

Lyn Tornabene, who entered the world of teenagers, started preferring their company to adults'.

With his darkened skin, John Howard Griffin felt instant solidarity and friendship with other Black people.

Sometimes, investigators start feeling like the people they're impersonating. They're like method actors who get deeply into the role. Norah Vincent felt as if she were a man; John Howard Griffin felt as if he were Black.

Kevin Roose was not converted to evangelical Christianity, but the ethos of Liberty University did affect him.

Take prayer. Liberty students prayed all the time. Please God, let my grandfather recover from his illness. Please God, let me pass my Old Testament exam.

So as part of his disguise, Kevin started praying, too. However, he didn't believe in a God that intercedes in human affairs. He prayed, rather, to feel more compassionate toward other people. He didn't think prayer would change the world—but that it would change him. Prayer became a habit. On the phone, he found himself telling a liberal friend—a Jewish woman going to Israel—that he would pray for her. It just popped out.

Often, secrets have to remain secrets, especially if national security is involved.

But some investigators come clean—to the outside world, with their books, and to the people they deceived. In the end, both Norah and Kevin confessed to the people they had lied to.

So, did that turn their new friends into enemies?

No. Astonishingly, their informants weren't angry at them. Kevin Roose's Liberty friends were intrigued. They wanted to read his book. He kept up his relationships with them. Friendship trumped ideology. He felt freed—he could be his real self.

Norah Vincent also came clean with her new men friends and the women she had dated in disguise. Her experience was similar. They were not furious at having been deceived. Some remained friends after her project was over. When the truth came out, it was cleansing.

Both Norah and Kevin bridged a great divide—gender in one case, religion in the other—with respect and empathy. They didn't see the opposite side as the enemy. They wanted to learn. Like anthropologists, they were curious about other ways of living and perceiving.

They didn't like everything they found out. But they were willing to scrap some of their preconceptions about the people on the other side.

Because of their deceptions—but also because they finally did tell the truth—they learned things worth passing on to the rest of us.

So what can we hope for in these polarized, violent times, when the people on the *other* side are portrayed as a villain?

It's hard to imagine armies of undercover investigators putting on disguises to closely study the other. And yet, in small ways, we've got to build bridges rather than walls.

So, may our own deceptions be responsible. May our own lies be replaced by truth. And may we pray—as Kevin Roose did—that the barriers between us be replaced by bonds of friendship.

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