

**Remarks by Harry Smith
Presenting The Media Institute's
2022 Freedom of Speech Award
To Lester Holt
October 19, 2022**

Good evening. I'm Harry Smith, a reporter for NBC News and, proud to say, I work with Lester Holt. Some years back when I worked at CBS, I used to cover a lot of breaking news. Big stories, disasters, earthquakes, hurricanes. More than a couple of times I found myself on the same plane with people from NBC News and with them, inevitably, was Lester. Lester has that thing in him, what Mike Wallace once described to me as this. "Harry," he said. "I'm like the Dalmatian dog at the fire house. When the alarm goes off I jump on the truck, no matter what." That's Lester.

Just this year he has reported from Ukraine, from Poland, Uvalde, Texas, from Highland Park, Illinois. He goes where the story is. Always has.

I first met Lester when he worked at WBBM in Chicago. And I was on the morning news at CBS. Lester was famous at the time because he was among the real-life reporters featured in the movie version of "The Fugitive," starring Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones. Yep, that was him, moustache and all.

Lester, though, was that local guy who stood out. He stood out because you knew he knew the news was not all about him. That's what he took with him when NBC and MSNBC brought him aboard.

You could see that in the presidential debate he moderated just a couple years ago. I personally have lived in mortal fear of ever having that job. Too big, too much pressure, too much at stake. A near impossible task to be truly fair and balanced. Other than his really good suit, you could not tell if Lester was grilling two presidential candidates or people vying for the local school board. He'd done his homework. He was thorough, did not shy away from an issue, and treated the candidates and the audience with respect. We are fortunate to have a man like Lester as the anchor.

Someone asked me about Lester a few years ago. I said trust is our most important currency in this profession. Lester is rich in that regard. We don't doubt a word that comes out of his mouth.

He takes his work seriously, no doubt. But also plays bass in the newsroom pick-up band. His personnel: a crazy salad of editors, producers and the like. Some infamous in the building but not famous like Lester. He doesn't front the band; he's in the back next to the drummer. The spotlight just is not important to him.

Except when it comes to issues of justice. For a network-wide series called “Justice for All,” the man was embedded in the Louisiana state prison in Angola for three days. I have been there. And I honestly can’t comprehend that he did that. But understanding the story completely and being fully committed to that were what put him there and that’s rare.

He’s interviewed all the big shots but I think he prefers speaking to people who are experiencing the news. That’s his job. Honorably and humbly serving the public. Giving voice to the voiceless.

You might not know that Lester’s father was in the Air Force, made a career of it. When your parent spends most of his adult life serving the country it teaches you something. Lester knows what’s at stake. Truth is no trivial matter. It is not a commodity to be sold and shape-shifted to suit an audience. No, for Lester, the First Amendment is scripture. And that scripture is sacred.