

TOM BROKAW

A KIND OF COMMON-MAN APPROACH

Tom Brokaw, anchor, managing editor and chief correspondent of the NBC News early evening program, is responsible for the editorial content and presentation of the newscast. But he's never lost what he calls a "common-man approach" to life, the legacy of his Midwestern roots.

Thomas John Brokaw was born in Webster, S. Dak. On Feb. 6, 1940, his father was a foreman on a dam being built by the United States Army Corps of Engineers. By 15, he had an after-school job as a radio announcer and he paid for his education at the University of South Dakota by working as a roving radio reporter.

After earning a B.A. in political science in 1962, Brokaw signed on as a newscaster and morning news editor at MMTV, the NBC affiliate in Omaha. By 1976, he was co-hosting the Today show.

Brokaw has played an active role in NBC prime time news specials, including a Conversation with Mikhail Gorbachev and China in Crisis.

Brokaw married Meredith Lynn Auld, a former Miss South Dakota on Aug. 17, 1962. His wife, an English teacher by training, is co-owner of Penny whistle, a toy shop on the upper east side of Manhattan. The Brokaws have three daughters and maintain homes in both Manhattan and the state of Connecticut.

M.M. What part of you Midwestern roots and values have stayed with you and how have they affected you as a newsman?

T.B. I think I have a kind of common-man approach to life and the way I see things. Even with the material gains I've been able to realize in this job.

I work very hard. My father and mother both were role models in terms of work ethic. They believed in the value of work and the honor of hard work and that it was a reward in itself, to say nothing of the other rewards it might bring.

I think the West and the Midwest also teach you the importance of personal honor and integrity – that a man or woman's word is the bond between you and others. There are so many trappings in life that can obstruct that; you have to be careful.

Also, as you're bearing witness to right now, growing up how and where I did, you hate to talk about yourself. There's this kind of getting along by solving your own problems and not complaining too much and not enjoying too much hubris.

M.M. You've said your dad was a great moral force, a great counterweight in your life. What do you mean?

T.B. Both my father and mother were. They were children of the depression who grew up without anything, in a material sense.

My father had been all but an abandoned child and had to drop out of school when he was 10 years old and work fairly hard over a number of years to build a

family, and security for his family. And he did that in absolute partnership with my mother; they both worked and loved each other.

When I think of my father, who died in 1981, I think of his enormous sense of joy, and hard work, and his ability not to take himself or what he did too seriously. My mother, the same thing. She always had a lot of imagination, and I think I've been able to live out her life in a way.

M.M. A woman reporter once described you as "the most feminist journalist" around. Is that grounded in the relationship you had with your mother?

T.B. I think it had to do with both my mother and father and how they treated each other. I was amazed, even when I got into high school and saw how other males treated their wives or son's treated their mothers. There was certainly none of that in our household.

I married a very strong woman and we have three daughters; they all had similar attitudes, in part because those were my expectations for them, but, more importantly, they were their own expectations for themselves.

M.M. You seem to have always been on a direct, clear career path. Were you propelled by a burning ambition?

T.B. I think I was, earlier. I think all young people come out of college pedaling as hard as they can. But I didn't have a fixed goal. I always wanted to succeed at whatever I did. I'm driven by that. I was doing it for my own sense of gratification, satisfaction and fulfillment.

I was fascinated by the 60's and 70's and spent a lot of time covering the counterculture. I was the first television reporter to go to Haight-Ashbury. I spent a lot of time in Berkeley, and not always in coat and tie.

And while I was fascinated with this re-examination of society and values, I always knew what my own core values were and what I stood for. I was willing to examine those other points of view and I was very tolerant of them and liberal in my attitude toward them. But it was just not a lifestyle I chose for myself, I guess because I did have a clear sense of where I wanted to get to.

M.M. You have often said that your wife has been instrumental in the direction and quality of your life. How would you describe what she has done?

T.B. The quality is easy to talk about. She is someone I love more than I care to discuss in public.

It's just one of those things that happens to a few people. All the stars run in the right alignment and that's a base of security and comfort; it's hard to describe to people who've not in some way experienced it.

We've divided up a life: she can't tell a story but she can laugh at all of mine. She is an enormously "steady -as-she- goes" person who has all these skills and yet an inclination not to be flamboyant about any of them. So all the patterns fit together in quite a harmonious way for us.

I'm a little more daring, more of a risk-taker but she's willing to take the risk, which is important. Our life is very interesting for the two of us because we have dual careers. I can share with my own sense of triumphs and frustrations and she does the same with me.

We bring to this relationship some common interests, but diverse points of view and activist philosophy.

In terms of direction, in this business especially, she's not at all star-struck. It's not important to her that I appear on television every night. She's been the beneficiary of some of the rewards of it all and we both acknowledge that, but, very like my mother and father, if this all came apart tomorrow, what she knows and I know is that we have each other and these three great children, and we've had a hell of a run.

M.M. Your daughters are now 24, 22, and 20. As a father, what have you tried to pass on to them?

T.B. I think you always have to be careful that you don't try to design their lives for them. You want to be there for them and stay close to them in terms of helping them shape values and offering guidance and setting limits when they're younger. But mostly it's being there for them, knowing that you're always available and not just on the telephone.

It's picking up and going off to see them if you need to, it's making sure they can come see you.

M.M. You've said you've never been motivated purely by money, yet you make over \$2 million a year. What is the role of money in your life?

T.B. It buys me toys I never thought I'd have. The best thing about having money for me is how you can give it away. I love that.

I've got more money than I can spend, I suppose, although Mrs. Brokaw tells the girls – because we believe so strongly in the dangers of trust funds and inheritances – not entirely in a jocular manner: "Don't wait around, because we're going to spend it all"

M.M. Age-wise, you've hit the "big five-0. Can you reflect on where you've been and where you're going?

T.B. Where I've been has been terrific; where I'm going I have no idea.

I have talked to a number of my friends who have just gone through the same passage, and you're no longer young when you're 50. You can fake it up to 49, then when you're 50 you're no longer the youngest person in the room, or the youngest person to do whatever you've set out to do.

That's an abrupt departure for me, because, as immodest as this is, I was kind of boy wonder for a while, and that gives you lots of latitude; you can be kind of outrageous, and people will always excuse you on the basis of youth.