WHY WRITE?

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Why Write?

Why write?

Why write when so many forces in the world seem pitched against writing?

Why write when it sometimes feels that so few people really read? I mean read slowly, tasting the words: read deliberately, as if their lives might be changed by what they're reading.

Too often now the public reads for information, not enlightenment. People read to be brought up to date and put in the know. They want telegraphic bursts of prose. They want the words to be transparent, not artful or arresting. They need to get right to the truth, or failing that, directly to the facts. It can seem now that writing is a service: the writer dishes up information the way the counterman dishes lunch at the fast-food restaurant. In his worst moments, the writer feels that the world doesn't really want writing: if by writing you mean thoughtful, nuanced interpretations of experience that could actually shift some basic perceptions—maybe even change some lives.

And if that is the case, why write? Why try, with as much selflessness as you can, to enlarge the contours of your mind—and to give others what real writing always has: pleasure and instruction, beauty and truth?

The world wants to be informed not enlightened, and the world wants to be entertained not inspired. Fiction writers now are supposed to give the readers exactly what they want. Novelists are to provide well-crafted, modest explorations of modest but badly crafted lives. Poets are to speak of themselves and themselves only (no big reach—no justifying God's ways to man, or man's to God) and speak in a timid whisper of a voice. To be a poet in America

now is a slightly shameful condition, like having a mild drug habit or talking occasional smack to other people's kids.

In America what once were artists are supposed to be entertainers. They shouldn't offer tough or potentially dispiriting work to the world: they need to shake their rattles and jangle their bells. They live in a culture that measures success by the number of copies sold not the number of spirits touched. They have to shorten their sentences and compress their sentiments to the common bandwidth. They ought to stop worshipping low-sale losers like Virginia Woolf (a suicide) or Herman Melville (died in despair) and begin to model their careers (writers now have *careers*) on palatable entertainers.

Get this straight, too. In America what once were essayists and critics are now consumer guides. They write not to tell us what art *they* favor. That would be elitist and narcissistic to boot. They write to let us know what we would like. They are in position to reflect taste (our taste) and not to shape it. They must use small neat words; they must pretend to like what the mass of their readers do; they must never make anyone feel dumb.

The artist is a glorified entertainer; the critic pens consumer reports. Under these conditions: Why write?

Why write when every day words seem to mean less and less? We are, it's said, becoming a culture of images. Developments in video technology have created wonders. A flat-screen TV delivers a vision that can seem more real than reality. The soft green landscape out my window can't compete in intensity with the high-def football game playing on the TV just below it. On the screen, life seems to be on fire. Every figure and every object appears to exude internally generated light. At the movies, we see that directors can put any image they wish on the screen. Dream it and your dream comes true. Would you destroy the Earth? Say the word to the special effects team, seated like obedient gnomes at their computers. Will you restore it all before the end of two hours? Done.

How can writing compete? How can shadowy etchings on the

surface of soon-to-yellow paper or bug-like squiggles on a screen touch the glittering image? The TV producer has become a demiurge. The film director is Jove. How can the inch-ling scraping along with his stylus ever compete? It's an open question now whether any traditional art can have the impact of the most modestly produced and conceived video diversion.

And if that is so: Why write?

There is another simpler and perhaps more serious objection to be made to writing. There is already too much of it. We live in a torrent of words that are already written and words fast coming into being. The Internet has made everyone a furious scribe; that much is understood. But beyond the Babel of words that flows daily into the world there is the accumulation of the most distinguished words—the best that has been known and thought. Libraries overflow with them and the Internet, for all its excesses, has brought us within a few strokes of *Paradise Lost* and *Regained.*

Why write when Shakespeare has already written? What has already been composed and is now there in the public domain is daunting in its magnificence and plenitude. An entire lifetime isn't enough to read all of the literature in English, or English translation that is worth reading. More lifetimes would be needed to take in the best of the sciences, law, social thought, and political reflection. Why try to add one's bit to this amazing horde of words, a treasure we can now see and enjoy online, with less exertion than it took the Arab merchant to whisper "open sesame"?

And why write when it is so damned hard to do? There really is no writing, one is told time and again. There is only rewriting, and in this there is some truth. The ones who have come before have set the bar high and every writer knows that no matter how lucky a day it has been, how smoothly the first draft rolled out, there will still be dozens of revisions and re-revisions. Writers often look at what they have done and say simply: "It doesn't work." When a mechanic says as much about the engine, he usually knows what's wrong and what needs to be done, or he can narrow it down to three or four possibilities. But the writer often has no comparable

clue. It's broken; she knows that. But what's the fix?

Walt Whitman implicitly compared writing to the work of "a noiseless, patient spider." The spider is constantly sending strands of filament into the void to create his web. Sometimes the strands catch and hold, but mostly they don't. The spider, undaunted, keeps letting the filaments flow. Whitman's suggestion is clear enough: the writer's efforts come from deep inside, out of his guts. When he fails, it is not language that is failing or the genre or the culture: he is the one who is failing and it is (dare one say it?) very much like a spiritual failure. Yeats says it as well as anyone ever could:

> A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
> Better go down upon your marrow-bones
> And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
> Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these, and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.

Yeats is right (and amazingly eloquent) but I doubt the lines have ever changed the mind of a single banker or priest about the writer's lot.

Writing is backbreaking, mind-breaking work. So, one might readily ask: Why bother?

Why write when the work is as lonely as it is? A writer is isolated in two senses. There is the obvious sense: she works all day (if she can) and she works alone. There is usually no one around to talk with; there is no one to complain to after you've bored your wife or husband near comatose for the thousandth time. We're told now over and over again that human beings are social animals. Life

is about the group. People who don't have a thrumming circle of friends and don't get out much are the ones who grow readily depressed. They become anxious; they entertain poison thoughts; they find themselves stuck with all the maladies that loneliness brings. We're now disposed to think collaboration is the name of the game: The best products are team efforts. Hit TV shows are created by committee. It takes a village to raise a child and it takes an army to make a film. Let's pool our talents. Let's all have a say. Let's put it to a vote, then e-mail and tweet until we've arrived at revelation. Meanwhile, the writer slogs on in her slightly toxic and highly suspect isolation.

There is the literal isolation of the writer: a room of her own can become a private cell, to which she's somehow lost the key. But the writer also takes her isolation into the world. Browning calls the poet God's spy and that's a complimentary way of putting it. We could say, more neutrally, that writers are almost always spies and have the kinds of lives that spying creates. They are constantly collecting information, making mental notes. Henry James said that often the foundation for a tale or even a novel of his was "a glimpse." A woman steps out of a tram in tears; an otherwise well-dressed man has holes in his shoes. In a crowd, writers are by themselves; at the party they may laugh with the group but often seem, both to themselves and to others, to be laughing alone. Once they've committed themselves to the writing game there is always a measure of detachment. Whitman said that he—or the part of himself that mattered most, the Me-myself—was never fully present. He was perpetually "in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it."

People live to achieve total absorption in the life around them: they want to be immersed in happy circumstances and feel calm and contentment. They find this state with their families, with their friends, watching a ballgame, or playing a round of golf. Writers out in the world almost never seem to achieve this condition; they are always watching and wondering at it. They rarely manage to disappear happily into their own lives. The only

time most writers can reliably get in sync with themselves is when they are writing—and then only when it's going supremely well. Outside the study (the cell) they are prone to feel that life is out of joint. And inside the cell—there they are alone, too.

There are so many reasons not to write and so many of them good: So why?

Because writing is one of the best acts a human being can turn his hand to. With all of these objections on file, and more besides, the case for writing remains overwhelming. Writing is a great human good, even a higher good than most of its best-known and most articulate advocates have told us. I mean real writing of course: writing that rises from the desire to give other people pleasure and instructions. I mean writing done with as much detachment from desire and purity of motive as possible. (Though no one could ever ask for that purity to be complete.) Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said that the limits of one's language were the limits of one's world. By coming up with fresh and arresting words to describe the world accurately, the writer expands the boundaries of her world, and possibly her readers' world, too. Real writing can do what R. P. Blackmur said it could: add to the stock of available reality.

There are plenty of bad reasons to write, and I'll be talking about them here. But mostly this book focuses on what seem the best reasons for giving oneself over to writing. Writing to make money and writing to possess the status of having written won't do much for you in the long run. But that's not all there is to writing. Writing can enlarge the mind and strengthen the spirit. It can improve character (if you let it). The process of writing can make you happy—or get you as close to happiness as people of a certain disposition are likely to come.

Writing—to highlight one of its benefits—can teach you to think. Doesn't everyone know how to think? Can't all of us reflect? We human beings are called the rational animals after all. But no, the truth is we can't. There's jumble and senseless rumble in our minds most of the time. We live in a stream of consciousness, and

that stream doesn't always go much of anywhere. Writing disciplines the mind the way hard workouts discipline the body. Writing compels us to reason and to give reasons. Then, after we've written we have to go back and check our work with a cold eye. We have to strengthen what's weak and reframe what's faulty. We strive to *make sense* as the saying goes. The saying touches on a truth. For sense is made not by coercing the facts or pumping up the rhetorical volume. Sense is made by sifting through the sand of our ignorance to find, here and there, the words and thoughts that persuade ourselves (truly) and perhaps consequently to persuade others.

I'm not sure how, without writing or intense conversation, we could ever learn how to think. Oh, we could learn to plot and scheme, all right. As human beings we are driven by desire—and usually we choose to try to satisfy that desire. So the practical mind comes into play, sometimes fiercely. But I persist in thinking that one hasn't really lived unless one has tried to think about a matter that doesn't touch on one's own immediate profit. We may never answer grand questions about human nature or what the best way of life for a man or woman is, but we are at our best when we pursue such questions. And to think well, we must train the mind much as the athlete trains the body. I sometimes think that to have been born with that majestic faculty, the mind, and have never truly thought and written is like having been born in our bodies but spent our entire lives on a mattress: no sports, no sex, no dance, not even a leisurely walk across the park.

Writing is thinking; thinking is writing. But if that sounds like too gray and utilitarian a reason to make writing part of your life, or to live for writing straight out, there are other reasons for writing that are of a more delighting sort. For once you're at home with words there are few more pleasurable human activities than writing.

"How do I know what I think until I see what I say," says E. M. Forster, and this is probably true of many of us. We don't know our views until someone asks us. Writing is a way of asking ourselves.

What comes out can be dismal: it's true. Whenever I try to write something about American politics I'm forced to remember that the political is something I'll probably never understand. Is it all about the needs of selves, or collections of selves? Does soul ever enter in? Does something like a spirit of benevolence? I never know where to begin. Though at least I know that I do not know, which the ragged philosopher Socrates thought a good enough condition to spend his entire life endorsing.

But sometimes, for everyone who writes, words tantamount to wonders pour out. Truth comes forth: or at least the truth that is true for you. And sometimes the shivering soul who says never—never could I write a poem or conceive a play—by sitting down and putting a word on the page then another discovers that there are worlds inside him he never knew. Is it good? Is it bad? Sometimes it's enough if a piece of writing simply *is*. It is. *It is and I did it.* Through writing people can sometimes say along with Wallace Stevens's persona in the marvelous poem "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon": "And there I found myself more truly and more strange."

Who am I to write a book about writing? What qualifies me to take on this difficult matter? I suppose I could point in the direction of a stack of books, a few sheaves of articles; I could flourish an advanced degree or two. But really, I think what chiefly qualifies me to write about writing is that I've been a slow learner. I've gone by small steps. I didn't publish a book until I was nearly forty and I drafted that one so many times that when it was done I felt like I'd written ten. But traveling by foot has its advantages. You get to look around and take in the territory, see where you are and plot out where you're going. Maybe taking the gradual overland route has put me in a position to be a guide for others, to help them out in ways that those who have flown over the same ground in a gleaming silver jet never could.

This book is organized around themes: writing and memory, writing and thought, writing and sex, writing and fame, writing and (cue the gnashing of teeth) being reviewed. But it's also a lightly drawn writer's autobiography. I start with issues and events

that dominated my early period of writing (or trying to write), move through some meaty midphase issues, and end with thoughts about the writer's later life, at which I've now more or less arrived. Writing can bring your mind to birth—and it can also let you carve your own tombstone if you're so inclined. And in the middle years, writing can help you reach many other goals, infinitely worth reaching. So here it is: some autobiography, some inspiration (I hope), and even a dose of how-to.

There's so much to be said about writing (real writing, I mean) and in the pages to follow, I'm going to say some of it. I'll draw freely from the great ones who came before me, and of course add something out of my own experience. Many wonderful words have been written about writing—words about the joy and pain of composing words—and I'll rely on some of them here. But I'll add something to the mix, a thesis if you like. As much praise as writing has gotten through the years, it has still not gotten enough. We are still not entirely aware of what writing, good writing, can do for individuals and for the collective. We have at our hands' reach a skill that is also a spiritual discipline. Writing is a meditation; writing is as close as some of us can come to prayer; writing is a way of being, righteously, in the world. And this is something that everyone ought to know.

GETTING STARTED

TO CATCH A DREAM

For a long time, I tried to figure out how I was going to get started as a writer. I knew that a writer was what I wanted to be—though it wasn't clear exactly why. Surely it was in part because I was certain I'd never be very good at anything else. But how was I going to get started?

All right, I'd done some writing. I'd composed some essays for my college classes and those had been received well enough. But assigned writing wasn't really writing. Writing, I thought then (I was about twenty I suppose), was something you did because you wanted to do it, maybe because you had to do it. It was a form of self-expression and it was self-initiated, not commanded by anyone else. Writers were "self-begot, self-raised, by [their] own quick'ning power." Or so I believed.

I began carrying a notebook with me everywhere I went. I was waiting for lightning to strike. And sometimes something did strike. Though on examination it always proved to be something that didn't really qualify as lightning. I'd get an idea for a story, some lines for a poem, a concept for a movie script (I wasn't particular; I'd start anywhere). But then I'd think about it. This? This is going to be the *first* entry in my writer's notebook? This is how I'm going to get my start as a writer? It's too thin, too clichéd, too boring, too trite, too something or other. This can't possibly be the way *I'm* going to start.

Is it possible that I was thinking of posterity? Could I have conceivably believed that future scholars would find my first scratchings and connect them to my later work? Maybe I was thinking of Keats, whose juvenilia has traveled with him through literary history like a broken can on the tail of a dog. *Vanitas*.

Vanitas. I had a bad case of it. What more is there to say?

But how bad could these early ideas of mine have been? I can show you, because as it turns out I remember one. It came in the form of a "poem." I concocted it sitting on the front steps of my parents' house in Melrose, Massachusetts. And on first consideration, I thought it pretty darned good. I had my notebook with me at the time. (I had my notebook with me at all times.) I even had a writing implement, a pencil as I recall. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the notebook, which was not imposingly made. It was not a leather number with my name engraved on the front, or even one of the sternly bound black items they sold at the bookstore of my college, where they were much in demand (for many of my contemporaries were poets; some were visionaries). No, mine was a much-sat-on pocket-sized once-royal-blue notebook, with a spring across the top that had sprung loose and looked like a strand of unkempt hair from a very curly head. Had it been red, it would have been a spring of Raggedy Ann's. My pencil was a pencil.

I drew forth the notebook and flourished the pencil and there, sitting on the doorstep of my parents' home in Melrose, I took a long breath and tried to begin to begin as a writer. It was just before dinner. The sun was more out than not, but it had put in a solid day's workmanlike performance and was ready to set; the grass had been cut (though not by me—allergies and indolence); and the birds from the cemetery down the street were gathering (they must have been, since they did this every fair-weathered day at the same time) in a massive oak tree beyond the cemetery wall, a tree that no doubt knew the secrets of the ages, having seen (maybe) Pilgrims and Indians and even a stray Salem witch or two.

Nature held its breath, or at least I did. I looked down, addressed the blank page, the white ghost-like page that haunts writers, or haunted them constantly until its job was taken by the screen of a computer that contains inside it news of the world, sports clips, pornography, and many other diversions: I addressed the page and I wrote absolutely nothing. That's what I wrote: nothing.

And it's not hard to understand why. What I had in mind was a poem. It was an untitled poem, inspired probably by all the existentialist philosophy and fiction I had been reading in college. The poem, or anti-poem, or non-poem (yes, I think that's it), ran this way: "There is a deity at the essence / of which, of what, I know not. / Only this: that the essence is lost."

Somehow I was both very proud of having concocted this and fully aware that it was abstract, boring (if you can be boring in three lines you truly have a gift) and ridiculously pretentious. Yet I was proud of it. And yet I knew it was vile. Knowledge defeated narcissism—and I wrote: nothing. A few days later the empty notebook disappeared and beyond school essays, which were tough for me to compose as it was, I wrote nothing for oh, two or three years.

The moral of this story is pretty clear. I should have torpedoed my doubts and written my pompous lines. I should have made those words my beginning and the hell with it. Starting takes guts. It usually means putting something down, looking in the mirror that is judgment, finding yourself ugly, and living with it. If a fool would persist in his folly he would grow wise, Blake says. And sometimes he is right. But I looked and I was scared and I ran away like the timid kid in the horror movie who manages to get slashed or gobbled up anyhow. I went cold and icy and dead. He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence, Blake also says. I ducked down that day and bred a little pestilence in myself, the pestilence that comes from wanting to do something worthwhile and being too timid to stay at it.

It's surprising how rarely accomplished writers are willing to talk about their initial efforts. Or maybe it's not: sprinters are never game to tell you how hard it was for them to learn to walk. Robert Frost tells a melodious story about how he "made" his first poem. He spent all day making it he says. He became so transfixed that he was late to his grandmother's for dinner. "Very first one I wrote I was walking home from school and I began to make it—a March day—and I was making it all afternoon and making it so I

was late at my grandmother's for dinner. I finished it, but it burned right up, just burned right up, you know."

It's well told. (Frost always tells his stories well.) But it smacks a bit too much of the Immaculate Conception for me. I like Frost's other earthier story of where his poems come from. It's as though, he says, you're walking down the street in your hometown and coming toward you is a fellow you've known all your life. You and he are fond enough of each other—though not too fond. What you usually do when you cross paths is to exchange insults. And this time you see him before he sees you, just a moment or so, and on the back of your tongue (I elabor-ate a bit here) there arises the taste of the most tangy, civilized but nasty insult you've ever conceived. And it feels good and when the time comes the delivery is a perfect strike. You score, 1–0: point, game, match. They tell you that you don't have to score, Frost says. But you do. Today, with your insult you do. And that's what it's like to make a poem. "It's him coming toward you that gives you the animus, you know. When they want to know about inspiration, I tell them it's mostly animus."

That day sitting on my parents' porch, watching the grass go golden green in the twilight and aspiring to Keats-like thoughts, I imagined that writing came from the impulse toward sweetness and light. That's the impulse Frost seems to attribute to himself in the first example. I wanted to summarize the world for the world and lament its sorry state in detached and compassionate terms. A deity at the essence! Alas, the essence is lost.

But I should have realized that writing doesn't always come out of pure motives, at least not at the start. (Though I think that finally it's best when it does.) Writing can be analogous to playful insult (or semiplayful), to invective, to curse, and to rant. Milton, Blake says, wrote best when he wrote from Satan's vantage. The Puritan poet was of the devil's party without knowing it. It's necessary early on not to idealize the process too much, or to idealize yourself. (Though later on there's room enough for high aspirations.) You want to get a sail up, even if it's a ragged one, and

plunge into the bay. I jumped in, Keats says. Rather than staying on shore and taking tea and comfortable advice, I jumped in and maybe made a bit of a fool of myself with *Endymion.* A critic named Croker laughed at Keats. But who has heard of Croker now, beyond knowing that Keats's friend Hazlitt called him "the talking potato"?

I think that eventually writing should be about truth and beauty, right and justice and that it should seek to profit others more by far than the writer himself. But get in by any door you can. Keep composing the lachrymose sonnets, full speed ahead with the "proud bad verse" (Keats again, though from the later, better *Fall of Hyperion*). Forward march with the inelegant essays; spring off the line on the first hut with the miserable rewrites of *Les Miz.* As long as you can in time recognize that they are bad and need work and that you must (and will) get better, you are triumphing. Virginia Woolf said that you should never publish anything before you are thirty anyhow. But get rolling now, even if you are thirteen (or seventy).

I wonder sometimes how many aspiring writers there are wandering around in writer limbo, hoping to make an august start, unwilling to touch pen to paper or finger to keyboard until they have achieved the inaugural mot juste, the Flaubertian word for just exactly right. I wish I could reach out to them and pat them on the shoulder and tell them it'll be all right, and that there is no time for starting like now. Take some courage from me. Take some spirits. And if you're truly desperate, I have some inaugural lines never really used that I offer gratis. Start with them if you want. "There is a deity at the essence..." From here, there is nowhere to go but up.

So how did I start? How did I get to the business of writing? I owe it to Hunter Thompson and to the invention of the electric typewriter. And oh yes, to drugs: I also owe it to drugs.

At a certain point in college I became enamored with the writing of Hunter S. Thompson. Thompson was the gonzo journalist par excellence who steamed himself up on drugs and wrote wild,

scabrous, trenchant pieces on Richard Nixon, the Hells Angels, and other outlaws in American life. (Nixon and the Angels really do belong on the same page.) The archetypal photo of Thompson shows him bent like a vulture over his typewriter, long neck in a downward curl, bald head poised over what looks like a meal of bad meat but is really an exposé on Greedheads or that swine of a man and jabbering dupe of a president Richard Milhous Nixon. In his eulogy for Nixon he averred that the former president's body should be burned in a trash bin.

Everywhere Thompson went in America he experienced fear and loathing and tried to create some, too, through the engine of his prose. He was a mannered fellow, actually a bit of a dandy, with his cigarette holder and his tinted yellow sunglasses and his bald dome before bald domes a la Michael Jordan became the thing. He looked manly, more manly almost than Hemingway, who did all he could to fuse writing (a lady's parlor game, the fellas feared) with grand-safari masculinity. Hunter even had the right name: he pursued big game with the avidity of a trained woodsman.

He also spent much of his time high as a monkey, or at least his persona did. He suggested that without a closet full of drugs—uppers, downers, sliders, smackers, and blasters—there would be no writing from Hunter S. Thompson. He wrote the way Andretti drove a race car—full out, balls to the walls, into the wind. Later on I'd learn that Hunter was a bit of an eleven-year-old, living off and alone near Woody Creek, Colorado, getting high and shooting off guns and going *wow*. And I'd also learn that when he was just starting out as a writer, he spent his time copying page after page of Faulkner and other writers to see how it was done. Nothing especially gonzo about that.

But what my twenty-three-(or so)-year-old self got from Hunter Thompson was the image of a guy who fueled himself like an expensive engine with high-octane drugs, threw himself down in his writing chair like a bull rider hopping on the brahma, then opened the chute (which is to say wrote a word) and let the bucking start. Thompson (my Thompson) wrote the way Rocky

Marciano fought. Full out, throwing everything he had into it until covered with sweat and maybe bleeding from the nose, he flung his hands over his head—victory!—and collapsed in a winner's heap. The man went at it.

I was not Hunter Thompson to be sure. And even then I had an inkling that Hunter Thompson was not Hunter Thompson either. But I followed his lead, or what I imagined to be his lead, and threw myself into writing sessions the way I had thrown myself into playing football: all out, head up, and body on the fly into the tide of the oncoming.

I had a Hunter Thompson sort of subject at my disposal, too. I was working as a stagehand and security guy at rock shows outside of New York City at the time and my life was full of rock bands and drugs and bikers and girls who stood up in the crowd partially clothed and danced to the music the way serpents do to the charmer's pipes. I'd seen riots and backstage fistfights and a knifing (maybe). I'd watched (from under the safety of the stadium eaves) as a Hispanic street gang heaved down lumps of concrete on my front-gate security crew, like the denizens of a medieval town fighting off attackers. (Get under the eaves, you dopes!) We had refused to let the gang in for free (or I had), even though the concert was taking place on their turf and so they were expressing their sentiments. To complete my Hunter Thompson experiential bacchanal, the Hells Angels turned up for our Grateful Dead shows. One show got canceled because of foul weather even though it said "rain or shine" on the back of the tickets. The Deadheads rioted. (One would have thought they were too stoned to manage anything as active as rioting, but they proved proficient at it.) The Angels ascended to biker heaven when it became clear they were expected to put down the riot through any means they wished. The image of a large Angel standing at the front of the stage urinating down on the Deadheads clambering to get up and destroy Jerry Garcia and his guitar and steal his drugs (presumably) is one I won't forget and one that seemed sent by the gods when, a few weeks later, I sat up late in my linoleum-floored

room on West 187th Street, up near the George Washington Bridge, trying to get it all down.

I pulled a complete pseudo–Hunter Thompson. I opened an envelope full of white powder—which might as well have been talc from the pool room, so potent were the powers of suggestion alive in the air—laid out a long sequence of lines, turned on the electric that had been willed to me by my writer buddy Michael Pollan, and I went to work. I wrote for seven hours running—Thompson hours—flying full force, headlong breakneck, amok in drug and sports imagery. I did not stop typing except to roll in another slice of yellow paper. I hit the keys so hard I blew holes in the yellow sheaves where the *o*'s should have been. It must have sounded like an all-night gun battle.

And from time to time I'd look down as if from a great height and say to myself, "I'm writing. I'm writing. I am writing!" It was like learning to ride a bike. It was like nailing three-pointers one after the next from the corner. It was like getting the hang of sex—if one ever gets the hang of sex. It was like magic.

I was so happy with what I'd done that a few days later, after a cursory redraft, I sent the manuscript—spilled on, fat, and sloppy as a pile of old bills—to George Plimpton at the *Paris Review*. (Michael and I had taken turns working there, basically failing to sell ads for that distinguished journal.) I knew for certain that Plimpton would love it. He'd been into the experiential journalist thing before Thompson even, though he was a bit too much of a white man—Exeter, Harvard, Hasty Pudding—for my newly fledged wild self. I did not think much about the response that was coming from Plimpton. I more or less figured that after my burst, publication was a done deal. I could now get some more ideas and write more.

What had happened? How had I finally—if a bit absurdly—done the thing I so much wanted to do and could not? How had I managed to begin, or at least begin to begin? Well, I'd made myself into something like a battering ram—a heavy, fast-moving force—and I'd rammed my way through my inhibitions. The inhibitions

were a well-made, heavily cemented wall of rocks and even boulders. I was quite simply afraid that my stuff would be terrible. I was afraid that I'd see that I had no talent. I was afraid that deprived of my writing ambition I'd have no other ambition remaining and be left wandering in the void.

So it took a lot of horsepower—some of it manufactured, some of it absurd—to break through. I had to pretend to be a guy I was not. And from what I could tell, he himself spent a good deal of time working on his gonzo persona, pretending to be a guy he was not. I had to counterfeit a counterfeit. I also needed the audience of my two roommates who stayed half-awake that night in awe of my amazing dedication to the craft. And the drugs! Later on in grad school I'd settle for coffee to get my writing done—so much of it that in time it part ruined my stomach. But this time I needed the devil's dandruff, as Robin Williams illuminatingly called it. Though I expect it was more the outlaw feeling of cutting those lines and laying them out that amped me than the drug itself. My roommates turned up their noses at it—which meant it was poor quality indeed. And perhaps it was truly nothing but talcum powder. (But coke: a deathtrap. We didn't know that then, so stay away!) To write what I thought to be the truth (my truth!) I needed fictions, fabulations, creative swerves from reality, dreams! But I started writing that night and from then on knew I could at least participate in the game. I might never be a *writer* like Hunter Thompson, but I would write.

So many young aspiring writers out there—or older or simply old straight out—escape the trap of silence any way they can. One guy I know did it by putting a woman's name at the top of the page and running free; one by dictating his tales; one by three days' meditation preliminary to the first, first draft; another by putting the pencil in his left hand, his off hand, and grinding it out. To get started you can use any means necessary, though crazier means probably won't work over the long run. Pretend, pretend, pretend, if you have to, in order to get to the real.

You're breaking out of jail. If you do it digging with a spoon,

that's fine; if you trick the guard that's OK, too; maybe you simply have some rich friend buy the dungeon and turn you out. By any means necessary. Because once you're out, you're out. A toast to you—my hand greets yours.

The rock-and-roll piece? A month later I got a letter back from George Plimpton beginning with the words: "It's not very good. At least not publishable." I walked around in misery for a while, feeling as put-upon and resentful as the Count of Monte Cristo when he left the dungeon after the years of wrongful imprisonment. But like the Count I also felt free. I was out and I was on my own. I was writing.

And Plimpton was wrong (give or take). My riff about the Grateful Dead show and the Angels anti-riot rioting did get published, albeit after a bit of revision and some patient reconsidering. It's in the first chapter of what in many ways is my favorite of my books, *The Fine Wisdom and Perfect Teachings of the Kings of Rock and Roll.* So what if it took thirty years to see the light of publication!

Often a benign invisible hand presides over these matters. Hey, there's a deity at the essence, right?

TO DO IT EVERY DAY

Writers—especially writers who write books about writing—tend to do a lot of talking about the blank page and lately about the blank screen. It's a frightening prospect this blank space—looming up at us like the void. Every day, in a manner slightly heroic, we have to enter this void and make it pregnant with feeling and thought. Daunting of course: scary, harrowing. Each morning (or if one is prone to stay in bed as long as Dr. Johnson and a few others did, every afternoon), you've got to rise and fling a lance at your own version of the great white whale: the pale, empty page.

Well, that's overdoing it of course and writers—and especially when they're writing about writing—tend to do that. They like to make of the regular encounter with their work something rather epic. Male writers are especially prone to this I suppose, often wanting to make of the writing game something within hailing distance of war, or at least lion hunting. We don't always like to think of Jane Austen, sitting in a room with her family, her page beside her needlework, chatting and sewing, and by the way creating the most exquisitely tempered sentences to be found consecutively in English.

But there's truth buried in all the whale-hunt-style hyperbole. Writing is *hard.* It's tough to get up every day and have the wherewithal to sharpen the pencil or hum up the machine, and then set in. How does one do it? How is it achieved? How do you go from being, on any given morning, someone who is not writing to someone who is? Even after you have *begun* as a writer, you must every day contrive to *begin.*

Virtually every writer I know has a ritual or, to play it down a bit, a routine that guides him or her into the act of setting words

on a page. (Page: yes, for a while let's stick to the old idiom.) One claims to sharpen half a dozen pencils to start; another gulps down a can of beer (before noon?); a third meditates (the sound of chanting from up in her lair gets the kids scrambling off to the school bus—that noise is *embarrassing*); a fourth needs espresso; his cousin requires Darjeeling (or not a silent verbal peep will be made) straight from China; a last goes outdoors and marches for a while to the beat of a different drummer: marches, literally, around the backyard.

What these rituals prove is that you've got to have an entry strategy, a way to open the door. But where exactly are you when you begin? And where are you trying to go? And why are there so many different keys with which writers open what amounts to the same door?

If you're a beginner, how the heck do you find the key that rightly belongs to you and to the door that happens to stand between you and your dream of writing every day? "We think of the key, each in his prison," says Eliot. "Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison." It's beautifully eloquent and no doubt with multiple applications. But on the matter of writing there is a prison (self-enforced silence) and there is (I think) a key. Though each person probably has to grind one to fit his own lock.

Even after you've made the grand initial leap—as I did I guess with my Hunter Thompson masquerade—there's still the work of getting up for it and into it every day, or at least five days a week or so. On the matter of how often to write, I'm a follower of Stephen King, who says he only takes off Christmas and his birthday. I take off Christmas, Christmas only. (He just writes faster than I do.)

These writers' rituals: what exactly are they for? Some people simply like the idea of being eccentric and so they try to be. They're home alone, working alone, and they can ignore office-like protocols and cultivate a little weirdness. But I don't think most writers' rituals are mere affectations. I think them quite necessary. The writer needs the right room, crowded or bare; the right drink,

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