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THE WRIGHT PROCESS

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER LAWRENCE WRIGHT ON
WRITING, DONKEYS AND HIS 4X6 APPROACH TO RESEARCH

PHOTOS BY BEN SKLAR

Lawrence Wright stood poolside in Pakistan, his thoughts focused on the phone call he'd received hours earlier. Should he stay or should he go home? A good friend would go home. A good writer would stay.

But he couldn't be both good friend and good writer, not with this story.

The phone call was painful. His friend had died, his good friend, and Lawrence Wright chose to stay there, poolside in Pakistan, rather than fly back to Austin and attend the good friend's funeral. Rather than spend time with his wife of 44 years, Roberta, and their two adult children, Gordon and Caroline. He chose writing over life, research over friendship, Pakistan over a good friend.

Wright slipped into the dark water, his thoughts muddled, aching for the friend he missed and the kind of friend he couldn't be, the kind who leaves Pakistan to attend a funeral. He wondered: *Is the story worth it?*

As he swam in the chlorinated coolness, Wright wondered, too, if he should turn back to religion. A somewhat devout Methodist growing up in Dallas, he left organized religion

as a teenager but he respects its place in a man's life, even a doubting man's life. Especially a man swimming alone in a hotel pool at midnight in Islamabad looking for answers.

And it was at that moment, in those waters, he heard what a religious man might call the voice of God. But Wright called it a feeling, an answer as clear and as simple as it was profound. Your job is to create meaning.

He repeated those same words again in his home office in Austin 10 years after that swim in Pakistan. "Your job is to create meaning," he says. "That's not saying that's true for every writer or artist, but it's what I consider my mission."

Wright has had similar existential experiences in life — a handful, he says — but that night helped mark a turning point in his career. The book he chose to stay in Pakistan for and research was *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. He spent nearly two and a half years abroad, traveling to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well as Pakistan. It won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 2007 and is the definitive book on pre-9/11 al-Qaeda told through multiple characters including Osama

bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri; Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence, and John O'Neill, the FBI's former head of counterterrorism. *The Looming Tower* launched Wright's career to new levels, spawning an HBO special and a one-man play, *My Trip to Al-Qaeda*.

But he couldn't have known that back in 2004. Back then he had to choose the story because writing isn't what he does. It's who he is. Wright devotes years of his life to some stories, researching how recalled memories can turn little girls into liars (*Remembering Satan: A Tragic Case of Recovered Memory*), tracing the formation of al-Qaeda (*The Looming Tower*), and why wealthy screenwriters and actors succumb to Scientology (*Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood and The Prison of Belief*). His dedication to the story — even his own — is not something new. It's something he's practiced since before becoming a Pulitzer-winning author and a two-time National Magazine Award winner. For *Going Clear*, published in 2013, Wright delved into the conflicting truths and disturbing practices of Scientology with the same researcher's focus he used to profile

1980s televangelist Jimmy Swaggart and Mormons and twins early in his career. Even as a young freelancer, he always pursued the tough big stories, no matter the personal costs, the time away from home, the struggle to make a steady living.

A banker's son, Wright grew up an uncomfortable Methodist in Dallas and came of age in the turbulent 1960s. Religion is a theme commonly explored in many of his works, but Wright is less interested in religious rigor than in its power of persuasion over people. A

“I don't think that you can out-amaze me by inventing things. Reality throws so many surprises your way.”

conscientious objector, he spent two years in Egypt avoiding Vietnam and studying Arabic at one of the most crucial times in Middle East history. His understanding of the people, culture and language helped him research *The Looming Tower* as well as *The Siege*, a 1998 movie screenplay he wrote about Muslim extremists in New York and the government's warrantless detention and torture of Arab-Americans. (Denzel Washington, Bruce Willis and Annette Bening starred. It became the most rented movie in America after 9/11.)

Wright's last two books, *The Looming Tower* and *Going Clear*, earned him acclaim. But it is his science-like approach to writing that even experienced writers find daunting. He is as organized as he is disciplined, as thorough as he is creative. For his narratives, he taps every source (600 for *The Looming Tower*, 200 for *Going Clear*), sometimes interviewing them dozens of times, taking notes in longhand on lined, canary yellow writing tablets (4,100 pages for *The Looming Tower*). He distills the most important information on white 4x6 cards, which he meticulously catalogues by subject matter. Wright swears his research method isn't as inscrutable as it seems, and like a patient professor, is happy to teach his methodology to anyone who will listen.

But it's not just his process of “horizontal interviews” or “the rubber band theory” or the “donkeys” that Wright employs to tell his stories. It's his ability to see the DNA of a narrative in his 4x6 cards, whether it's a book narrative (he's written eight), a screenplay (two) or play (six, with HBO developing a new drama

series, *God Save Texas*, based on Wright's 2005 play, *Sonny's Last Shot*.) Research is how Wright builds tracks through his stories. It's how he makes readers believe he understands the root causes of terrorism and what motivates young men to board planes and slam them into the World Trade Center. Using taped deathbed confessions from Sarah Northrup, L. Ron Hubbard's second wife — Wright won't say how he got the tapes — he makes readers question if the founder of Scientology wasn't much more than a brutal bully.

Wright draws his readers through hundreds and hundreds of pages, with multiple storylines and scenes, and decades of data and facts, and makes them see the story, not feel the research. He outlines and interviews until nonfiction feels like fiction. His method is in the cards and in the legal pads (of the right color) and in the disciplined organization, yes, but most writers have a method. Most have a process that works for them but few are as successful, over multiple media, for sustained time. Process and method aren't why readers keep reading. Or why Larry keeps writing.

Lawrence Wright, at 66, is still working hard even as friends retire. “I don't have a fat pension,” he says. So what motivates the grandfather, keyboardist, screenwriter, playwright, actor, author, writer for *The New Yorker*, and if you ask some Scientologists, a “suppressive person,” to risk his life, his reputation, his family, his friendships?

What keeps a man in Pakistan?

SETTING THE STAGE

Wright's sanctuary in Austin is an upstairs bedroom converted to a home office. It's the kind of place you would expect a scholar to occupy, with thick black carpet and rows of spruce bookshelves lining the walls. There are lots of windows, but his desk doesn't face them — he doesn't like looking out windows while writing. On a shelf alongside pictures of family and friends, there's a baseball signed by members of the 1956 Philadelphia Phillies and a signed Dallas Cowboys football — a nod to his hometown team.

This is where he recently finished *Cleo*, a play about the making of the 1963 Elizabeth Taylor-Richard Burton movie, *Cleopatra*. (“It's my favorite thing I ever wrote,” he says, noting that the research and writing were fun.) This is where he is editing his yet-to-be-released novel, *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David*. (A play on the subject, which he was commissioned to write, opened in Washington, D.C., in spring.)

His 2-inch opus on the Middle East peace accords lies on his desk held tight with a large bulldog clip. Wright had the writer's desk specially made of mahogany and spruce. *Look*, he says, showing off its finer features: The left wing has a raised lip where Wright places his rewrites — other desks don't have that, he says proudly. A stack of papers — notes from friends — wait in the rewrite area. He's going through their suggestions: *Keep the audience in mind, not everyone is familiar with the 1978 Camp David accords*, one friend writes.

Like the writer himself, the office breathes masculine. Wright looks fit, with thick graying hair. Horn-rimmed reading glasses are the only concession to age. Clad in brown corduroys and brown dress shoes, he talks about using throwaway phones to talk to terrorists and encrypted emails to communicate with Scientologists as though these were everyday matters as mundane as setting the house alarm or remembering to turn off the stove. When he stops to think, he locks his arms behind his head. When he speaks, he sounds *New Yorker*-smart but with a Texas accent. Somehow it feels a little less intimidating when he talks, when he looks at you with his keen blue eyes and smiles when something is funny and laughs a genuine laugh.

He is as much a fixture in this space as he is its master, a writer surrounded by his research. A few feet away are two sliding whiteboards for book notes. For his book on Scientology, he kept a chronological list of dates and events on the white board. For *The Looming Tower*, he kept his central characters separated into three color-coded columns. He covered the same board right to left in Arabic script, practice for a research trip abroad. (To brush up on the language, he hired a tutor who came to his house eight to 10 hours a week.) On a pedestal nearby is a Gutenberg-size dictionary. Off in one corner is one worn squeaky chair where guests are invited to sit, and squeak. And listen to Larry. And try not squeak.

He's eager to talk about his note cards and



walks over to a 2-foot-deep metal filing cabinet standing in one corner of his office. Each note card has typed information, a paragraph or less. He divides the cards according to subject and catalogues each one according to subject. “It's retro, I understand, but I haven't found a better way,” he says as he thumbs through note cards for *The Looming Tower*. There are tabs for each of the flights that crashed on 9/11 — in the field in Pennsylvania, into the twin towers and into the Pentagon. He points out a red divider tab that reads “Beheadings” and a green tab for “al-Qaeda.” This is not everything about al-Qaeda, he warns. “I could have 20 inches of information on al-Qaeda.”

He shuts the drawer and stands on what used be a balcony but now serves as an extended office area. On a sturdy dining room table in the center of the small space, he's stacked the tabletop — end to end — with research about

Camp David. Somewhere in the piles, Jimmy Carter's face is floating.

THE PROCESS MAN

Wright starts each week with a bike ride to a local bakery where he has breakfasted with close friends and fellow authors H.W. Brands, Gregory Curtis and Stephen Harrigan for 25 years. Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Caro, author of the acclaimed LBJ biographies, has also stopped by. (The breakfast club has spinoffs for wives and children, too.) These are the writers whose opinion Wright values. Their comments end up in stacks in his special rewrite area.

Wright always spends his mornings on research and afternoons on writing. On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, as the towers fell, Wright sat in his Austin office and reached for a canary yellow notepad and wrote one

name at the top of the list — Khaled al-Maena. Wright goes to his notepad box and pulls out the original pad where he made his notes that morning. Maena was an outspoken critic of the Saudis. As the body count rose, Wright kept writing down names and phone numbers. He was looking for his “donkeys” — beasts of burden, the characters who could transport the reader into the dark world of al-Qaeda. One name popped up in *The Washington Post* obituaries and caught Wright's attention: John O'Neill, then head of security at the World Trade Center and former FBI counterterrorism chief. O'Neill had hunted for Bin Laden. Bin Laden had found him instead.

The list soon took on international proportions: Saudis, Pakistanis, Sudanese. As it grew, the process man took over. “As soon as I get their telephone number, I write it down into the margin and when I talk to them, I highlight

the names so that I know that I've spoken to them. And then you go talk to these people and you say, 'Well, who else should I talk to?' Eventually, there are thousands and thousands of names."

As he talks, he flips through pages of his original notepads, now 13 years old, for *The Looming Tower*. "It goes on and on. That's the process of populating the universe of the story that you're writing. You find out just generally who's in the story. You find out in the newspaper just generally some names and you always say, 'Who else should I talk to?' and then you go talk to them and then you say, 'Who else should I talk to?' and then you go talk to them," he says. "Eventually, the roots sink really deep into the story. Eventually you're not going to hear any new names. And you know that the universe of this story has been fully fleshed-out." That is what Wright calls horizontal reporting. "It's the fundamental rule of journalism: Talk to everybody you can."

The process man preaches vertical reporting, too. "Some of these people are more knowledgeable, more interesting, more candid than others. And you go back to them again and again and again. You need to be able to go back to your sources. You realize that they're key to you. They're key narrators for your story," says Wright. "It seems like there were 600 people I interviewed [for *The Looming Tower*] but some of those people I interviewed dozens and maybe even a hundred times. Because they were the people who could tell me the story in the most authentic and interesting way."

One of the first men Wright interviewed for *The Looming Tower* was Khalid Khawaja, the man Mariane Pearl blames for the beheading of her husband, *The Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, in Pakistan. Khawaja is believed to have let the kidnappers know that Pearl was Jewish. "I usually trust my instincts to know if danger is lurking or if people are telling me a load of crap. You have to develop those instincts. I felt pretty confounded in Pakistan," says Wright.

Another key in the process is building tension, or as Wright calls it, the rubber band theory. Put a question in the readers' mind and don't answer it for as long as you can, he says. He begins the first page of the *The Looming Tower* with a simple question, "In a first-class stateroom on a cruise ship bound for New York from Alexandria, Egypt, a frail, middle-aged writer and educator named Sayyid Qutb experienced a crisis of faith. 'Should I go to

America as any normal student on a scholarship, who only eats and sleeps, or should I be special?'" Qutb, a writer who became the Karl Marx of the Islamic movement, eventually returns to Egypt and is hanged.

For his HBO film, *My Trip to Al-Qaeda*, Wright tells the audience at the beginning, "You never know when your life is going to change forever." The audience is left wondering: *How did his life change?* "The fact that I've written screenplays has helped me understand how to guide the reader. You know, create characters, create scenes that are more gripping and visceral for the reader," says Wright. On the other hand, he brings journalistic techniques to his dramatic efforts. "I always feel that things that are real are more amazing than things that are imaginary. It's just a bias of mine," he says. "I don't think that you can out-amaze me by inventing things. Reality throws so many surprises your way."

Wright dutifully numbers his notepads as well as his recorded conversations, with only the important highlights placed on note cards. Keeping material organized and close at hand in his metal filing cabinet is key to keeping the "locomotive moving" — not just for the writer, but the reader as well, he says. "In some unconscious way, if you're having to go and write in fits and starts because you don't have the material right at hand and under your command, then I think that in some way the writing is going to reflect that."

Wright's research assistant Lauren Wolf, who helped with *Going Clear*, transcribes interviews and works with her boss and mentor on long-form nonfiction stories. The close working relationship helped her learn when to stop researching and start writing. Seeing how Wright works, she says, "made me not try so hard to have that perfect first draft." Listening to his interviews has shown her the power of the long pause. He's not scared of silence, she says. He'll let it linger when most reporters try to fill the silence with senseless chatter. Interview subjects will want to fill the silence, too. "I listen differently now because of him," she says.

John Burnett, a national correspondent for National Public Radio in Austin, used Wright's research system on a recent investigative series and "it literally saved the story," he says. "I love the fact that he's nice and analog and 3D" in a Dropbox world. Wright takes on subjects most reporters won't touch, writing about al-Qaeda pre-9/11 and then tackling a chronology of the secretive and litigious Church of Scientology,



Burnett notes. "I can't think of anybody who takes on these subjects as ambitious as he does."

Wright makes it seem so easy now, but he was not always as successful. In the early years, he was scraping by, doing freelance. He felt pressure to provide for his family and wanted to write a bestseller. At a book release party for his 2000 novel, *Noriega: God's Favorite*, only four people showed up, a turnout that's often terminal to the careers of up-and-coming writers. But friend and *Texas Monthly* contributor Mimi Swartz says he persisted in pursuing difficult stories, no matter the cost in time and

money. "What I think about are the early years, when he was struggling financially. He held out doing the big stories," she says. "So many writers give up. He's unafraid to take that next big step. He keeps at it until it works."

SHARED THEMES

Wright's books and essays today often explore religious belief as well as themes of shame, humiliation and conversion that are common among believers of all faiths from Mormons, to Scientologists, to Muslims. "I'm fascinated," he says, "by how you can take

idealistic good people and have them believing things they never thought they'd believe and doing things they'd never thought they'd do. We're all influenced in our lives to a great or lesser extent." In his 1999 book, *Twins: And What They Tell Us About Who We Are*, Wright explored the life of twins separated at birth and uncovered research showing that even twins raised apart will share an interest and attachment to religious belief.

"Religious belief is more powerful than political beliefs. My observation is people can hold very strong political views. Rarely does

it actually affect their behavior. But powerful religious views are different in nature. They're very formative. And not just for individuals but for societies," he says. "I think that reporters tend to look past religion as something that we don't like to notice because it's impolite or it's irrelevant. I don't agree with that. I think the world of belief should be in every reporter's armor." By looking into people's beliefs, he says, "you might find out what strings are being pulled back there that caused them to believe the way that they do."

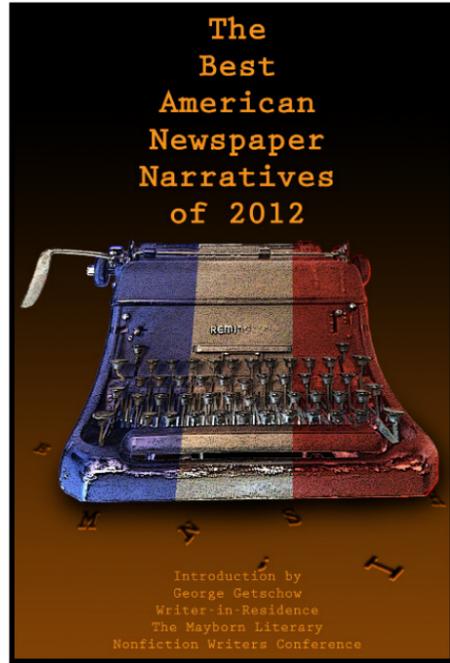
Wright's own religious youth in Dallas in the

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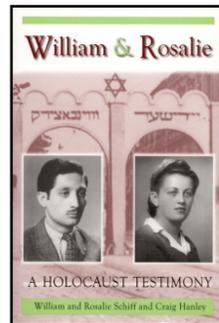
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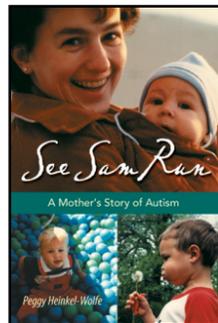
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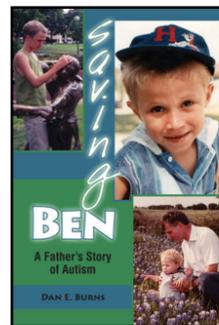
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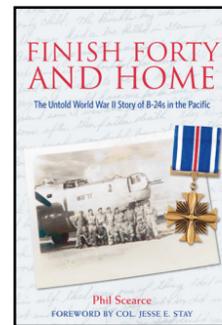
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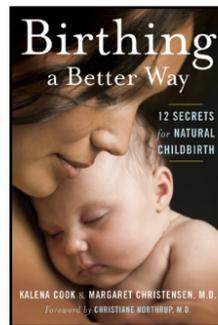
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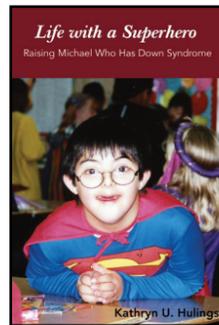
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1960s was formative. His family belonged to the First United Methodist Church Dallas where he joined Young Life, a youth group, and later the Campaigners, a more fervent offshoot that witnessed to other young people and drew them in with the promise of friendship and the Good News. Part of their work included performing reenactments of the kind of falsehoods, temptations and mistruths youth would face as they went on to college.

"I sure didn't convert anybody in high school," says Wright. "Mainly they were getting me to convince myself." His reenactment involved playing an intellectual who claimed

the '80s — Wright only stayed six months — and more recently on screenplays. Harrigan, one of Texas' most accomplished authors, agrees that much of Wright's writing success is due to his tremendous organizational skills.

But sometimes a writer "encounters the thing he was meant to write," says Harrigan, who saw the earliest drafts of *The Looming Tower* and knew it would be Wright's breakthrough book. "The reception and accomplishment of that book gave him a sense of personal authority and international recognition. In some ways, a new identity as a writer, a new power, a new sense of purpose," says Harrigan. "Having a success like

Wright plays keyboards with Austin-based WhoDo. **He started taking piano lessons at 38. Now 66, he trains with Floyd Domino.**

God was like a watchmaker who created a watch and then he died. "The universe is the watch and there's no God around it. And I did a very convincing job," says Wright. Then the group leader told him to refute himself. "I couldn't do it. I actually talked myself out of the whole Young Life thing. So, I went off to college and became an existentialist." Now, he can't think of a definitive religious label for himself. "I'm interested but not optimistic," he says.

Wright left Texas for Tulane University in New Orleans where he met Roberta and later attended the American University in Cairo. He returned to the states in 1971 and took his first reporting job at the *Race Relations Reporter* in Nashville — a white boy talking about race in the South, an irony that was not lost on him. Two years later, he went to work for *Southern Voices* out of Atlanta and freelanced for national magazines until he landed at *Rolling Stone* as a contributing editor. In 1992, he earned a coveted staff writer position at *The New Yorker*, but not before being rejected the first time he applied. His 2002 article "The Apostate" about screenwriter Paul Haggis and his public split with the Church of Scientology served as the foundation for Wright's bestseller, *Going Clear*.

that and [then writing] *Going Clear* settles your mind a little bit."

If Wright does something, say his colleagues and family, he does it all the way. After writing a magazine article on the 20th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, Wright had himself hypnotized in 1983 to see if he was one of the Dallas schoolchildren who'd reportedly laughed when news of the Kennedy assassination was announced. Under hypnosis, he remembered hearing the announcement over the PA system and a gush of breath. But he couldn't remember if he had laughed. When he wanted to play "Great Balls of Fire" for his 40th birthday, he began taking lessons at 38, starting with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Today he trains with Grammy award-winning "boogie woogie" keyboardist Floyd Domino. Wright also plays around Texas with his band WhoDo, looking the part of urban cowboy dressed in black jeans, black boots and a black pearl-snap cowboy shirt with embroidered white buffaloes.

Even after he publishes his books, he can't let go. When Wright learned that former Scientology spokesperson Tommy Davis had moved to Austin, he made a point of trying to see him. Davis finally answered the door last year and told Wright, "My views haven't changed." Wright wasn't surprised Davis still maintained the church's stance. "The only thing I knew for sure is I didn't want him to later have the opportunity to say 'Well, he never asked me.'"

That tenacity hasn't won Wright any favors. The Church of Scientology created a web-

site LawrenceWrightGoingClear.com, How Lawrence Wright Got it So Wrong, a chapter-by-chapter dissection of his bestselling book. The homepage features a Photoshopped image of Wright leering above a copy of the book — as evil in image as it is in message.

In the early 2000s, members of the Joint Terrorism Task Force came to Wright's Austin home and wanted to know why he was calling a phone number in London that belonged to a lawyer who represented jihadists. Wright told them it was for research, but they wanted to know about Caroline Wright, his daughter, whose name was not listed on any phone bills. That's how he learned they were listening to his calls. His daughter's name had been floating on illegally acquired telephone transcripts alongside the names of al-Qaeda members.

During his reporting for *The Looming Tower*, Wright got into a heated argument with a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and later found himself in an almost-friendship with people he was sure "had blood on their hands." His family worried about his time abroad. His wife worried more about the Scientologists. Wright joked that at least they wouldn't behead him. Roberta didn't think that was funny.

Yes, he does tire of writing about Scientologists and terrorists. Though he is a dogged writer and devoted family man, the cards are tedious, the time spent away from home is wearing, and the research is time-consuming even with an assistant. But the stories, he says, are insistent. They are seductive. They won't let go. And Larry can't let go either.

"It's for the story. You know, I am a very simple person. I am driven by the longing to tell great stories. It doesn't matter what form they're in. I just want to have the opportunity to create these narratives and it's primal with me," he says, leaning forward in his chair. "There's a sacrifice involved in wanting to be simply a storyteller and not a moneymaker or not a powerbroker or whatever. I'm the chronicler."

He raises his arms above his head, pinching his reading glasses between his fingers. He smiles a little and lets out a deep breath, as frustrated as he is resigned to the fact that his career will see no retirement.

He will always stand poolside in Pakistan and choose the story over a good friend. Over family. Over security. He will knock on the Scientologist's door one more time. He will fill another filing cabinet full of research and another whiteboard with timelines.

He won't quit because he can't quit. ●

NOBLE CHRONICLER

"Years ago we would just talk and talk and talk about how do we succeed. What would success be like and how would we achieve it," says Stephen Harrigan, a breakfast club member who worked with Wright at *Texas Monthly* in