Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and tonight we are pleased to join with the Stanford Center on Ethics and the Knight Fellowships Program to bring you “An Evening with Calvin Trillin.” Mr. Trillin will be in conversation with Alan Acosta, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who is now Associate Vice President and Director of University Communications here at Stanford. Tonight we will follow our typical Aurora Forum program format with 45 to 50 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience conversation. If you have a question or a brief comment, please take a place in line behind one of the two aisle mikes and the moderator will recognize you.

Tonight’s program is being recorded for later broadcast nationally by C-SPAN Radio. I believe it will air on Sunday, May 26, at 10:00 a.m., Pacific Standard Time. For more information on this and other Aurora Forum offerings, please visit our Web site at auroraforum.org.

Before introducing Deborah Rhode, who will introduce Calvin Trillin, I would like to take a moment and recognize a very special guest who is here with us tonight: Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. [Applause] The Aurora Forum was created to host public conversations that explore democratic ideals and inspire social hope. Justice O’Connor’s life and work on behalf of democratic ideals is most inspiring, and we are honored to have her here. [Applause]

We would not be here tonight with Calvin Trillin were it not for the energy and enthusiasm and hard work of Deborah Rhode, Stanford’s Ernest W. McFarland Professor of Law. Professor Rhode is also the founding director of the Stanford Center on Ethics. And Deborah, everyone is so grateful for all of the hard work that you and the Associate Director of the Center, Dr. Lawrence Quill, are doing to enhance our community life by creating a space where people will gather together and reflect upon ethics. Please join me in expressing appreciation to Professor Rhode and welcoming her to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]
Deborah Rhode: Thank you for that more than gracious introduction. It is now my great pleasure to introduce our speaker this evening as well as to register some brief but important thanks, first to our co-sponsor, the Aurora Forum, and particularly its Director, Mark Gonnerman, and the Knight Fellowship Program and its Director, James Bettinger. We also, as Mark just mentioned, owe an enormous debt to the Ethics Center Associate Director, Lawrence Quill, and to his program coordinator, Bisera Rakicevic-More, who made this event possible.

And finally, thanks to our speakers. Alan Acosta is Associate Vice President for Public Affairs and Director of University Communications at Stanford University. Before we were lucky enough to lure him away, in 1996 he worked as Deputy City Editor at the Los Angeles Times. During his term there, the paper covered leading cases including the Los Angeles riots and the O.J. Simpson case, and won two Pulitzer Prizes for its local coverage.

Calvin Trillin has written for The New Yorker for 30 years after beginning his career at Time magazine. He’s also a columnist for The Nation, and there he wrote what USA Today calls “simply the funniest regular column in journalism.” He’s also a prolific author. So far, his works have ranged from two comic novels, a collection of short stories, a travel book, an account of desegregation at the University of Georgia, and family memoirs, to four books on eating: American Fried: Adventures of a Happy Eater; Alice Let’s Eat; Third Helpings; and most recently, Feeding a Yen: Savoring Local Specialties from Kansas City to Cuzco. He’s also published poetry under titles such as Deadline Poet or, My Life as a Doggerelist and Obliviously On He Sails: The Bush Administration in Rhyme. A new collection is forthcoming shortly. He lectures widely and has appeared often as a guest on television programs such as Good Morning, America, the Today Show, and Late Night with David Letterman. His two one-man shows at the American Palace Theater in New York were widely acclaimed and played to sell-out audiences. In reviewing the second show, the New York Times called Trillin “the Buster Keaton of performance humorists.” We are delighted to have him here this evening. [Applause]

Alan Acosta: Well, I know you’re not a big fan of confessional journalism, but I have a confession to make to you. Tonight is not the first time that we’ve talked. I don’t know if you know this, but I was your waiter at a Covent Garden restaurant on 13th Street in the early 1980s, and I said to you...

Calvin Trillin: “You spilled the soup!”

Acosta: You know, you were doing the talk show circuit at the time; you were on Johnny Carson 33 times, I read. Is that true?

Trillin: Yes, it is.

Acosta: And I said, “Mr. Trillin, I’m a great fan of your work. I’ve read you in The New Yorker and The Nation.” And you said, “You read The Nation?” [Laughter]
Trillin: Well, I used to say that The Nation subscription list was 200 libraries and 8 unreconstructed old Trotskyites. I don’t know which one you were.

Acosta: I was a reconstructed Trotskyite. [Laughter]

I want to start by asking you some questions about ethics and nonfiction writing. Your field has taken quite a beating in the last few years in some ways: names like Judith Miller, Jason Blair, Bob Woodworth—some of our leading lights—have taken on a kind of a public presence. The public knows these names and it represents something about journalism that I think we’re all worried about. I guess the question is: When you write, do you subscribe to some code of ethics or is it in your DNA that you just don’t go to certain places? There are lots of times when writers ask, Should I do it or should I not? How do you handle that?

Trillin: I think those times are usually over transition sentences. [Laughter] One of the problems is that the world doesn’t correspond to the way pieces are written, and sometimes the facts are messy so there’s a temptation to clean them up, and I think it depends on what kind of writing I do. When it comes to nonfiction, I have very orthodox ideas about the responsibility of telling what you believe to be the truth. I’m not saying I don’t make mistakes; I’m actually somewhere between orthodox and Hassidic, probably. But, for instance, when I started writing a column for The Nation, I’ve often spoken of our negotiations with the person I usually refer to as “The wildly and parsimonious Victor S. Navasky,” the then editor of The Nation, and I said, “How much were you thinking of paying me for one of these columns?” And he said, “Oh, something in the high two figures.” [Laughter] And so I turned the negotiations over to my high-powered literary agent, Robert “Slowly” Lesher, and I said, “Play hardball.” [Laughter] And Slowly got him up to $100. Then a few weeks after I started, Navasky came to me and said, “What about these quotes?” And I said, “What quotes?” And he said, “Did John Foster Dulles really say, ‘You can’t fool all the people all the time but you might as well give it your best shot’?” [Laughter] And I said, “Victor, at these rates you can’t expect real quotes.” [Laughter] So I don’t hesitate to make things up in the column. But in reporting, I still have strict notions of things. I was strictly raised.

Acosta: Nonetheless, the way people talk is not the way they end up sounding in an article. I’ve always said that when people complained that their quotes were taken out of context, my answer as an editor to them when they called on the phone was, “That’s right, because we didn’t want you to look like a fool.” [Laughter] And that’s really true; you do bring some kind of cohesion or coherence to a piece.

Trillin: Actually, The New Yorker was sued once for quoting somebody in bad grammar, and people have special ideas about how The New Yorker ought to write things—kind of reserved and distinguished. The first time The New Yorker printed a picture of an actress’ bare breasts, I got several letters. [Laughter] I had nothing to do with it. My only defense was, “Well, they were small breasts. [Laughter] So you could say The New Yorker custom of understatement is still intact.” [Laughter]
I think you’re absolutely right. I was talking to somebody the other day. I did a murder story once in Harlan County, Kentucky—once known as “Bloody Harlan,” a very good place for murders—and when I was using my tape recorder to tape a previous trial, the clerk of the court and somebody else walked in and they had a conversation. My tape recorder was on, and I quoted the conversation later in the piece. I would never have gotten it without a tape recorder because they had a regional way of talking I simply wouldn’t have caught because you filter out some things. I mean, you filter out the third negative or something like that. [Laughter] And you’re sort of a prisoner of your education in some ways.

But I don’t know, I’ve never had anybody complain that I misquoted them. I think most reporters do their best under circumstances that are difficult, particularly, say, at the Los Angeles Times. It’s a daily paper; you really don’t have time to spend a lot of time going over things and saying, Is that really square with what this guy said? Everybody is sort of under pressure. The New Yorker has the luxury of having fact checkers, and I remember writing a piece once about eating barbeque mutton in Kentucky. As you probably know, Owensboro is the barbeque mutton capital of the world. (I didn’t know that…. Editors.) [Laughter] I went to one restaurant there that had a sign that said, “Mary had a little lamb; won’t you have some, too?” [Laughter] But I was trying to redeem the reputation of Kentucky from Kentucky Fried Chicken. I said something like, “Housewives in Brussels or students in Kyoto think Kentucky Fried Chicken is what fried chicken in Kentucky tastes like, and it doesn’t.” And the checker said … (I can’t remember if these are the right cities) … but he said, “You can use Kyoto, but there’s no Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Brussels.” [Laughter] I mean, I find that very comforting that they’re going to find that, but you don’t have time to do that in a newspaper.

So I don’t think these are ethical lapses, given that most people are trying to do the best they can. And I also ought to say that the rules have changed somewhat. It used to be that with the tough guy daily columnist on a newspaper, everybody sort of took it for granted that maybe some of those quotes were imaginative or dressed up or made a little more perfect on the way in. Now that doesn’t go, but at one time, nobody really argued about things like that.

Acosta: You once said that a “new journalist,” that term that we used at some point, was someone who feels he doesn’t have to tell the truth, and that included making up quotes, as long as the writer’s opinion got represented fairly.

Trillin: Well, I think that’s true. I believe that. I think it’s certainly not a definition they would like. But for instance, they believe, and I think they honestly believe, that you can get inside somebody’s head and decide why he was doing something. So you have a guy come and look over the trading floor in his firm and start him thinking he knew that if he stabbed this guy in the back he would be able to gain some things that he wanted. Well, they don’t actually know what’s in the guy’s head; I don’t think he knew what was in his head. And I also think that when most people try to think of why they did something, there’s never one thing; there is a combination of motives and incentives. So I think that
they prefer to write about what they hope to be true. I don’t think that they’re trying to
mislead anybody exactly, but they sort of get fixed on what would be a good story and
they do it. I don’t think you can do that. The facts are really clumsy and they don’t fit in
paragraphs easily, and that’s part of the point of it. If you don’t have to stick to what
actually happened, then why do it?

Acosta: And yet, the facts are the facts, but you must approach these stories with some
sense of what the truth is, so let’s distinguish between the facts and truth. [Laughter]

Trillin: Well, yes. On my college paper, our definition of objective journalism was:
“We try to be equally inaccurate about both sides.” [Laughter] And I remember once a
photographer from Arkansas when I was doing a piece in Searcy, Arkansas, at Harding
College. And I hired a photographer from the Arkansas Democrat or one of those papers.
His definition of objective journalism, he said, was that when he leaves the office and
he’s supposed to take a picture of somebody, he stops at the city desk and says, “Do you
want him gazing out into the sunset or picking his nose?” [Laughter]

I guess you can distinguish between the facts and truth, but I’m not sure that it’s up to me
to do that, and I don’t think that you can ignore inconvenient facts. There was a little
dustup once at The New Yorker where somebody had a quote and made the mistake of
talking about how he sometimes made up quotes when he was talking to a class or
something—probably trying to impress the coeds—and he said, “That’s what whatever
this person was—a Spanish peasant—would have said, but he didn’t say it. And if he
said it, he wouldn’t have said it that gracefully.” And I don’t think that if it’s nonfiction
that you can get around that.

I give people a little room when it comes to memoirs. I read these memoirs and they
have in quotation marks a conversation that happened when they were four. [Laughter]
And I don’t really remember much before I got out of high school, so I don’t really
believe anybody does that. But it’s his life, and I say, what the hell. I think what
happened in the latest memoir thing with James Frye is that now, in order to write a
memoir in the United States that’s going to sell and show your redemption, you have to
be redeemed from something. It’s got to be pretty horrible. And this kid was a middle-
class druggie. They’re a dime a dozen. [Laughter] And so you need something like
maybe incest or bestiality or something to sell the thing.

I wrote about this once because I was writing some memoir-like stuff and I thought I was
at some disadvantage. We were at a memoir conference and I could see myself sitting
late at night with the other memoirists at a memoir bar [Laughter] and they’re talking
about the horrible secrets of their childhoods—these hair-raising secrets. And they look
at me when they get through, and…. I don’t think I’d admit this in New York, but this
far away I think I could say, with the understanding that it stays in the room, that I had a
happy childhood. [Laughter] So I didn’t know what to say. They looked at me and I
finally said, “Well, the only secret I can think of from my childhood was about our collie
dog, Chubby. And they looked at me with great disdain. Collie dog Chubby? It’s
absolutely true. When I was three or four, we had a little collie puppy named Chubby
who was very sickly. And one day he disappeared, and my sister and I said, “Where’s Chubby?” And my parents said, “Chubby has been given to some friends of ours who own a farm, and there he will be happy in the sunshine, in the barnyard, frolicking with the other animals.” So I didn’t think much about it after that. Then some years later—I think I was home from college—Chubby’s name came up at dinner, and I said, “Why didn’t we ever go visit Chubby at the farm?” [Laughter] And my sister looked at me and said, “There wasn’t any farm, you dummy! Chubby had to be put to sleep.” And I said, “Chubby’s gone?” [Laughter] And my mother said, “He’d probably be gone in any case. Collies don’t usually live 18 or 20 years.” And I said, “Yeah, but why am I just finding out now?” And my father said, “It’s not our fault you’re slow on the uptake.” [Laughter]

**Acosta:** And you’re recounting this memory word for word.

**Trillin:** Absolutely. It’s seared in my memory. So I wrote that in a book. And about a week after the book came out, my sister called me and said, “The collie was not called Chubby. [Laughter] The collie was called George. You were called Chubby.” [Laughter]

So you can see this kid [Frye] reaching for something horrible that happened to him. I mean, I was in jail longer than that kid was.

**Acosta:** You say you were called George, but you were really called Bud from the time you were...

**Trillin:** I was called Buddy at home.

**Acosta:** And why was that?

**Trillin:** I think my parents named me Calvin but were unwilling to call me Calvin. [Laughter] They never called me Calvin, ever. My father grew up in St. Jo, Missouri, and didn’t go to college. He read a book called *Stover at Yale*, and he wanted me to go to Yale. I believe that he thought, incorrectly, that Calvin would be a good name to have at Yale. [Laughter] We never discussed it at length. I did tell him once that if he was going to put on airs, he should have put on Episcopalian airs instead of Presbyterian airs [Laughter], but it was too late; I was already called Calvin.

**Acosta:** I read that your good friend John Gregory Dunne said that the only two people in the world who called you Calvin were he and his wife, Joan Didion, and they did it out of sheer perversity.

**Trillin:** Both of those things are true. They’ve always called me Calvin. Joan still calls me Calvin, and actually, I didn’t exactly dedicate a book to Joan and Gregory Dunne; I had a claimer—instead of a disclaimer—on a novel about news magazines, and it said, “The character of Andy Wolfermann is based on John Gregory Dunne, though it tends to flatter.” [Laughter] He asked me later, “Just out of curiosity, why was my character Jewish?” And I said, “Well, that’s the ‘tends to flatter’ part, John.” [Laughter] I said,
“You don’t want to be lace-curtain Irish all your life.” And he said, “Boarding-school Irish.” He made that distinction.

**Acosta**: It’s curious, because you are a writer who does not like to use the word I very much, particularly in your long-form work, and yet your two good friends—particularly Joan Didion—are people who use it. Let me read something that Dunne said about you: You (Calvin Trillin, Bud Trillin) “see the fitting of facts through a personal prism as an indulgence not to be countenanced.”

**Trillin**: Well, you know, I think it depends on what you’re writing and also who you are. It’s not completely true, but usually if the word I is in one of my nonfiction pieces, it’s a lighter piece. I guess I’m not a very serious person. If I’m me—if I’m talking about myself—it’s usually about family or kids or eating or travel or something like that. But to do, say, a murder story…. Now, Joan does murder stories wonderfully and uses the first person. It just doesn’t come naturally to me. To me, the reason for doing a murder story partly is because it has such a wonderful narrative. I mean, it has a kind of a strong story line. So I always think the thing to do is to just get out of the way of the story, which is difficult sometimes. It’s sort of like changing clothes in a very small closet, or something like that; you get entangled in it. But I always think if I can get out of the way of this and just have it read like a story that somebody’s telling in front of the fire, I’m better off. But some stories just don’t lend themselves to that. I love to think of that little (it’s almost like Hitchcock’s McGuffin)… that little train engine pulling the story along. And some of them don’t have a train engine, so you sort of have to kind of figure out how to do it, and that tends to be when I start saying “I.”

**Acosta**: One place where you did that a little more was in your memoir of your Yale years, *Remembering Denny*. Why did you make that choice, or was it a choice? Did you just seem to get pulled into that? Maybe you should say a little bit about what the book is about.

**Trillin**: Well, there was somebody in my class at Yale named Roger Dennis Hansen who was from a few miles from here; he went to Sequoia Union High School in San Carlos. He was a sort of golden boy, what was then a common term: California Golden Boy. And at Yale, he was on the swimming team and very high in the class. And he had a great smile; he was a great, charming guy. He was a Rhodes Scholar, and *LIFE* covered his graduation. Actually, Alfred Eisenstaedt covered his graduation, with Michael Arlen carrying his bag. We sort of half-jokingly thought that he would be president. It was only half joking, and you have to remember that this was in the ’50s at Yale where it was assumed that you could do sort of what you wanted to do. For one thing, you only had to compete against 50 percent of the population because women didn’t do…. If you wanted to go to law school, you went to law school; if you wanted to go to medical school, you went to medical school. And so it wasn’t really outlandish that this person would be the president, and he eventually committed suicide in his 50s, so I did a book about him. I think I always had the I in it, but it wasn’t nearly as personal as it got until my wife read a draft of it. I happened to be out of town when she read the draft, and she wrote—I think this is the only time she ever did this—she wrote this long memo saying, You really have
to have more of yourself in this book to make it work. And I decided she was right, partly because in Yale terms, we sort of corresponded. We were both high school class presidents or student council presidents that Yale was going to take and sort of buff up and send out into the world. And we both came from immigrant families. His grandparents were all Danish immigrants; they lived in Alameda. And there were so many parallels that it was just easier to do it that way. I didn’t really know how to discuss it in an objective way because I was involved in it.

I remember the other time I used I in a serious piece was when I did a piece about the acrimony caused by critical legal studies at Harvard Law School, and I knew three or four of the people involved fairly well. I had gone to college with one or two, and one of them was my cousin, so I really had to say, I know this guy. That’s another exception along with the Denny book, but generally, if it’s an I, it’s a lighter piece and it’s meant to be funny.

Acosta: Let me switch gears here a little bit. I’m wondering, what is your favorite kind of piece to write? Do you prefer these long-form, even-handed journalistic pieces? I know there’s a financial incentive to write poems; is that correct?

Trillin: Yes. I get the same amount for the poems that I used to get for the column. I don’t do both; it’s not double-dipping or anything. I get the straight century every time I write a poem. Actually, I’ve written about this. When the offer was made of $100 for a poem, I didn’t think it was much. And then I investigated poetry pay in the United States. [Laughter] And as some of you poets in the audience know, the way to pay poets in this country is normally by the line, not by the poem. And the highest payer is The New Yorker, I’m proud to say, at $10 a line. So if you do the math, you can see why there’s not a huge crowd in front of the poetry booth at the Career Day Fair. [Laughter] But I was getting $100 for a poem, no matter how long it was, so when I wrote a two-line poem, I was the highest-paid poet in the United States. [Laughter] And so when I wanted to get that buzz you get for working at the absolute top dollar in your field, I would write a two-line poem. I remember when Lloyd Bentsen was confirmed as Secretary of the Treasury, I wrote a poem that was: “The man is known for quo pro quidness/ In Texas, that’s how folks do bidness.” [Laughter] That’s $50 a line. [Laughter] And the last book I published, Obliviously On He Sails, was half of one of my poems. The full poem was written when President Bush’s Yale transcript was revealed during the campaign, to no particular effect, and the poem was, “Obliviously on he sails with marks not quite as good as Quayle’s.” [Laughter, Applause] Fifty dollars a line.

Acosta: I have some others here at $25 a line. Would you like to read some of these?

Trillin: Sure. I don’t know which ones you have. (Wait a minute, if I find my glasses I’d like to read them; if not, I wouldn’t. Yes, I do feel my glasses down here somewhere.)

This is “On the Report by House Republicans.” Oh, no, you don’t want to hear that. [Laughter] “On the Uproar over Allowing a Dubai Government Company…” (this one, I
only made about $6 a line) …Allowing a Dubai Government Company to Run American Ports”:

Of course, the terrorism card’s been played
By Bush for years now—making us afraid
With orange alerts and constant talk of war.
With that, he’s scared off criticism for
Those weapons warnings that were proven phonies,
The no-bid deals he handed to his cronies.
The evil ones, he says… [he actually uses that phrase a lot—‘the evil ones.’ I like that; it sounds like one of those action movies: “The evil ones are coming.”]
The evil ones, he says, are so abhorrent
He has the right to snoop without a warrant.
The threat is grave, he says, so for a while
He’s cancelled suspects’ rights to have a trial.
To criticize his reign, he says, appeases
The bad guys so he does just what he pleases.
To play the scary card has been his tack.
Is he surprised that someone’s played it back?

[Applause]

This one doesn’t have the whole poem in it, I’m afraid. Oh, the next book that’s coming out at the end of May is called A Heckuva Job. [Laughter] “On the Report by House Republicans (Yes, Republicans) That Excoriates the Bush Administration for Its Fumbling Response to Hurricane Katrina”:

Though Bushmen had claimed that word never reached
The White House that levees had finally been breached,
The White House was told, all the evidence shows.
Yes, this report shows that it’s doubtless that those
In charge of tornadoes and floods and nor’easters
Had all been informed and then sat on their keisters. [Laughter]
And Chertoff was sluggish and clueless and worse.
It’s in the report all in chapter and verse;
[It sounds kind of like Dr. Seuss, doesn’t it?] [Laughter]
His failure to get what the crisis demanded,
Like buses and boats meant that thousands were stranded.
While Bush, at the ranch, kept on cutting out brush,
His gaggle of clowns seemed to be in no rush.
So Brownie is hardly unique in this mob.
No, others as well did a heckuva job.
It’s easy to blame one incompetent slob
But others as well did a heckuva job.

[Applause]
I have to say that cutting brush on the ranch is one of the things that the president does that’s fantastically Reaganesque, or “Ray-ganesque.” Actually, he used to be called “Ree-gan” in Hollywood. And also Perot used to be called “Pee-ro” in Little Rock. That’s true. But remember when President Reagan went on vacation, they always said, He’s cutting brush; he’s cutting trees, and that’s it. And I thought, My God, the place must look like a parking lot now. [Laughter] I mean, all the man does is cut trees down. I mean, I could see him hitting western Nevada. [Laughter] And he said, “It’s morning again in the country,” and the other guy said, “God, don’t touch that tree.”

Anyway, what was the question? Did you ask a question?

Acosta: Yes, I did ask a question back then. It was, What do you like doing the most?

Trillin: Oh, I see.

Acosta: And then I interrupted you by giving you pages to read. It’s my fault.

Trillin: I remember I did a piece once on Edna Buchanan, the murder reporter for the Miami Herald. I heard her give a little speech to other reporters, and she said, “The three things you remember about editors: Never trust them, never trust them, and never trust them.” [Laughter] I actually like the change. I like working on a long piece or, not necessarily long, but a nonfiction piece that you have to worry about whether you’ve got it just right and whether you’re setting off the right bells in people’s minds, and then stopping on Friday or Monday, or whatever it is, with the column and just making it up. It’s fun. A lot of these are very satisfying. I don’t actually write a column anymore, and I don’t stop for the poems. The poems are due Monday, so on Sunday night, I turn the shower to iambic pentameter [Laughter], and it usually sort of comes like that. I don’t know what happened with this Dr. Seuss thing. [Laughter]

Acosta: Well, you have two grandchildren.

Trillin: Yeah. I like the Doctor. Don’t get me wrong.

Acosta: For 15 years, you wrote every three weeks a rather long piece for The New Yorker. It was called “U.S. Journal.” You’d travel around the country and then write a long-form piece about a place.

Trillin: Well, a story in a place.

Acosta: In a place; it was not so much about the place. Did that start to feel like too much of a job and not really what you wanted to do?

Trillin: Yes. A couple of things happened. I really loved it; I mean, I thought, I’m really lucky to be able to do this, and at the same time, there was a guy from the AP named Jules Lowe who did a similar series around the country—shorter and more often
because he was at the AP. And we actually had an organization called the American Association of American Correspondents Covering America. Our acronym was GLINGPAC. We just liked that as an acronym. And our headquarters was O’Hare Airport because that’s pretty much where we lived—at O’Hare Airport. There were only two of us in the organization, and our only rule was: you can’t quote de Toqueville. [Laughter]

**Acosta:** A very good rule.

**Trillin:** That’s how we kept the membership down. [Laughter] I loved doing it. I would get tired around springtime and my family lived in Nova Scotia in the summers and in July and August I’d go to Nova Scotia and then around August I’d get sort of itchy thinking about places I hadn’t been in the country. It was great. I think a couple of things happened. One, when I first started doing it in 1967, I sort of felt that I had the country to myself. Most national news organizations weren’t very interested in a story that happened in a town or in a city that didn’t have implications elsewhere. I mean, the newspapers had to justify their presence in a story like that. If I do a story about the most disreputable guy in Maquoketa, Iowa, who killed the most disreputable guy in some other little town in Iowa that I can’t remember the name of, the New York Times can’t justify a story like that. They have to have something that newspapers call the “nut graph” which is where you explain why an important person like you is there. “This is symptomatic of disreputable people killing each other in small towns, which has been a national trend,” or something like that. [Laughter]

**Acosta:** With the really long stories, you don’t have a nut graph; you have a cosmic nut graph.

**Trillin:** Yes. At *Time*, we used to call that the billboard paragraph. If they had a cover story on the Secretary of State, you didn’t have to explain why he did it; he was the Secretary of State. But if you had it on a racing car driver, there was a paragraph—usually about the third paragraph—that said, “Some racing car drivers have won more money, some of them have gone faster, but no racing car driver so symbolizes the ……” And then I think—I don’t know exactly what happened—but maybe newspapers got organized in a different way. But I felt that I might go to a story and find a guy from the *Washington Post* or the *Los Angeles Times* there (not so much the *Times*)—those two papers particularly. And I got so I had done a lot of stories. I actually did two different librarian firings. They were greatly different stories. One of them was in Easthampton and one of them was in a former Henry George community in Alabama, so they were really different because of the places, but still I felt I was sort of narrowing the stories I hadn’t done, and then I think I sort of felt that I found myself looking for the easy ones. And I thought maybe that would be a good time to quit.

**Acosta:** But a really fortunate thing happened while you were doing this. This is when you started writing about food, and just in the spirit of the name of your organization, I like one story you tell about the fact that usually some Rotary Club person would tell you
the best restaurant to go to in town and you usually called that “La Maison de la Casa House Continental Cuisine.” [Laughter]

**Trillin:** Yes. I have to tell you that a friend of mine in Canada who had been a reporter for a long time was named editor of a Canadian magazine, and I said to him, “I hadn’t thought of you as an editor, but now that I think of it, you do have a short attention span.” [Laughter] And the reason he had become editor was sort of old school ties. He had been kicked out of a prep school the same year as the proprietor, the guy who had just bought this magazine. The proprietor was kicked out for selling exam answers, and my friend John on a physics test that counted for the entire year. He got a 7, and his father said, “How could you have gotten a 7?” And John said, “I don’t know; I didn’t think I answered anything.” [Laughter] So I’ve always ever since thought of editors and publishers that way: the publisher is an entrepreneurial fellow who is trying some schemes that may or may not be legal, and the editor is somebody who, trying his level best, can’t get one out of ten. [Laughter] And both of them may have to be asked to leave. Anyway, what was the question?

**Acosta:** The fortunate thing that happened during “U.S. Journal” in which you found a new genre to write—what you call eating.

**Trillin:** Eating, yeah. Because I don’t cook or anything like that; I don’t know anything about food. La Maison de la Casa House Continental Cuisine is usually on top of an office building, and revolving, so if a woman puts her purse down on a ledge next to her, it might be halfway around the room by the time…. [Laughter] Great view of another restaurant on top of another office building—maybe the municipal water treatment plant, or something. And I thought at first that “continental” in continental cuisine had something to do with the continent of Antarctica, where everything starts out frozen. [Laughter] Then I thought it had something to do with the Continental Trailways Bus Company. [Laughter]

Anyway, two things happened while I was going around the country that started me on this little sideline. One is that I was in a strange city usually every three weeks, and I needed to find someplace to eat that wasn’t in a motel and, in a larger city, La Maison de la Casa House. I always had thought that what Americans actually like to eat and what they say when somebody comes into town asks, Where should we eat? are two different places. I mean, I used to tell the guy at the motel, “Not the place you took your parents on their 25th wedding anniversary; the place you went the night you got home after 13 months in Korea. And they’re two totally different places. And they were really ashamed of the places they liked, so it was hard to get the information.

And the other thing that happened is that I found that I could write about places in a lighter way through eating and through taking my daughter to the Catfish Festival near Palatka, Florida, to see if she would eat catfish. “No” is the answer to that. [Laughter] And it was really a story about people in central Florida who liked to call themselves crackers and feel sort of threatened by people in southern Florida. And also it would give me a kind of a comic relief, not so much for the readers but for me, that when I had been
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doing a murder story and a story about an argument about development and then some other controversy, then the next week or three weeks later, I went to a place where it was looser than that and it wasn’t very serious reporting. It was fun for me. So that started a sort of mini-specialty. Then I quit doing it completely for about ten years because it seemed like the joke was getting sort of thin. Also, people would call me and say, “I’m going to Chicago; where should I go? Where’s the third-best French restaurant?” I really don’t know. It was hard. I kept saying, “I don’t know anything about this.” But it didn’t seem to impress anybody. It really is a lesson in how easy it is to become an expert in this country. I don’t cook; I have no knowledge of food at all in an academic or scholarly way.

Acosta: Don’t you feel a little awkward now that you’re writing about food, given that it ends up in Gourmet magazine?

Trillin: Well, what happened with Gourmet magazine is that a friend of mine became the editor.

Acosta: See, not all editors are bad.

Trillin: Oh, I love this woman. She sends me to the nicest places. I say, “You’re not really the editor; you’re sort of my travel agent.” That’s one of the reasons I sort of crept back into it.

Acosta: I did want to talk about something. I think probably a piece that a lot of people here have read—it’s a recent piece—is “Lost Son,” a piece you did for The New Yorker about a young man who died in Iraq. Tell us how you got interested in that story and then what you found when you started writing it.

Trillin: Well, it was a very unusual story for me, and it sort of represented a lot of things I often don’t like in other people’s stories, which is, it was in the first person, it was partly about me, and I said in the story what happened and how it came about, which I am usually sort of impatient with when people do that. I say, Why don’t you just gather up your notes and write the story?

But I was going to see my grandson in New Jersey, driving down 78. He had been born just a few months before and my son-in-law had a long Tuesday. He left early in the morning and came back late at night, so I used to go down there to be with my daughter and let her go to the gym and sort of get acquainted with my grandson. We called it “Tuesdays with Toby.” [Laughter] And I heard this NPR story—this was really the first big [event]—when the helicopter was shot down with about 15 people, and this young man was the helicopter pilot. And the NPR reporter in Illinois had gone to his hometown and had done a short piece, and he just sounded like a wonderful young man. I have never made a secret of the fact that I thought that the Iraq war was unconnected to the war on terrorism, at best, and that people from my part of the country who were just trying to be in the National Guard to get through college and things like that were bearing the brunt of it. And he just sounded like a son you’d want to have, and I found myself in
tears. So I tried to forget it but I never really forgot about it, and about a year later, I decided to go talk to his family. Then, when I looked up things on the Internet and the newspaper morgues and so on, I found I had no idea before that his parents, who were divorced, were very split on the war. His mother was actually an anti-war activist of the peaceful vigil sort, not of the throwing rocks sort. And his father had not only the American flag but the 82nd Airborne flag in the front yard and was very much for it. So I just went and talked to them and to his friends and to his girlfriend and wrote a piece about it because I think it is terribly sad and it doesn’t make any difference how you feel about the war. I sort of liked his father. I thought he was a nice man, an honest man; not a zealot or anything like that. He was a refugee from Eastern Europe, and he thought, It’s my country and I go fight. I don’t know what, exactly, I was after. There’s also an unusual story here because I usually at least know what a story is before I go, I mean the rough outlines of what it is, and in this one, I just thought I would like to meet these people and tell them that their son sounds great, for one thing. That was sort of the story of the story.

**Acosta:** I think it was moving because it really represented how deeply this country is divided over this issue and it really does come home to one family in this case.

**Trillin:** Right. And it isn’t that one of these parents loved him any more than the other one. And it doesn’t make any difference how you feel about the war when your kid gets killed. And I think one of the things that has troubled me about the war is that the burden of it falls on a section of the population that’s unrelated to the people who are making the decisions about it. [Applause] I remember once, fairly early on in the Vietnam thing (I guess it was naïve of me not to realize how things have changed), but somebody said—we were in a discussion about the war and people being drafted and killed—and someone said, “Well, you don’t have to go; you can go to Canada.” And I said, “Well, where I come from, that really wasn’t an option.” I mean, if you’re called, you go. It eventually came to be an option. I mean, I did war pieces during the Vietnam War at Kansas State and places like that. But in this war, it seems to me that the people who are being killed are, to a great extent, people who are in a back-door draft who didn’t sign up for this, and it’s pretty much the opposite of the National Guard in Vietnam. The simple truth in Vietnam is, if you joined the National Guard, you weren’t going to get killed. There were 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam, and the number of National Guard people killed was 97. You essentially saved your life by getting into a Guard unit. This is the opposite, and it seems to me that a war that doesn’t ask sacrifices of anybody except one section of the country, whether you believe it’s a justifiable war or not, is not a good thing.

**Acosta:** Well, I would like to continue because I’m having a good time, but this is the point where we do open it up to everybody out there, and I’m sure you’ve got some great questions, so there are two microphones. Just work your way up to them and have at Bud Trillin, as they say.

**Question from the Audience:** I was wondering what percentage of your writing comes from inspiration when the muse whispers in your ear versus perspiration when you’re
running against a deadline. And are you an organized writer who writes every day at the same place, same time, or do you just grab a piece of paper as you’re passing through O’Hare Airport?

**Trillin:** I’m not an organized writer. I talked to the Knight Fellows this afternoon and I was telling a story about another *New Yorker* writer—I wouldn’t mention his…well, it’s John McPhee [Laughter]— who is maddeningly organized, and irritatingly so to the rest of us, because we like to think that a lack of organization is all part of it and that we have artistic temperaments and all that. McPhee is very organized, and we were discussing the writing process. I guess he was writing some introduction to a book or something one day, and he told me about his writing day. It took about 20 minutes to tell because it was very complicated. Certain things are on bulletin boards, and it’s very complicated, and it ended with taking the day’s production pages to the same copy shop in Princeton and then putting one copy back in his office (he has an office at Princeton) and then taking the other one home, putting it in a strongbox, and putting it above his kitchen in a crawl space that he had decided would be probably the last place to go if he and his family were killed in a conflagration. And then he said, “Is that neurotic?” [Laughter] I said, “No. Sounds OK to me.”

If you can get up the next morning and do it again, then it works. And as I told the people this afternoon, God did not intend people to make a living as a writer. It wasn’t in his plan. So you have to invent some sort of structure that works, and with me, I don’t write every day. There are days that I don’t write at all; there are other things I’m working on, and other things to do, and sometimes I have stuff that we call in our family “administrative caca.” [Laughter] It’s just like, I don’t know, getting the boiler fixed, or something like that. I used to, in these every-three-week pieces, have a very set routine of how much of it I had to have done every day to get it in at a certain time, and with longer pieces, I do that to a certain extent. I have goals. I call it the Committee of National Goals, which was an Eisenhower administration commission, and I see them as these old guys with grey hair way up high, and I tell them, “Listen, I can’t do it today. I’ve got a lot on my plate and I don’t feel well.” [Laughter] And they say, “No excuses. This is it.” So I use more of the how much I have to get done every day, and I’m really capable of stopping in the middle of a sentence—maybe not in the middle of a sentence, but certainly I’ll stop when I reach it, and I don’t care if it’s 11 in the morning; I’m done. I’ll do other things. But what I’m saying is, it seems to me that everybody has to invent his own way of doing it, and there isn’t any right way. Whatever allows you to write is the right way.

**Question from the Audience:** Well, for the people next to me, I just want to thank you for about the best experience we’ve ever had in Kresge, and a lot of good things have happened here.

I think there’s a question of ethics in journalism. I’m not sure it applies to *The New Yorker*, but what do you think about the situation, let’s say, when the venue or the organ or the magazine you’re writing for may have a political or other slant or angle, and you’re
writing, let’s say, in the back of the book or the books-and-arts section, what do you think about yourself as a writer and what you’re contributing when you’re in that situation?

Trillin: I think traditionally if you look at some of the people who wrote in the back of the book of the National Review, for instance, people who are roughly my contemporaries—Joan Didion, John Leonard, Garry Wills—they weren’t necessarily people who agreed with everything in the magazine. I think it’s fine as long as you’re able to write what you want to write and you don’t have to go with the magazine’s line. The old readers of The Nation, the librarians and Trotskyites, [Laughter] complained for years that I wasn’t sufficiently political when I wrote that column. I had sort of let the agony of the Scottsboro boys slip from my mind. [Laughter] In fact, I invented a character to represent them called Harold the Committed, and I said Harold the Committed didn’t think we were raising our girls with enough political content, and he wanted one of my daughters to go to the Halloween parade in the village as Emma Goldman [Laughter] and she went as a box of M&Ms. [Laughter] He wanted my other daughter to go to the parade as the dangers posed to our society by the military-industrial complex. [Laughter] I said, “Harold, we don’t have anybody at home who can sew that well.” [Laughter]

People used to ask me, “Why do you write for The Nation?” I always said, “It’s the closest magazine to my house.” That’s not exactly true, but it is true that if Navasky had been at the New Republic, maybe…. I don’t think of it as necessarily political. Obviously, I’m not on the side of the National Review, although I’m friendly with some of them; I don’t have anything against them.

But there are people who think it’s loyalty. I was on a television show—I can’t remember whether it was Carson or another of them—and said that I had been on a book tour of a collection of Nation columns, and I was in Boston and some reporter was interviewing me and he said, “Some of our readers may be unfamiliar with the Nation. Could you describe it?” And I said, “Pinko. [Laughter] I would describe it as a pinko magazine.” And he said, “Well, surely you have more to say about it than that.” And I said, “I think it’s a pinko magazine printed on very cheap paper. [Laughter] It’s the sort of magazine that if you have an article in it and you get a Xerox copy, the copy’s a lot better than the original.” [Laughter] I got several letters from Nation readers saying, “You’re playing into the hands of the enemy” and all that. They’re not my enemy; I don’t care.

Question from the Audience: I took my Ford F-150 to University Ford, and I noticed that no longer is that shop thronged with vehicles all day long (I guess I bought mine before the 100,000 mile non-lubricant-needing sort of automobile). And I’m noticing as I’m looking around for opportunities for writers that we seem to have our newspapers drying up and the worldwide wait has actually become the World Wide Web, and the information highway actually has some information on it nowadays, and I was wondering whether you’ve thought about getting yourself a blog.
Trillin: Well, actually, my daughters call me “Net Boy,” but I think they mean it ironically. [Laughter] I think they mean most things they say about me ironically. I haven’t. I’ve written all my life to make a living. That’s one of the reasons I do it, and blogs, at this point, I don’t quite understand how they’re going to work to make a living. And it’s really partly as simple as that. Not that The Nation is enriching me, either. [Laughter] But I think a lot of people are getting into it, and I think really in the last few years it has changed appreciably. It used to be there was a sort of mess out there. I think of the Internet as sort of …. Well, I guess there is an encyclopedia like that on the Internet. If you said, Anybody who sends in the first entry, that will be the entry, then on Jefferson, it may be the greatest Jefferson scholar alive, and on Andrew Jackson, it’s some guy who thinks Andrew Jackson came from a space vehicle or something. It was particularly true at the beginning. Now I think it’s getting regularized more. I look at some of those blogs, but I don’t have any desire at this point to do one. I think in some ways I’m still sort of stuck in the print culture just as a matter of age, even though it sometimes feels that I’m working for a buggy whip company or something like that. That’s what I do. No, I’m not going to be a bloggist, I don’t think.

Question from the Audience: You’ve made several comments about your experiences at Yale and mentioned something about how the school grooms people and it wasn’t unexpected that your friend might have grown up to be president, for instance. Obviously, George Bush and his father and Dick Cheney went to Yale as well.

Trillin: Well, I had a theory that Cheney was picked as vice president because he was the only living American politician who had a less distinguished record at Yale than George Bush. [Laughter]

Question from the Audience (continued): It is true that Cheney did not graduate from Yale. But they’re surrounded by Scooter Libby, Stephen Hadley, Porter Goss, John Bolton, John Negroponte, David Frum, Paul Bremer, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle….

Trillin: Perle? We’re not responsible for Perle.

Question from the Audience (continued): OK. That was the one I wasn’t totally sure of. [Laughter]

Trillin: Yeah. I thought so. You need a fact checker. [Laughter]

Question from the Audience (continued): Is this simple cronyism? Is there something about people who go to Yale who think they have a right to grow up to run the world…

Trillin: Oh, definitely. [Laughter]

Question from the Audience (continued): …or is it instilled as part of the rituals there to tell people that they really can do anything they want?
Trillin: Well, first, I’d like to say in deference to Justice O’Connor that Stanford pretty much controls the Supreme Court. [Laughter/Applause] So nobody complains about that. I’ve never heard any complaints about that.

Well, I think there are a couple of things. Some of those people are from Yale Law School, although not too many of them. Libby was Yale College. Yale Law School always had a reputation as a place that attracted people who wanted to go to law school but didn’t necessarily want to practice law. And a lot of them have ended up in public service in one way or another. I’m not sure it’s fair to call it cronyism because most of those people didn’t know George Bush at Yale; they were in different classes.

I want you to put out a correction on Perle. [Laughter] I actually did a poem once called “Richard Perle: Whose Fault is He?” [Laughter] Now this is an ethics thing, so this is a case where I just baldly made up a fact. I saw Richard Perle on television a lot, and I looked at him and I thought, There is a mama’s boy who was pushed around in fourth grade and is getting back. He’s a tough guy, but it happens to be other people’s sons who are getting killed, and so I wrote a poem, “Richard Perle: Whose Fault is He?” And it was about how he was pushed around and now he’s getting back and all that. And about a week later… I didn’t even know where he was from… about a week later, I get a phone call from somebody I had met 20 years before at a dinner party. He said his wife went to grade school with Perle in Los Angeles and is still friendly with a lot of her friends from there and they’re interested in finding out, how did I know this? [Laughter] I said, “You mean it’s true?” You can’t even invent a slander in this country anymore! So then, somebody wrote The Nation in defense of Perle, saying he wasn’t really a sissy, although the way she made him sound in the letter…. [Laughter] So I answered the letter in The Nation saying, “Fine, you didn’t laugh when Rocko Gunterman…. (Oh, first I called the person back and found out some names—not Rocko Gunterman—I made that up, too.) But I said, “You didn’t laugh when Rocko Gunterman from Mrs. Whatever-it-is’ sixth-grade class called him “Perlie Girl,” and all this, so you’re not responsible at all for the invasion of Iraq. [Laughter] Then she wrote back! Really silly to write back to somebody who has no compunction about making things up. I said, “You weren’t one of the girls who used to push him down the hill on Fuller Street,” which is true. So she said he did live on Fuller Street and she was in Mrs.Whatever-it-is’ class, but there wasn’t any Rocko Gunterman. [Laughter] So I asked The Nation, and The Nation said, “Come on! Quit.” And I said, “No, no. I get to try one more time.” And I said, “Rocko Gunterman, whose existence you deny, says ‘Tell Perlie Girl to meet me at the swings at five o’clock on Friday and tell him not to bring two teachers and his mother this time.” [Laughter] I said, “Gunterman is a psychotherapist in Sherman Oaks.” [Laughter] So we had nothing to do with Perle.

The rest of it, I don’t know. I wonder about that. Actually, Yale is getting a little better because it used to be that it was associated totally with the OSS and CIA, so now we’re getting into public service that you can actually tell your neighbors about. [Laughter]
**Question from the Audience:** Your custom of visiting small towns in remote states: have you extended that to Western Europe, and if so, do you have any comments on British cuisine? [Laughter]

**Trillin:** I was talking the other day about a kid that I used to call the Tiny Deflator from the Back Seat who says something that makes you realize that what you’ve said is foolish or not quite true—which never ends, by the way. When I was going to my high school reunion (I was in San Francisco and I was about to go to Kansas City), my sweet older daughter who’s 37 said, “Are you staying with the Saylors?” And I said, “Yes, Bill is very involved with the reunion; he was president of the class.” And she said, “Oh, I didn’t know that. What were you?” And I said, “I was president of the student council,” and she said, “You never told me that.” I said, rather modestly, I thought, “Well, it never came up.” She said, “Isn’t that kind of a dorky thing to be?” [Laughter] When my other daughter was about eight or nine, I picked her up from a sleepover. My wife had a business partner who wrote a cookbook of British food. She wanted to call it *Much Maligned*, and they called it, of course, *Great British Cooking*, or something like that. And I said, “You know, it’s nice to be in a business where you can work anywhere. On the way over here, I was having trouble thinking of the first line for the introduction of Jane’s cookbook, and I thought of it.” She said, “What is it?” I explained a couple of words in it that she didn’t understand and then I said, “I think it’s unfair for people to say that the British have neither a cuisine nor a sense of humor since their cooking is a joke in itself.” [Laughter] She laughed and laughed, and then she said, “I don’t get it.” [Laughter/Applause]

**Gonnerman:** Alan Acosta, Calvin Trillin, thank you very much for a delightful evening. The Aurora Forum will convene again on April 20 when we will discuss “Democracy and the Middle East: Prospects and Problems” with Larry Diamond and Abbas Milani. We hope to see you then. Good night.

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**Alan Acosta**

Alan Acosta is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who is Associate Vice President and Director of University Communications at Stanford.

**Calvin Trillin**

Famous as America's “deadline poet,” Calvin Trillin has been a gadfly in verse for *The Nation* since 1990, delighting readers with his rhyming observations on the news of the day. A staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1963 and columnist for *Time* magazine, Trillin has traveled America's highways and byways to keep his finger on the nation's pulse (and its palate). One of the most stylish and humorous of contemporary food writers, his articles have an uncanny way of revealing as much about what people are thinking and feeling as what they are eating. His seventeen books and two critically acclaimed one-man shows at the American Place Theatre have brought him renown as a most gifted and irreverent wit. A native of Kansas City, he attended Yale University, served as chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, and became a member of Scroll and Key
before graduating in 1957. He was a trustee of Yale University and is currently a trustee of the New York Public Library. He is married, has two daughters, and lives in Greenwich Village.

Comments?
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