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On a spring day nearly a decade ago, I paid a visit to a small religious community that lived on a wooded property several miles up an undulating dirt road in the Ozarks. Two rather serious-looking young men met me as I emerged from my car and, with a minimum of small talk, escorted me to meet the group's patriarch. The interview focused mostly on the community's unique beliefs: that people of Northern European ancestry primarily comprised biblical Israel's true heirs, and that apocalyptic events lay in store for the United States. At one point, he suggested that someone had the community under surveillance; not long before, he said, a "black helicopter" had been spotted hovering low overhead. Local law enforcement officials later told me they knew nothing about this. But it had been an exceptionally violent month in that particular region. Four weeks earlier, Timothy McVeigh had bombed the Oklahoma City federal building. The same day, the state of Arkansas had executed a white supremacist for the murder of a state trooper.

I cite this experience not for its details, which still strike me as exotic as I read through my report of that visit, but rather because its essential elements typify my work as a journalist, which involved visiting religious sites around the country. Before I came to Syracuse University in January 2004, I spent much of the previous twenty years working as a newspaper journalist, covering religion in America in all its great diversity. From 1994 until the end of 2001, I worked

for the *New York Times* and, prior to that, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Visiting religious sites was an important part of my job. I was expected to interpret for a general audience the varied forms religion takes in the United States. My visits were not random, but occurred after my editors and I agreed that the places and people I would see had value as “news” — such as, if a community were engaged in some legal or political issue, or if the site in question represented part of a major trend. Often, as in my visit to the group in the Ozarks, I had a relatively short time to gather information at the site itself. But there were times when I had the luxury of a longer visit, such that I could return to the site over the course of two, three, or more days, asking follow-up questions, noting details I had missed, and gathering printed material to read in the off-hours.

I write this essay as I prepare to teach a course on religious pluralism. I expect to include visits with my students to local houses of worship. My journalistic experiences ought to prove useful, but I expect to make changes in my approach, as I will note below.

One practice I will certainly retain is calling ahead before visiting a site. As a journalist, I found it far better to establish a cursory relationship with the primary person or people I wanted to interview before I arrived. Rarely, I believed, would I gain anything by taking someone by surprise. I recall trying it once in 1988 and found it unproductive, to say the least. At a minimum, not making contact in advance runs the risk of wasting time, since one ends up negotiating to arrange interviews at the scene.

The articles I wrote always required some description of the site itself, as well as the activities carried out there, written to be accessible to a general reader. But I rarely thought my own observations ought to stand alone. I relied on the people I encountered to interpret from their own experience the spiritual dimensions of the place and to describe the value of the activities occurring there. Once, at the *Times*, I proposed a series of stories on the rise of evangelical Protestant megachurches, which typically attract upwards of 2,000 people a week to services. I wrote three stories, which focused on the clergy, the congregations, the activities within those churches, and the organizational ideas that fostered their growth. My editors asked the *Times* lead architecture critic to write a fourth story,

