

### 3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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#### **Ep 86: Reporting from War Zones with CNN Chief International Correspondent Clarissa Ward: How What's Reported Differs From the Situation On the Ground**

**INTRO male voice:** Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers, and now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia Lynn Thoman.

**Lynn Thoman:** Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be with Clarissa Ward, CNN's Chief International Correspondent, who's going to give us the inside scoop on the news, what gets covered, how the reality compares to what's shown on TV and what it's like to be a war correspondent. Clarissa has been based in Moscow, Beirut and Beijing, and has extensively covered the conflicts and wars in Ukraine, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. There's no one like Clarissa. To quote Anderson Cooper, "How did a continent-hopping Eloise, who was banished at ten to a dismal British boarding school, wind up in Beijing as a stand in for Uma Thurman on a Quentin Tarantino film and then break into the news business and become one of the great foreign correspondents of our time?" Clarissa has been awarded the most prestigious awards in television news, including the Peabody and nine Emmys. Welcome, Clarissa, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

**Clarissa Ward:** Thank you so much for having me, Lynn.

**LT:** It is my pleasure. Thank you also for all of your wonderful reporting, you've really brought home to people the reality of events and crises as they are happening, you've also helped us better understand people around the world who would otherwise not have a voice, such as freedom fighters and women in remote Afghan villages. Your reporting is mesmerizing.

**CW:** Oh, thanks. That's really, really kind of you, I appreciate it.

**LT:** Clarissa, what's the craziest thing you've done in your career?

**CW:** That's a good opening question. I'm sorry to say there are quite a few contenders. I would say crossing the Syrian border from Turkey into Syria illegally in 2012 was pretty crazy. It quickly became the norm and the way that journalists got into Syria, but at the time, that was pretty crazy going and embedding for a few days with the Taliban three years ago. That was pretty crazy at the time, or it certainly seemed it, and now, of course, it seems a lot less crazy with hindsight. Going into Syria to interview a western Jihadist who would go on to join ISIS on my own, and that was pretty crazy going into Damascus posing as a tourist on my own and then slipping off and embedding with activists for a week, all of these things sound a little crazy or daring. In reality, they require months of preparation and a huge amount of work goes in to ensure that they're not so crazy that they are in fact well thought out and fairly sensible plans.

**LT:** Clarissa, they just sound incredibly risky and dangerous, what do you aspire to accomplish in taking such enormous risks?

**CW:** Yeah, I know it's hard for people to believe this, but I'm genuinely risk-averse and I really go out of my way to mitigate risk to the best of my ability, and I'll never do anything if I think it's really like 50-50 how it's going to turn out. If it's that kind of a risk, no, I'll only take a risk if I know that it's doable, and then I spend a lot of time, as I mentioned, trying to work out how to do it as safely as I possibly can, but the reason I'm willing to take those risks is because I firmly believe that the toughest stories and the most important stories are often the hardest to get to, and often the most dangerous to tell, but they are often as well, the most compelling and the most vital for an international audience to be aware of and to hear from people and to make sure that those voices are given a platform.

**LT:** You've spent years reporting from Syria, from Afghanistan, what are some misperceptions about these countries?

**CW:** Oh, there are so many. There are so many, and it's really heartbreaking because as a journalist you are often really trying to correct the narrative or inject a little bit more nuance into the conversation, but you recognize that you are facing an uphill battle because ultimately it can be very useful for governments or for media organizations or for whoever to try to simplify narratives to create a kind of black and white dichotomy, whereby there's only good and bad and white and black, and the reality is there's a lot of gray, and there's a lot of complexity, and there's a lot of nuance. So when I look particularly at countries like Syria and Afghanistan, I think there are some fundamental misunderstandings in the West and particularly in the US about Islam, about the motivations of Muslim people, about the way... their cultural mores, the way they live, the treatment of women in many of these societies, which is not to downplay the obvious problems that exist, but more to underscore that often we enter into our understanding of these cultures with an assumption that ours is superior, that ours is perfect, that ours is what everyone else should aspire to, and being a journalist has really forced me to become much humbler on that front and to accept that there are different ways of looking at the world, and that doesn't necessarily make another country or another religion or another people somehow inferior to us.

**LT:** What makes your reporting unique, at least to me, is your empathy for the people that you talk to.

**CW:** When I started out as a journalist, there was a perception that to be a good reporter, you needed to be neutral and strong and probably a man. And things like empathy, are looked down upon a little bit. And I actually think one of the benefits of having so many more women in this field now than we used to, although it's not limited to women, is that we do see a little more empathy in reporting in war zones. I think that's hugely important. We will understand that you need to have multiple reporters covering conflicts from different angles because it's impossible not to be moved or feel connected or attached in some way to the people that you're reporting on, and so if we understand that that level of subjectivity is almost a foregone conclusion, then I don't see the problem as long as you don't step into the realm of activism, I don't see the problem with having empathy for your subject and forming those connections because that will enable the viewer or the listener or the reader to form an attachment or form a connection to that person, which then enables them to have different and less cerebral, but more human contact or connection with the story as a whole.

**LT:** You were in Afghanistan when the Afghan government fell during the US evacuation. Your reporting was mesmerizing. What was that like? And do you see it differently now, in retrospect?

**CW:** Yeah, in the moment, you don't really have time to think about anything except doing the job, it's almost like you don't have the second to even think about what you're going to eat for the next meal. You only know one way, which is forward, okay, "How do I get out onto the streets? How do I start asking these people questions? What is it safe to do? What is too dangerous to do?" And I believe that it's only sometime later that you really start to absorb and assimilate the impact of your reporting, but more importantly, the impact of what you've seen, what you've witnessed, and this huge historical moment that you really played a small part in writing the first draft of. With Afghanistan, the big shock, of course, was the speed with which things unraveled, I had already been in the country for two weeks, everyone knew the conclusion that was most likely in this scenario, I don't think anyone could have predicted it was going to happen in such a rapid, rapid manner. And I'm still floored by that, although now with the benefit of hindsight and with a deeper knowledge of some of the things that were going on behind the scenes, both in the Afghan Army, in the relationship between the US and the Afghan government and the government of Ashraf Ghani, it seems less shocking now than it was at the time that things collapsed as quickly as they did.

**LT:** What has it been like reporting as a woman in the Middle East, what have you learned that you wouldn't have learned as a man?

**CW:** I think there's always a perception when you're a woman working in the Middle East that things must be really tough for you, that you must always be discriminated against, and there are situations in which I can't enter a room as a woman, if it's a very, very, very conservative group of Islamists, but they're pretty rare because for the most part, female western journalists are treated as this kind of anomaly, we're almost like a third gender, we're given the respect and a kind of more gentle touch than our male colleagues as women, but we're also not treated like Afghan women, for example, were understood as being... The word that was sometimes jokingly used by Afghans was honorary men, but at the same time, we have the extraordinary privilege of having access to women, 50% of the population who are basically shut off from my male colleagues, if you're talking about a more conservative society, like rural Afghanistan, for example. And so that's hugely important. How can you tell the stories of war without hearing the stories of women, without hearing about their experiences, their perceptions and invariably, having spent a lot of time with women in war zones now, they do have a different perception, they do have a different take, and it's such a crucial part of giving a more holistic understanding of what's happening in these complex zones, to hear their stories, and to hear their suffering, but also just to hear their experience.

**CW:** The other thing I would say is that as a woman, I'm seen as less of a threat in general, so I can cover my hair with a hijab and pretend to be asleep in the back of a car and drive through a check point, I can enter a room and sit quietly in the corner and people will ignore me even if they're suspicious of me, they probably won't want to talk to me because that will be perceived as being rude. So there are actually a lot of things that I'm able to do that are much, much tougher for a Western male journalist, I would say.

**LT:** Your reporting is the first time that I've heard rural Afghan women speak. Can you talk a little about that, the different perspectives of women in Afghanistan that you've been able to uncover.

**CW:** Yeah, it's a really important question. I'm glad you asked it because we do have a tendency to view Afghan women as this sort of homogenous group, this monolith, and we tend to assume that all of them have been delighted to have more freedom to be able to go to school, to be able to partake in civic life, and the reality is that it's much more complex than that, and I've had the fortune during my times with the Taliban to embed in rural Afghanistan and spend time with women there who really live a very, very, almost like a hermetically sealed life, they live in a compound within a larger compound, their days start before the Fajr dawn prayer, they're sweeping, making tea, baking bread, cleaning up, taking care of the children, cooking meals, doing their prayers, they might go out occasionally, but for the most part, they stay in their compounds. The little girls might go to school, to religious school, to madrasa to learn Quran and maybe the numbers. But beyond that, once they approach puberty age, they usually will no longer go to school, and the school they go to is a madrasa, it's not like they're not learning about science and math.

**CW:** So in that context, women have a very different understanding, well, first of all, of the US presence in Afghanistan, and what it meant to them and what it brought to them and for many people in these areas, it brought nothing but misery and war and drone strikes and corrupt police officials who were emboldened by their western backers, and also in terms of the opportunities, because for them, female education is not a priority, it's not really part of the conversation about their lives, nor is the sort of idea of women having more visible roles in civic life. I'm not saying that that's right, and I'm not saying that those women get to make those decisions for themselves, they almost certainly don't, those decisions are made by men, and yet I didn't find many women in these areas when I spent time with them who were questioning those decisions that have been made, that is often, I think more of luxury as more educated women. And so it is important to remember that these women had very different experiences, very different expectations and very different goals.

**LT:** In addition to reporting from war zones, you've also documented the struggles of ordinary people against autocratic governments, and you've seen acts of extraordinary courage. What stands out for you?

**CW:** It's always mind-blowing to me that things that we take for granted that we view as being entitled to as our birthright, there are people in this world, many of them who are willing, literally to lay down their lives in order to try to attain those things for their children, there are so many extraordinary acts of heroism. I was in Myanmar, we were the first journalist allowed in, and in fact, the only Western journalist allowed in after the coup, and we were out in the streets, we were completely surrounded by the junta by the military junta who had taken power, we had police security, you name it. I have been in that situation before. I have never been approached by freedom fighters in that situation, and yet the minute we went and shot some video in a market, people just started coming up to us, they started flashing the Hunger Games, the three-finger Hunger Game Salute, which has become the symbol of their pro-democracy movement, they started banging pots and pans, which is an ancient ritual to ward off evil spirits, but which again has become the sort of signature rally and cry, if you like, of this uprising of this movement.

**CW:** And I was so blown away, and these people as they were coming up to me, I was stammering, and I was saying, I'm surrounded by security, it isn't safe for you, and yet they didn't care, they wanted to have their voices heard, they wanted to have their story told. 11 people ended up getting arrested for talking to us, which as a journalist, it's always your worst nightmare, and we spent a lot of time working to try to ensure that they were released, we know that eight of them were released

in a couple of days, but my point being, I think it is very difficult for most of us to fathom that kind of courage, and it really does make you appreciate what you have. And this is what pains me so much when I see what's happening in America right now, and I see the divisions becoming uglier and the rhetoric becoming uglier. Having covered war for so many years, and having covered autocracies, it is heartbreaking to see this happening in the US because I know where the road ends, and it ends in such a bleak and ugly place. And I know also how incredibly blessed we are to live in a society that affords us so many freedoms and affords us so many rights, even if it's not perfect, and that so many people around the world would just do anything, anything to be able to have a taste of that or to be able to give that to their children.

**LT:** I think many people do forget that how lucky we are and how much we have. Where do you think you've made the most difference, Clarissa, with your reporting?

**CW:** I think I started to try to think of my role differently, if you become fixated on the idea of making a difference, which during the Syrian civil war, I think I really did, because I wanted so desperately to help these people who were being massacred, but if you get too focused on that, it distracts you a little bit, it takes you off the path of where you really need to be, and ultimately I found it was much more bearable because it also becomes this overwhelming burden then if I haven't solved the Syrian civil war, I'm not a good journalist, I'm not a good person. I haven't done enough to help. It became much easier for me to continue to do this work without burning out, if I understood my work in a slightly more humble scope, which is, my job is not to solve the problem, my job is to shine a spotlight on it, to give people a chance to have their voices heard and to make sure that those in power are held accountable, and if I focus narrowly on that, then ironically, I think I'm able to do a better job and therefore probably more likely able to make a difference.

**CW:** So it means that I tend to be very humble and if anything downplay my ability as an individual to really make a difference. I'm just a vessel here to put a spotlight on someone and give them a chance to tell their story or show their bravery or show their conditions, and they are the ones who ultimately will either be able to make a difference or not, that power is not really so much in my hands beyond giving them that platform. But if you're asking where I have seen, maybe at least some sort of a shift in the conversation or a strong reaction to my reporting, my reporting in Syria, I was asked to speak at the UN Security Council, which obviously would imply that there was some kind of an impact there. My work on Russian paramilitaries carrying out their work in Central African Republic and my work on the investigation into who poisoned Alexei Navalny and finding that it was indeed, along with this investigative outlet, Bellingcat, that it was the FSB, the Russian security services. Those stories in particular, and I guess my work in Afghanistan this summer, I think I've seen the most impact coming from them, whether it's sanctions that might be related not just to my work, but that theme or a sort of shift in attitude maybe. But yeah, I try not to get too caught up with it, because A, it becomes a vanity thing, but B, as I said before, it becomes an overwhelming responsibility that is not sustainable.

**LT:** What are the most important lessons that you've learned from your reporting?

**CW:** The most important lesson I've learned is that people are people, which sounds like a pretty obvious thing to say, but it's not that obvious because we, and especially as Americans, because many of us, not as well traveled, or well connected to the rest of the world, we tend to be quite insular and because it's a huge country and it's very far away from a lot of other places. But I think there's always a tendency for Americans to assume that they're a lot better than other people in the

world, and not because they're arrogant, but because they just have a slightly skewed perception of what people in the rest of the world are like. And I see this, particularly with the Muslim world, and it comes back to what we were talking about, the chasm of misunderstanding, that is really what led me to start out on this journey and inspired me to start telling these stories to try to facilitate or improve that understanding, and I do think there have been improvements.

**CW:** But there is still a huge amount that remains to be done, because even if you're with... It can be with anyone, it can be a group like Hamas who you automatically assume are evil. And then you understand that words like evil, like good people are capable of doing evil things and evil organizations are capable of doing good things, and everything is much more nuanced and much more complex and much more layered than we would like it to be. And that's a challenge as a journalist, because if you're telling stories, you want to make them coherent and you want to make them digestible, particularly for television, but you can't afford to overly simplify either.

**LT:** How do you see TV? What kind of business is it?

**CW:** Well, it's a business that's changing every moment, because those are traditional revenues like the cable bundle are on the decline, and we see the rise of streaming and we see new people in the marketplace. Every other week, there's a new organization. And we've seen how social media has had a huge impact on television, much more diverse storytelling now, and that's a good thing. But it means that it's a constantly evolving and changing marketplace. Fundamentally though what has drawn me to television and what keeps me drawn to it more than any other medium is that I see an opportunity to create connections for people and television and the power of the image, for me, and the power of story-telling, it almost can be cinematic at times. You really have the ability to get people out of their comfort zone, and with me as a guide being like, "Come along, let's have a look at this, let's talk to these people. Let's see what they're about. Let's see why they're doing this." You really have an ability to touch people and to make them curious about or engage with a topic that might be a 1,000 miles away, both literally and metaphorically from their everyday life.

**CW:** And that is very profound, as far as I'm concerned. A New York Times reader is already interested and engaged at some level with these issues or wants to be. Television is a different audience, it's a broader audience, and that brings challenges with it, but it also brings tremendous opportunities, and I find that really exciting.

**LT:** Does TV reporting represent the reality of what's going on, and if not, what does it represent?

**CW:** I think it represents a snapshot. Part of the reason I wrote a book was because you cannot, you're only telling one part of the story. So I would have all these incredible profound experiences in war zones that would be hugely impactful in terms of informing how I understood a culture or a conflict or a people, and they would never make it on to the evening news because it was a conversation I had with a taxi driver who broke down talking about his daughter, or it was a kindness where someone gave me a piece of chocolate when I was frightened to help... These small acts that speak volumes, they do not usually make it into the evening news. They don't really belong on the evening news, but they are hugely important in painting a more vivid and nuanced picture of any given scenario.

**CW:** So television is a snapshot. It's a snapshot that is aimed or geared towards giving you some kind of a window into a world, and some kind of an understanding into what's going on in that

world, and hopefully some sense of a connection to it or a curiosity about it that you might then follow up and be like, "Well, I now want to learn more about Afghan women. I'd now like to read more about that." And obviously the more you read, and you might read some books on it, and then you get a richer understanding or experience of that. So it's a portal. That's how I see it.

**LT:** Your book is remarkably personal, and you talk about how you've seen people killed and maimed by bombs and shells and bullets, that you've watched men beat someone to death, and you've also lost several friends and colleagues. Can you talk about the price of your reporting?

**CW:** I tell this to every young journalist, because when you're young, you think you're invincible, and you think that you'll be okay and that you're stronger. And I say to all of them who ask me for advice, the check doesn't necessarily come right after you order it, but it will come one day. You are not going through 10 years or 20 years of working in this industry without paying that check, like you will. There is a price to be paid for doing this work, and there is an impact that it has. And what makes it tricky is that it's not linear. It's not that I go to Syria and I will see a child die. And then I cry a lot and I feel sad and I don't sleep well, and I go and see a counselor and I talk through it. No. I see a child die in Syria and I don't... I feel terrible, but I don't have time to think about it 'cause I have a thousand things to do to make this story come together. And then I leave and then I go home, and then I argue with my parents and I don't want to eat, and I feel disconnected, and I want to go back to the war zone. And it takes years sometimes to start to see the patterns, to start to understand that all of these things are imprinted on your soul on some level. And depending on how in touch you are with yourself, there are journalists who can go through decades of doing this reporting and never see a therapist, but I will guarantee you that many of them have substance abuse problems and really troubled family lives.

**CW:** And my belief is that if you want to do this in the long run, and you want to sustain, then you need to be checking in. You need to be engaged with your mental health. You need to be talking to someone about it, and you can't ignore it. You can't sweep it under the rug, it's not going to go away. And unless you're a sociopath, no one's invincible to it. And that's why it was really important to put this stuff in the book, 'cause I had a lot of people say, "Oh my gosh, it's so personal." And I'm like, it would be disingenuous of me to imply that I'm just so brave and can do all these great things and have all these great adventures and there's no consequences of that. There's no repercussions for that. Of course there are. And it's important that we talk about them also because it's still a taboo in this industry, which is ridiculous. I mean, we've made such progress in general talking about mental health, but man, do we have a lot of work to do still!

**LT:** What has the cost been like for you, the check, as you call it, for the reporting you've done? What is it like for you when you return home, from many of these trips, to your family?

**CW:** Homecoming is always the hardest part. You look forward to it for days, for weeks. You're counting down the minutes. You're counting down the hours. And in the beginning, of course, there's the flood of relief, "I'm okay, I'm safe, I can eat delicious food, I can have a drink or whatever, I can hug my children," and then there is the invariable crash, and there will be a crash. There has to be a crash. What goes up must come down. If you've been living for two weeks on adrenaline, you're going to have a crash. But beyond that, the most tricky part is the guilt, is the survivor's guilt. I remember going from Aleppo one year to a summer vacation in the south of France, and I was in Provence and sitting around a pool with my now husband, then boyfriend, and four or five of my best friends, and there's rosé and goat's cheese and baguettes and games of

Scrabble and love. And how could I make sense of that when I had just left people who were being bombarded day in and day out and crushed under rubble? I couldn't.

**CW:** So I spent my whole time, on my phone talking to a journalist who was still in Syria. Literally I spent 18 hours a day texting with this person because I could not. And I felt guilty and I felt irritated, I didn't... My friends kept me... Talk about Syria. And I was like, "I don't want to talk about Syria," but I also can't relax. And so along the way, you learn strategies and you learn that in order to cope and sustain, as I've said before, you have to be able to embrace joy. You have to be able to embrace love, you have to be able to accept your blessings and your privilege, random and undeserved as they may be, you have to embrace them. And you have to embrace life, because otherwise you're going to burn out or have a nervous breakdown or develop some kind of an unhealthy addiction. I guarantee it.

**LT:** Clarissa, you have two young sons. How has being a mother changed your reporting?

**CW:** It's changed it a lot. First of all, I've always thought of myself as an empathetic person, but now as a mother, it's like endless, endless depths of empathy and compassion, which is not to make myself sound like a great person, it's not that. It's just I really genuinely feel very connected to people suffering, and I feel that I can feel it actually, and particularly with regards to women and children. I feel more open, more porous emotionally. And I would like to think that that is a good thing in terms of how it's impacted my reporting. It obviously, as a mother, it requires a lot more consideration doing my job and making sure that the risks I'm taking are not stupid, for lack of a better word, and making sure that I remember as I always do that my first and foremost and most important duty that I have is as a mother to these two little boys. But when we talked before about representation in covering war and the difference of having women covering war, I also think there's something to be said for having mothers covering war. Because again, I think it's the slight shift in the language, the energy of describing or experiencing a conflict.

**LT:** It's your empathy that I notice about your reporting. Many reporters are very impersonal and very neutral and yet you radiate humanness and empathy, and the result is that the people you talk to really open up to you in a way that they don't to many other reporters.

**CW:** Yeah, well, thank you for saying that, because I feel that way. I feel when I'm doing these interviews, I genuinely, I can't feel the scope of their suffering, I'm not saying that, but I can genuinely feel their pain or I can touch the edges of it. And I think that allows me to form a connection even if it's just for five minutes, and I will often... A lot of this stuff doesn't make it on TV, but I believe in this idea of giving people a chance to have their say and have their voice heard and often in a war zone, that's also just about being a human being when the camera isn't rolling. Because you find people want to come up to you every five minutes. In a war zone it can be really exhausting, and everyone has their story to tell and also you have a job to do as well. But even if it's not going to be in the evening news, it's really important sometimes to just take that few minutes and look in that woman's eyes and let her tell her story. Let her tell you what... "Okay, it's not going anywhere. It's just going here, I'm the only one listening and hearing, but I hear you, and I'm listening to you, and you're not invisible." That for me, on a spiritual level, it's a powerful thing, and I think it's an important part of being a journalist.

**LT:** Before I ask for the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention? What should I have asked you that I didn't?



**CW:** I think your questions have been great. I've really enjoyed your questions. I'm actually glad that you didn't just want to talk about the minutia of geopolitics, because people can read Foreign Policy or Foreign Affairs, or any of those publications to get a better sense of that, so I've really enjoyed your questions. I think they've been an interesting variety.

**LT:** Clarissa, it's been a pleasure to talk to you. What are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with?

**CW:** The three takeaways I would like to leave the audience with are be curious, be humble and listen. And they sound like three really simple things, and they are three really simple things, but they're things that all of us, including myself often forget to do, and they're things that if you really put them into practice will just blow your mind and change the way you see the world in ways that are really positive. And I think especially at this moment in the US, we all need to do that. We all think we're right about everything, that we have all the answers, that the other person is an idiot, that the other person is this. We need to listen. We need to be curious, and we need to be humble.

**LT:** Thank you, Clarissa. This has been terrific, and thank you for your wonderful reporting.

**CW:** Thank you so much, Lynn.

**OUTRO male voice:** If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com) or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Know that 3takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com).