



Photos courtesy of CNN

Aaron Brown

by Aliza Davidovitz

know news is
good news

When John F. Kennedy was shot to death on November 22, 1963, the entire world was glued to the television in a manner unprecedented in broadcast history. All Americans were shocked, some were heartbroken, and many were filled with uncertainty. But there was one 10-year-old American boy named Aaron who was never more certain of anything than what he had decided that day: He would become one of those men he watched with fascination on TV, the ones with front row seats to history—a reporter. From his living room, the young boy watched the continuous news coverage and was enraptured by the immediacy of TV. He knew he wanted to be “there” wherever “there” was. He had never imagined, however, that one day he would be in the front row of history, and that it would be standing on the roof of CNN’s New York headquarters covering the next most shocking and heartbreaking day in American history—September 11th.

Over Aaron Brown’s left shoulder the world watched as the Twin Towers collapsed. It was his 13 hours of continuous news coverage of that tragic event that turned this award-winning journalist of twenty five years into a household name. Some would say he became an overnight success; others, who knew better,

would say he'd been a success for 25 years, but it took September 11th to show what he was made of all along.

That fateful day in American history was the apex of a career which he began a quarter of a century ago as a talk show host in the small town of Hopkins, Minnesota. He soon relocated his unique radio voice to bigger and better markets and then made a medium shift to TV as anchor and reporter for Seattle's King-TV. As an anchor and correspondent at ABC News for 10 years before going to CNN, he played a lead role in covering major stories such as Nelson Mandela's rise to the presidency of South Africa, the O.J. Simpson trial, the death of Princess Diana, the Columbine High School shooting and so many more. As a professional he was ready for 9/11; as a human being, he was not.

In the privacy of his hotel room in New York City, Brown "cried like a baby" he told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter. "I'm not having an easy time with this emotionally," he said at the time. "I've had some trouble with some of the images, with the planes, the crashes...sometimes when I go home, [or] wherever the bed for the night is, it just comes out."

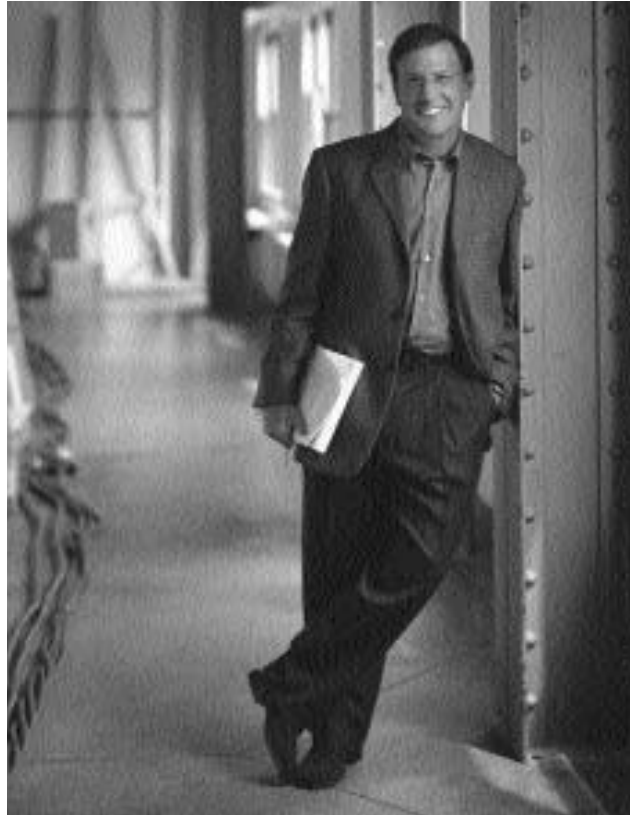
Brown says that anchors are not heartless machines. And though he certainly doesn't cry on the air, he refers to journalism's most respected news man, Walter Cronkite, and reminds us that Cronkite himself shed a tear on TV when JFK was shot.

In fact, getting in touch with his feelings is what makes Aaron Brown different than most anchors. Every night he prefaces his 10 p.m. EST show, *NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, with a brief editorial essay that lets viewers know what he is personally thinking and feeling.

"The essay gives me a place to say, this is where I am today," Brown explains.

"Here's what's on my mind, here's what gives me joy or makes me sad, here's what's bothering me."

What had bothered Brown for a long time was that his own styles and abilities were not being put to their best use at ABC News. "When I was anchoring programs at ABC, I was trying to be the anchor I thought they wanted me to be," Brown



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am much more me now," Brown says, as the anchor of his own show. "But, I can still hear Peter Jennings' voice every night saying, "Sit up straight!"

Whether Brown is sitting up straight or off to the side a bit, he is undoubtedly all over the show. He often writes or rewrites 90% of the show's content, and approves all scripts and news packages before they make it into his broadcast.

But with this Jewish anchor weighing in on editorial decisions, many Jews wonder why CNN's news coverage has allegedly taken on an anti-Israel bias.

"I think CNN ought to be proud and not defensive about how we cover the [Israeli-Palestinian] story. That's not to say we are perfect," Brown says. "On the issue of balance, we have a complicated story and I believe both sides have a story to tell. I believe absolutely that Israelis have legitimate security questions that need to be understood. I also believe that the Palestinians have real issues that need to be explored."

Brown says that it is a fundamental Jewish value not to deny a voice to other people. "We know better than almost any people on earth the price

tells *Lifestyles*. "I often felt like I was wearing my father's clothes." In addition, his evident talent was overshadowed by ABC's plethora of other great talents: John Miller, Charlie Gibson, Ted Koppel, and the main man, Peter Jennings. He gladly admits that he learned an enormous amount from Jennings and that he is very grateful to him. But it was a permanent anchor spot that Brown wanted and with little opportunity to acquire that at ABC it was anchors aweigh for Aaron Brown in order to make his own career set sail.

At his behest, Brown was kindly released from his contract with ABC and was off to CNN to fill the anchor chair he had longed dreamed of. "Stylistically, I

that is paid when people have no voice," Brown adds. To the Jewish groups that sometimes come down hard on him, he says: "They cannot expect of me to be a 'Jewish' anchor, somehow reflecting a particular point of view. What they have every right to expect of me, as a man, is that I live my life in the way of the great traditions and values of my religion and upbringing."

Though Brown himself does not practice Judaism in the traditional sense, his wife of 20 years, Charlotte, who converted to Judaism and was once a reporter herself, takes great pride in running a Jewish home, going to synagogue, and is herself studying to become bat mitzvah. Brown himself never had a bar mitzvah,

but he did take great pride and joy in his daughter Gabby's bat mitzvah which was soon after 9/11.

"I was so proud of her and so blown away by her presence and her knowledge and self-assuredness," Brown recollects. "She is not the kind of kid that likes to be the center of attention, but she was up there and she owned the joint."

If Brown was able to recuse himself from the dictates of practical Judaism, he could not escape from antisemitism. He tells how as a young child in elementary school in the '50s, all the children would be given an hour and a half off every Friday to go to religious instruction whether at church or the priest's house, but the Jews had nowhere to go, so they would be given extra home work. "That was stunningly unfair," Brown recalls. He remembers one teacher in the sixth grade telling him, "You really should go with the Lutheran kids; it'll do you some good."

In the mid '80s Brown had a place to go, with fellow Jews, which "did him good": the State of Israel. Brown tells how one particular Jewish organization rounded up the ten least religious "who's who" they could find—he among them—and sent them off to the Promised Land. "It was a wonderful experience," Brown says. "It was moving and enlightening in ways that I never thought it could be and ways that really surprised me."

He remembers one Friday night in Jerusalem sitting on a stone wall that overlooked the Western Wall and watching the magnificent splendor of the sunset. "It was the prettiest scene I had ever seen." He felt transported in time as he watched old Hasidic men who looked as if they had just come out of a *shtetl* in 1855, walking toward the Wall for Sabbath services. "I could imagine my grandfather in that group," Brown recounts. "It is one of the most vivid images I have ever had, but it was a trip that my grandfather never got to make. I felt a really interesting connection with my history and find it moving 'til this day."

Brown says that he is also troubled to this day by a rabbi he met on that same

trip whose extreme position toward the Palestinians was quite "ungodly."

It is hard to believe that the very opinionated and outspoken Aaron Brown, who broadcasts nightly to an audience of almost a million viewers, is very shy. He admits that being shy is hardly one of his best qualities. He tells *Lifestyles* how he and his wife will often attend parties in two different cars. "I'm just not one of those people who can walk into any room and feel comfortable," he says. "I'll just get to a point where I can't deal with it anymore, and then I leave early in my own



Photos courtesy of CNN

car." He admits that of the dozens of invitations he receives every week, he attends very few of the events. "I am grateful that I work the nightshift, so that I can decline without offending anyone."

At age 53 Brown doesn't think he'll be overcoming his shyness anytime soon. But when it comes to getting the "gets" (the industry's word for "getting" big interviews), Brown's shyness is MIA. "Over the last 25 years I have walked up to almost anybody and introduced myself and gone to work!"

For Aaron Brown, his job is a labor of love. He can't even pinpoint what he loves best about it. He relishes the fact that every night he gets to be the storyteller, the one who tells people what is important and what happened in the world today.

"To say that I am blessed doesn't give the word blessing enough force," Brown feels. He is very grateful to CNN for the opportunity they have given him to make his dreams come true. The only thing he dislikes about his job is that he gets home at

midnight, past his daughter's bedtime. (One of his favorite pastimes is cooking with Gabby.)

But if Brown is getting home late at night, he is at least in good company, interviewing kings and prime ministers. He usually has admiration for the people he interviews, especially when they are forthright and work hard. He has a special affinity for King Abdullah Hussein of Jordan, whom Brown regards as a very thoughtful and smart man. "He has an important voice in the Middle East and he has to be very careful how he says things," Brown comments.

Brown, spent some time with the King off-camera talking about kids and shopping and has taken a genuine and personal liking to him. The unassuming anchorman was honored that Abdullah Hussein invited him to dinner if he ever found himself in Jordan. "Did he really mean it?" Brown asked Hussein's PR person. "With you, he meant it," she affirmed.

One interview that would really intimidate Brown, but that he would love to get nonetheless, is with the Pope. "Really smart people scare me," admits a self-taught Brown who never graduated from university. Brown admits that sometimes he feels a little insecure about not having a degree. He also says that the one thing he missed out on by not having a formal education was studying the great authors like Faulkner and Shakespeare in a university setting. "There is something special about literature when you come together in a group and talk about it," he feels.

But even without a diploma, Aaron Brown is never at a loss for words and grills his guests with great questions. He has indeed himself become one of "those men"—a reporter—that a new generation of youngsters watch with fascination in living rooms across America.

Yes, Aaron Brown is a unique anchorman who has become known for his ability to ask the thoughtful questions that get to the heart of the matter. When asked if he could interview God and ask him but one question, he thought in silence for a profound moment and replied, "I'd ask God whether He regretted giving man free will?" [lifestyles](#)