



More Truth, Even Less Convenient

Davis Guggenheim

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When Davis Guggenheim was young and living in the Washington D.C. area, his parents drove him past the local public schools and out into the suburbs where he attended a private Quaker school – the same one that President Obama’s daughters attend today. Guggenheim remembers asking his parents why he had to drive so far away to school when there were closer schools in his neighborhood. His parents told him that the schools in his neighborhood weren’t very good.

His parents were right, of course.

Now, as an adult and father of three, he drives past the public schools in his neighborhood in Venice Beach, Calif., as he takes his own children to a private school.

Same reason.

Guggenheim is a filmmaker and a television producer and director. He has directed episodes for *24*, *Alias*, *Push*, *Nevada*, *ER*, *Deadwood*, *The Shield*, and many other programs. He won an Emmy for *Deadwood* on HBO. He was the original director for the movie *Training Day* with Denzel Washington and Ethan Hawke (for which Washington won an Academy Award), but was abruptly fired by Washington early in the production and replaced. Guggenheim didn’t pick up a camera for a couple of years after that, but when he did, he began making documentaries. His 2006 movie *An Inconvenient Truth* put the topic of climate change on the culture’s agenda and he won an Academy Award. His music documentary *It Might Get Loud* portrays guitar legends Jimmy Page, The Edge, and Jack White as both the future and the past of rock music. His most recent movie, *Waiting for ‘Superman’* is having the same impact as *An Inconvenient Truth*, but on the topic of public education reform. His documentaries have rocked public opinion on complicated topics.

interviewed exclusively for risen magazine in san diego, ca

Risen Magazine: In your last three documentaries you tackle big issues – climate change, the evolution of music, and education reform. But you do them all in a similar way – you portray characters we care about, you show the viewers that these characters want something, and then you hold us in suspense as to whether they’ll get what they want. That’s classic storytelling. So is that how you see yourself primarily – as a storyteller?

Davis Guggenheim: Yes. My father taught me that. People connect with people. He always said, “Forget the issue -- connect with people.” He passed away right before *An Inconvenient Truth*. That movie was a challenge because I knew I couldn’t make a movie about a scientific slide show, even though the slides were great. But I was thinking about what my dad said, so I thought, well maybe there’s a story in Al Gore. Maybe the story is outside of the slide show, a personal story. People told me that it was impossible to do what I was attempting, and even I wasn’t sure we could do it. But the movie was about a guy trying to tell this very important story – wanting to impart this truth, and no one wanting to listen to it.

RM: You made Al Gore interesting. That’s no easy task.

DG: Jack White said that in the movie *It Might Get Loud*. I made the guitar

the MacGuffin – a Hitchcock device that really drives the plot. In Hitchcock movies you think the movie is about one thing – like uranium – but that’s just a device to show that the movie is really about a love triangle. The movie’s not about the electric guitar at all. *An Inconvenient Truth* isn’t about Al Gore. He’s the MacGuffin.

RM: You have done some incredibly fruitful entertainment shows like *24*, *ER* and *Deadwood*, but more recently you’ve done projects that have more of a social conscience. Do you have a preference?

DG: I really love documentaries. Actually, I like it all. Since these experiences are so different, you constantly get to tell different types of stories. You’re learning different kinds of scripts and you’re constantly honing your skills. But no matter what, you’re constantly trying to do the same thing. You have different tools, but you’re still trying to tell good stories.

RM: *Deadwood* is set in South Dakota in the 1800s during the Wild Bill Hickok era. How is that the same thing as to *Waiting for ‘Superman’*?

DG: You still have a central character who wants something. It’s up to you to help describe those obstacles that are in their way, so you can dramatize the audience’s expectation of whether they will get it. *Deadwood* and *Super-*

man are different in significant ways, too. With documentaries you have to be careful because you cannot fake anything. You can't make up the characters or the obstacles. Everyone in *Superman* wants a shot at a better education, and they have obstacles like paying tuition, poor local public school, a lottery, a cruel system.

RM: The dominant reaction I had after I saw *Superman* was, "*This is not okay. It is not okay to have this kind of system in this country.*" Did you set out to get that idea across to the audience when you started working on this movie? Or did you just set out to tell the stories of these kids?

DG: I try not to draw conclusions for the audience. That's a tricky business.

RM: That's propaganda, right?

I have a friend who said that the best way to make God laugh is to tell him your plans.

DG: Right. And I try not to tell the audience what they should think. But I take them to a world that I saw. These kids are subjected to a lottery as whether they would get into the schools they wanted to attend. I did see in the lottery a sort of metaphor for what happens to every kid – even for those who aren't in that lottery. There are still the haves and the have-nots. There are all kinds of lotteries metaphorically. Warren Buffett says there is an ovarian lottery by who your mother is. There's a lottery for what teacher you have or what school district you have. You can make the argument that a lot of these families are lucky because they have a choice. There are more districts in this country where you don't have any options, where you get the school you get.

RM: Or you're born in a Third World country and the option of having any kind of education isn't possible.

DG: Third World country? How about California? Schools in California are in crisis. They're certainly not First-World country quality.

RM: This is a personal movie for you, since you could bypass the bad schools when you were young, and you're bypassing the bad schools for your own children now. Is this movie a way for you to address your own ethical dilemma of having the means to go to private schools? You narrate this movie and you are heard asking questions of the characters. We hear your voice throughout.

DG: I've never put myself in a story before. I've never thought my own involvement was relevant. I always thought narration was old school, something to avoid. I had friends who said "*Why don't you have Morgan Freeman read it? You're not so good.*" But I thought the simple point of view of a parent, not an expert, but someone who puts his own failings up front, would be important. In the movie I talk about how I betray the ideals I thought I lived by. If I was going to be in a position of criticizing others, I had to first criticize myself.

RM: Speaking of failure, would you consider getting fired from the movie *Training Day* a failure? And was it a good thing in the long run?

DG: *Now* I can say it was a good thing. But for years, I couldn't talk about it. I couldn't see the people involved without being angry, and I couldn't help feeling taken advantage of. Now I feel it was life sending me in the right direction despite what I thought I knew I wanted.

RM: Is that what happened – it sent you in the right direction?

DG: I have a friend who said that the best way to make God laugh is to tell him your plans. Getting fired from *Training Day* was a really painful experience, and it set me back. I was angry and unproductive for a long time. I made my first short documentary after that out of spite. I got a camera and went downtown and did it in a blind, unconscious way.

RM: The school you attended in DC has Quaker roots. Did that religious heritage have an impact on you?

DG: The school had a philosophy that I liked. They taught a sense of purpose; that you were here on this earth for a reason. But it wasn't very spiritual. The bigger influence was my father,

who instilled in me this sense that you have to use the skills you have toward some good.

RM: So you were brought up with this sense of purpose?

DG: Yes, and with the sense that stories have the power to transform people...to change people's lives. His very first film was about a bond issue for the St. Louis Zoo.

RM: It sounds compelling! Can I get it on Netflix?

DG: I've never made this connection before, but he had started the public television station in St. Louis, and then was fired. While he was without a job some people gave him money to make a film that had this purpose: "*Our zoo needs money. Vote for this bond.*" The film worked. The bond went through. It was very simplistic. But he immediately saw that films can do good in the world. There was that sense of it then being a responsibility.

RM: Interesting parallel to your own experience.

DG: Yes, in a very practical sort of way.

RM: Is there a faith component in your own life?

DG: A vague sense. That's all.

RM: There just seems to be a significant conscience in the movies you make. I was just wondering.

DG: I think there is a vague sense of it. Not really, but yes. There is something always looming. It's funny because I told everyone who helped make this movie, "*God bless you.*" I'm not really religious, but here I am saying, "*God bless you.*" I really believe that little miracles happened for this movie. These doors opened, and these angels came to help the movie...for a reason. That's as close as I get. ∞

