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Writing to Change the World

MARY PIPHER

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To Anne Frank and Nelson Mandela and to those writers from all over the world who, in all times and places, have written to make things better

You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. . . . The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way . . . people look at reality, then you can change it.

—*JAMES BALDWIN*

INTRODUCTION

> More than at any time in history mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we will have the wisdom to choose correctly.—WOODY ALLEN

Maybe things are not quite as bad as Woody Allen suggests, but they are bad enough. Life has never been easy, but today the scope of problems that befall us is greater than ever before. Up until this last hundred years, humans were expected to deal only with their immediate environment. If they were hungry, they planted grain, went fishing, or foraged. If their children cried or their parents lay dying, they could caress them and sing to them. When it was cold, they built fires. When an animal or another human attacked, they tried to fend it or him off. The problems that arose often were not solvable. But they were nearby.

For the most part, humans had little idea what was happening over the next mountain, let alone continents away. They knew only what they could see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. If they spotted ripe blueberries, they could pick them for dinner. And adults knew what they could do for one another. If a neighbor's hut burned down, they could help build another. If children were left without parents, they could take them in.

Today our senses are amplified by technology. We receive detailed information from all over the globe. Daily, we see buildings collapsing, children starving, and

whole villages dying of AIDS. Our brains and our adrenal systems have electrical and chemical responses to world events, yet our bodies, which are far from these troubles, can do little to help. Many of us become anxious and despair from this poisonous brew of overstimulation and powerlessness.

I can name salient examples of our harsh world—the deterioration of the ozone layer, deforestation, and the enormous differences in wealth across nations and within our own. We live in a world where twenty-seven million people live in slavery, a world where poor children make toys for rich children, where the World Food Program cuts distribution because of lack of funds while two-thirds of Americans fight obesity. We humans have become the species of nuclear weapons and genocide, one that is killing itself and all other living things.

Right now, our beautiful democracy is eroding before our eyes, as, for example, our government disregards the Geneva Conventions and uses torture as a method of interrogation; in the history of our country, this has never been official policy. As has often been the case historically, power is distributed according to wealth, not wisdom or compassion. Bullies and thugs rule the world. Increasingly, it feels as if we are trapped in a medieval crisis—Crusaders versus Jihadists. The Enlightenment is in remission, and science is simultaneously exploited and ignored. Technology advances rapidly as collective wisdom declines. We are a nation good at consuming and poor at savoring. In my thirty years of being a therapist, I have never seen Americans more stressed. If the news were a weather report, every day it would be the same: Black clouds overhead. Tornado warning!

> I feel the vacuum, the loneliness, the silence, the dehydration of the soul as people who want desperately to save our constitution, country and planet still wander the streets without knowing how to say hi to one another.
>
> —*SAM SMITH*

Distance negates responsibility.—GUY DAVENPORT

We live together in an era of what Anthony Lewis, a columnist for *The New York Times*, has called "existential blindness." *Tech Tonic*, a publication of the Alliance for Childhood, reports that the average American can recognize over a thousand brand names but is unable to identify ten indigenous plants or animals. We understand many facts about the world, but we cannot discern their meaning or their implications for action. Our world needs leaders, and yet people everywhere feel helpless and lack direction.

While we call our time the Age of Information, wisdom is in short supply. Language, which maps the ways we think, is often just another marketing tool. Style trumps substance. War is called peace, while destruction is called development. Environmental devastation is footnoted or ignored. Hype and spin trivialize and obscure the truth. My favorite example of fuzzy language is George Tenet's line during congressional hearings in spring 2004. When questioned on inaccurate government information regarding weapons of mass destruction, he said, "The data do not uniquely comport with policy decisions." Parse that.

Sometimes language itself is a weapon. In urging a crackdown on asylum seekers, people who have fled their countries without valid documents, James Sensenbrenner, a congressman from Wisconsin, said that he wanted to "Stop terrorists from gaming the asylum system." He failed to mention that no asylum seekers have been identified as having links to terrorists. And, clearly, he does not know the asylum seekers I know—Tibetan monks fleeing Chinese soldiers, human rights advocates escaping from repressive governments, some of America's greatest friends who are leaving countries where rulers fear democracy.

Language is weaponized when it is used to objectify, depersonalize, dehumanize, to create an "other." Once a person is labeled as "not like us," the rules for civilized behavior no longer apply. The phrase "illegal alien" is an obvious example. Both the word "illegal" and the word "alien" separate us from the person being described. Indeed, America treats illegal aliens quite badly. The truth is that no person is illegal and no person is alien.

Kay Daly, of the Coalition for a Fair Judiciary, missile-launches language to

maim and kill. She is writing about what she calls "the Left": "You know who they are. You've seen them. The pro-abortion fanatics and the radical feminists; the atheists who file lawsuits attacking the Pledge of Allegiance and the Ten Commandments; the environmentalist, tree-hugging animal rights extremists; the one-world globalists who worship at the altar of the United Nations; the militant homosexuals and the anti-military hippie peaceniks. . . ." Daly isn't talking about people or ideas: she is disconnecting and demonizing—processes that have led to disastrous consequences in our last century.

Musician Ted Nugent objectified others when he addressed the NRA: "I want carjackers dead. I want rapists dead. I want burglars dead. I want child molesters dead. I want the bad guys dead. No court case. No parole, no early release. I want 'em dead. Get a gun and when they attack you, shoot 'em."

Progressives also have their ways of dehumanizing. They hurl stones when they use terms such as "fundamentalists," "rednecks," or "right-wing conservatives" in derisive ways that allow no room for nuances, individual differences, or empathy with their adversaries' points of view.

I am not interested in weapons, whether words or guns. I want to be part of the rescue team for our tired, overcrowded planet. The rescuers will be those people who help other people to think clearly, and to be honest and open-minded. They will be an antidote to those people who disconnect us. They will de-objectify, rehumanize, and make others more understandable and sympathetic. They will help create what philosopher Martin Buber called I-thou relationships for the human race.

Buber distinguished between "I-it" and "I-thou" relationships. In I-it relationships, we deal with living creatures in one-dimensional ways. An "it" exists merely to serve our own purposes. A bank teller is essentially a nonperson who gives us our money; an old-growth forest is lumber waiting to be harvested. In an I-thou relationship, the bank teller is a person like us, with desires, dreams, and people she loves. And an old-growth forest has a purpose far greater than our wish for lumber. When we deal with the teller or the forest in I-thou ways, we show respect. We are entering into a relationship.

Once the concept of otherness takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible. We don't want to look at the faces of the homeless as we walk past them; when we

do, they become people, and it becomes harder to keep walking. During the Vietnam War, our GIs called the Vietcong "gooks"; in Iraq, our soldiers call the insurgents "rats" and their trails "ratlines." Psychologically, humans can kill rats much more easily then they can kill hungry, tired, frightened young people much like themselves.

With connection comes responsibility. Without it, decent Americans vote for government policies or support businesses that leave villages in India or Africa without drinking water. We do this by erasing from our consciousness any awareness that our actions have hurtful consequences for people whose names we do not know. Labels help. It's easy to erase "civilians," "peasants," "insurgents," "enemy combatants," even "protestors." Once we have a label that doesn't fit us, we can ignore the humanity of the labeled. Part of our responsibility as writers is to tell stories that make such erasures impossible.

A writer's job is to tell stories that connect readers to all the people on earth, to show these people as the complicated human beings they really are, with histories, families, emotions, and legitimate needs. We can replace one-dimensional stereotypes with multidimensional individuals with whom our readers can identify. In creating a world of I-thou relationships, writers can do much of the heavy lifting.

> Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.—MATTHEW 22:10
>
> Everything is hitched to everything else.—JOHN MUIR
>
> We are one leaf on the great human tree.
>
> —*PABLO NERUDA*
>
> The emergent science of ecology is easily summed up: Everything is connected. But interconnection is anathema to a consumer notion of the world, where each of us is useful precisely to the degree that we consider

ourselves the center of everything.—BILL MCKIBBEN

Writing for Change

Good writing facilitates the making of connections in a way that inspires openheartedness, thinking, talking, and action. All totalitarian governments achieve their ends by frightening and isolating people, and by preventing honest public discussion of important matters. The way to promote social and economic justice is by doing just the opposite: by telling the truth, and by encouraging civil, public discussion.

Good writing enlarges readers' knowledge of the world, or empowers readers to act for the common good, or even inspires other good writing. We all understand the world from our own point of view, our own frames of reference, that allow us to make sense of what our senses take in. Writers help readers construct larger, more expansive frames of reference so that more of the world can be more accurately perceived.

Good writing connects people to one another, to other living creatures, to stories and ideas, and to action. It allows readers to see the world from a new perspective. Writers are always asking people, "What is your experience?" They listen, they observe, then they share what they have learned with others. Writing to connect is empathy training. And, as Gloria Steinem once said, "Empathy is the most revolutionary of emotions."

Writing to connect is "change writing," which, like good therapy, creates the conditions that allow people to be transformed. Its goal is not to evoke one particular set of ideas, feelings, and actions, but rather to foster awareness and growth. Psychologist Donald Meichenbaum defines therapists as "purveyors of hope." Change writers are also purveyors of hope.

By definition, writers are people who care enough to try to share their ideas with other people. We are not passive, or utterly cynical, because then we would not even bother. We have a deep yearning to connect, to write things down and pass them around.

Every town has its cultural connectors. They know who to call in any crisis.

They broker jobs, help with legal problems, find housing, fix schools, and raise funds for needed projects. They make sure that people meet one another, and that they understand and respect one another. Writers serve a similar function for the community of readers.

In *The Middle of Everywhere*, I coined the term "cultural broker" to describe Americans who helped refugees. Cultural brokers were those people who were willing to teach refugees what they needed to know. They introduced refugees to our hospitals, transportation systems, grocery stores, schools, libraries, and parks. They helped them locate other refugees from their homeland.

Writers are cultural brokers for the world of ideas. Our job is to share, as best we can, what we know. I write this book with the hope of making our world one connected tribe. To upend Groucho Marx's famous saying, I would say I don't want to belong to any club that won't have everyone as a member.

> Great drama is great questions or it is nothing but technique. I could not imagine a theater worth my time that did not want to change the world.—ARTHUR MILLER
>
> Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds.—ELIE WIESEL

Passionate and well-articulated ideas can and do change the world for better or worse. Consider the work of the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who formulated the world's first declaration of human rights, or the work of Plato, Theresa of Avila, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Reflect on the influence of the writings of Adolf Hitler, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-tung, or Ayatollah Khomeini, whose fiery writing led to the establishment of an Islamic republic. Long after

buildings and aqueducts have crumbled, writers' words live on.

Many writers today live in countries where, no matter what they write, they are unlikely to be locked up or executed for their ideas. Yet we must remember that writers in different times and places have risked their lives to tell the truth. Augustus Caesar sent the poet Ovid into exile. Stalin imprisoned and tortured numerous writers, including Boris Pasternak and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and he killed the poet Osip Mandelstam. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writing to save Germany's Jews cost him his life.

I was moved by the story of Liu Di, whose e-mail moniker was "Stainless Steel Mouse." A graduate student in psychology at Beijing Normal University, she used her school computer privileges to tell the Chinese people about human rights. She was arrested by the government, and sentenced to several years of hard labor under the harshest of conditions at Qincheng Prison.

When you take pen to paper with the goal of making a difference, you join a community of people for whom words and issues matter. Perhaps you are a pediatrician who wants to educate parents about vaccinations, or a minister who wants to write more effective sermons. Maybe you are a high school student who wants to compose an editorial about drunk driving, or a labor organizer who plans to educate migrant farmworkers about their rights. Maybe you are a lawyer protesting the erosion of civil liberties under the Patriot Act, or a Floridian working to save the manatees. If you want to use words to change the world, *Writing to Change the World* is for you.

As a writer, your life goal may involve a worthy cause I cannot even imagine. Whatever it is, you are fortunate. Ossie Davis once said that his generation of African Americans was lucky because Martin Luther King Jr. had given them a moral assignment: to work for civil rights for all people. They could organize their lives around that goal. Davis worried about younger generations lacking such a clear goal. As Barbara Kingsolver put it, "The difference between happy people and unhappy ones is that happy people have found a use for themselves, like a good tool."

> Once in East Africa, on the shores of an ancient lake, I sat alone and suddenly it struck me what community is. It is gathering around a fire and listening to someone tell us a story.—BILL MOYERS

Stories are the most basic tool for connecting us to one another. Research shows that storytelling not only engages all the senses, it triggers activity on both the left and the right sides of the brain. Because stories elicit whole brain/whole body responses, they are far more likely than other kinds of writing to evoke strong emotions. People attend, remember, and are transformed by stories, which are meaning-filled units of ideas, the verbal equivalent of mother's milk.

Healthy cultures pass on healthy stories from generation to generation. The Lakota Sioux tell stories about the sacred hoop of life, and about their connections to the buffalo and all living creatures. Their myths created a belief system that allowed for the development of an emotionally sturdy people in a strong community. Indigenous people in Australia thought they were the tongue for the body that was the land. Their duty was to speak for the soil, water, plants, and animals. Because of how they conceptualized the world and their role in it, they were good caretakers for all of the life around them.

Today in America, shallow, tawdry stories blanket us like dirty snow. There are more films about prostitutes than about schoolteachers, more television shows about serial killers than grandparents. The old, the ordinary, and most ethnic groups are not deemed interesting enough for movies or TV.

As portrayed by the media, sex is casual, and it happens without discussion, protection, or the need for a relationship. Having sex involves about as much commitment as buying a sandwich. And violence is presented as the way to resolve the smallest of problems, and often as the first way and not the last. Worst of all, violence is divorced from its effects. The grieving grandparents, the heartbroken friends, the children growing up without parents—these are not shown on television. Violence, like sex, looks simple and shiny.

In the world of business, all of life is boiled down to one word: "profit." As John

Muir said, "Nothing dollarable is safe." Advertisers design narratives to sell polluting, unhealthy, useless products. Cigarettes and alcohol are depicted as refreshing. Ads miseducate our children about the nature of happiness, teaching them just the opposite of what all the world's great religions teach. In brief, advertising tells you that to feel good you need to buy something you do not need. The comedian George Carlin eloquently expressed it this way: "Trying to be happy by accumulating possessions is like trying to satisfy hunger by taping sandwiches all over your body."

The stories we are told by people who want to sell us things will not save us. We need stories that teach us to be patient, to share, and to put things in perspective. Tolstoy's definition of wealth was "the number of things one can do without." Sut Jhaly of the Media Education Foundation estimates that the average person sees or hears three thousand ads a day. Imagine a world that had no ads. Or imagine our country instead with three thousand messages a day encouraging us to eat more fruits and vegetables, brush our teeth, call our great-aunt, and behave kindly toward one another.

Healing stories give people hope, teach them empathy, and encourage action. They feature different kinds of protagonists, and they need not be superheroes. Firefighters, missionaries, teachers, doctors, biologists, actors, and parents do kind and brave things every day. Many college students take full course loads, work, and still squeeze in volunteer projects. There are disabled students who are high achievers, and children who do not tease and hurt others.

Americans have always loved outlaws, but the true heroes are likely to be in-laws and the other good people who help us travel through our lives. Many people distrust public servants and do-gooders, yet right now our country desperately needs just such people to step up to the plate and try to make things better.

The title of this book, *Writing to Change the World*, may sound grandiose, but I truly believe that positive changes come from decent people acting properly. Most people perform good deeds every day; it is governments, institutions, and corporations that run amok. When I write this, I think of my grandmother Agnes. She and my grandfather homesteaded in eastern Colorado in the 1920s, raising five children on a ranch during the Dust Bowl and then the Depression. She worked hard all her life, and died with less than two thousand dollars in the bank.

Still, she was loved and loving, and mostly content. She created a meaningful universe for herself amid tumbleweeds and rattlesnakes.

When I was a senior at the University of California, I visited my grandmother for the last time. She was widowed and dying of cancer, and I was a reader of popular psychology and full of myself. I asked her, "Grandmother, have you had a happy life?" She ignored my question. I persisted, asking again, as if she hadn't heard me the first time. She grimaced, then answered, almost angrily, "Mary, I don't think of my life that way. I ask, 'Have I made good use of my time and my talents? Is the world a better place because I have been here?' "

The person who wrote "You deserve a break today" made a difference in the world, but perhaps not a contribution to it. This book is for people like my grandmother Agnes who want the world to be a better place because they were here.

I hope *Writing to Change the World* helps you clarify your thoughts, experience new hope and new energy, and communicate your best ideas as effectively as possible. My goal is to help you translate your passion and idealism into action. This is not a book on how to write; rather, it's a book on how to write in order to improve the world. It is for competent writers with generous hearts and bold spirits.

We live in a world filled with language. Language imparts identity, meaning, and perspective to our human community. Writers are either polluters or part of the cleanup team. Just as the language of power and greed has the potential to destroy us, the language of reason and empathy has the power to save us. Writers can inspire a kinder, fairer, more beautiful world, or incite selfishness, stereotyping, and violence. Writers can unite people or divide them.

In the chapters that follow, I will focus on expository writing, because that is my medium. I write books, articles, and speeches. However, I hope that poets and writers of fiction will find useful ideas in the text. I set myself a double task in writing this book: to tell and to demonstrate what I wish to say about writing. That made the work more complicated for me, but also more honest and rewarding. As I struggled with the writing, I learned more about writing.

I will teach what I know best, a connecting style of writing that employs

storytelling to build empathy and the motivation to help. Still, there are many roads to Rome, and I will share ideas and examples from writers very different from myself. Irony, humor, anger, and dead-on logical argument all have their place in writing that connects.

I came to writing as a therapist, and I believe that psychotherapy has a great deal to teach us about making connections and fostering change. Carl Rogers formulated his basic tenets on transformation through relationships. He discovered that the best way to facilitate change is to accept people exactly as they are. He taught generations of therapists about nonjudgmental attitudes, empathy, and authenticity.

In both therapy and advocacy writing, relationships matter. Mutual respect and trust facilitate the growth of souls. Both endeavors require openness to ideas and a willingness to reconsider and expand one's point of view. Relationships create the environments that allow humans to extend their circles of caring. In the 1970s, psychologist Stanley Milgram theorized the now famous "six degrees of separation" between all people on earth. Since then, in our computerized, cell-phoned, outsourced world, we have grown even closer to one another. If Milgram were alive to rethink his earlier theorem, he might discover there are only three or two degrees of separation.

Lyndon Johnson said, "Let's hope the world doesn't turn into a neighborhood before it turns into a brotherhood." That is what 9/11 and all acts of terrorism are about. People who share the same space do not know how to understand and help one another. I encourage you to tackle the job of turning our world into a brother- and sisterhood. Writing allows us to connect with readers all around the world. We can support and influence people we will never meet. We can't necessarily repair damage in another country, but we can write something that may help, at least a little. With our words, we can construct a new kind of worldwide web, with strands of empathy. Together, we can formulate new metaphors for building a better world for us all. We can create a grammar of hope and a syntax of salvation. Then we will see an explosion of fresh green ideas.

The founder of Outward Bound U.S.A., Josh Miner, said, "If you are lucky, just once in your life you will be associated with a great idea." If I have one great idea, it is that connecting people might save the world. I suspect that everyone reading

this book has a great idea. I hope I can help you sharpen, clarify, and share yours. I want you to go forth and tell your good and important stories. Are you ready to put your shoulder to the stone?

PART ONE

What We Alone Can Say

ONE

WRITING TO CONNECT

In the dark times, will there be singing?
Yes. There will be singing about the dark times.

—BERTOLT BRECHT

There is nothing more truly artistic than to love people.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

The first book to change my view of the universe was *The Diary of Anne Frank.* I read Anne's diary when I was a twelve-year-old, in Beaver City, Nebraska. Before I read it, I had been able to ignore the existence of evil. I knew a school had burned down in Chicago, and that children had died there. I had seen grown-ups lose their tempers, and I had encountered bullies and nasty school-mates. I had a vague sense that there were criminals—jewel thieves, bank robbers, and Al Capone-style gangsters--in Kansas City and Chicago. After reading the diary, I realized that there were adults who would systematically kill children. My comprehension of the human race expanded to include a hero like Anne, but also to include the villains who killed her. When I read Anne Frank's diary, I lost my spiritual

innocence.

In September 2003, when I was fifty-five years old, I visited the Holocaust Museum, in Washington, D.C., to view the Anne Frank exhibit. I looked at the cover of her little plaid diary, and at pages of her writing, at her family pictures. Meip Gies, Otto Frank's employee who brought food to the family, spoke on video about the people who hid in the attic. She said that Anne had always wanted to know the truth about what was going on. Others would believe the sugarcoated version of Miep's stories, but Anne would follow her to the door and ask, "What is really happening?"

The museum showed a short film clip of Anne dressed in white, her long hair dark and shiny. She is waving exuberantly from a balcony at a wedding party that is parading down the street. There are just a few seconds of film, captured by a film-maker at the wedding who must have been entranced by her enthusiasm. The footage is haunting. Anne's wave seems directed at all of us, her small body casting a shadow across decades.

At the end of the exhibit, attendees hear the voice of a young girl reading Anne's essay "Give," a piece inspired by her experience of passing beggars on the street. She wonders if people who live in cozy houses have any idea of the life of beggars. She offers hope: "How wonderful it is that no one has to wait, but can start right now to gradually change the world." She suggests action: "Give whatever you have to give, you can always give something, even if it's a simple act of kindness." And she ends with: "The world has plenty of room, riches, money and beauty. God has created enough for each and every one of us. Let us begin by dividing it more fairly."

Even though Anne Frank ultimately was murdered, she managed, in her brief and circumscribed life, to tell the truth and bequeath the gift of hope. She searched for beauty and joy even in the harsh, frightened world of the attic in which her family hid from the Nazis. Her writing has lived on to give us all a sense of the potential largesse of the human soul, even in worst-case scenarios. It also reminds us that, behind the statistics about war and genocide, there are thousands of good people we have a responsibility to help.

the book, he fell in love with her, and, a hundred years later, so do his readers. Empathy can turn contempt into love.

Moral Writing

> The real end of all art is beauty, truth, and goodness.
>
> —*JOHN GARDNER*

Art can compel people freely, gladly, and spontaneously to sacrifice themselves in the service of man.—TOLSTOY

> Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind—the corruption of consciousness.
>
> —*ROBIN COLLINGWOOD*

You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. . . . The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it.—JAMES BALDWIN

Socially conscious writers want authenticity and transparency to saturate every page of their work. They strive to teach readers how to think, not what to think. They connect readers to ideas and experiences that readers would not have on their own. Always, this kind of writing coaxes readers to expand their frames of reference, or, as the Buddhists say, to put things in bigger containers.

All kinds of writing can change the world by James Baldwin's millimeter.

Recently, I read an article by horticulturalist Twyla Hansen that encouraged landowners to plant slow-growing shade trees, the kinds of trees that may not grow tall on our watch but will be beautiful for our grandchildren. After reading Hansen's article, I bought a sycamore.

For many years, I wrote "Urgent Action" letters for Amnesty International. I mailed them all over the world, to protest the torture and imprisonment of innocents, the curtailment of civil liberties, the oppression of women, and the harassment of journalists and others who worked for democracy. I am sure that many of my letters were simply tossed away; however, thanks to all those letters, a number of campaigns produced results. The Red Cross and Red Crescent were allowed into horrific prisons. Dissidents there were allowed access to their attorneys or even set free. And universities and presses have been allowed to reopen.

Examples of effective writing abound. President John Kennedy was so moved by Michael Harrington's *The Other America* that he launched the War on Poverty, later implemented by President Johnson. More recently, the state of New York was able to amend and soften the harsh Rockefeller drug laws instituted in the 1970s. A *New York Times* article credited this policy change to Jennifer Gonnerman's book *Life on the Outside*, which told the story of a woman detained for sixteen years for a single sale of cocaine.

Academics can be revolutionaries. Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jorgan Randers in *The Limits to Growth* educated us about the future of the earth's resources. They plotted graphs showing that while the world's population is increasing, such natural resources as oil, water, and arable land are decreasing. Their work gave scientists, policymakers, and everyday citizens new ways to frame environmental, energy, and population issues. Dr. Paul Farmer, writing as a medical anthropologist, has revolutionized medicine in the developing world with such books as *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* and *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plague.*

Journalists can change the zeitgeist as well. Think of Bob Wood-ward and Carl Bernstein on Watergate, or of Seymour Hersh's recent writing on Iraq and Afghanistan. Reporters pick the stories to tell from the thousands of available ones. They call readers' attention to what they think is newsworthy. And readers

respond. For example, Jim Barksdale, former Netscape CEO, offered to reward students in Mississippi up to ten thousand dollars of their college tuition if they did well in school. His generosity was inspired by an article he had read on the state's struggle to fund its educational system.

Many writers who have suffered great sorrows write memoirs for cathartic reasons. They also write to document their experiences, to express outrage at injustice and unnecessary suffering, and to help others to see and feel what can happen to people like themselves. They write to both bind up their own wounds and inspire others to care.

Most likely, Loung Ung's memoir, *Lucky Child*, was written for all of the above reasons. Ung tells the story of her family's experience of the genocide that took place in Cambodia. Both her parents and several of her siblings died, but Loung fortunately escaped to a refugee camp with an older brother and his wife. Later, they settled in the United States. *Lucky Child* compares Luong's life in the United States with the life of her younger sister who stayed behind in Cambodia. It shows readers the differences between living in a prosperous, yet stressed, democratic country and living in an impoverished, yet communal, autocratic country.

Song can be a powerful tool for connecting people to one another. Think of civil rights workers singing "We Shall Overcome." Think of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready," or Tracy Chapman's "Revolution."

Films often change the world. Morgan Spurlock's entertaining, witty, and solidly researched *Super Size Me* has Spurlock, a healthy young man, bravely eat nothing but McDonald's fast food for a month. With doctors monitoring him, he gained weight and suffered numerous health problems. His downhill slide into a dangerous medical condition was highly instructive for the rest of us, and it pushed McDonald's toward offering healthier choices.

Any form of writing can change the world. Your goal is to find the form that allows you to use every one of your talents in the service of what you consider to be your most important goals. You want to search for what you alone can say and then how you can say it most effectively.

> A true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life.—

TOBIAS WOLFF

> The mind, once expanded to the dimensions of bigger ideas, never returns to its original size.
>
> —*OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES*

Ordinary people can and do change the world every day. Yet even as I write, I hear a despairing voice inside me whisper that right now car bombs and nuclear weapons seem more powerful than words, that few people read serious writing, and that even those readers who do seem to read only to reinforce their established beliefs. Some days, I have to argue with myself for a long while before the urge to connect in me wins and sends me off to work.

Discouragement can stop us from doing our work, as can humility. Many writers silence themselves by thinking, Who am I to write? And who among us has not written letters to editors, corporations, or government officials that were simply ignored? I remember *The Lazlo Letters* by Don Novello, published years ago. It featured crazy letters written by one "Lazlo Toth, American." The twist was that Novello's fictional protagonist wrote to real government officials, real heads of universities, and real CEOs. Alongside Lazlo's silly letters were the actual replies he received. Most of the responses clearly showed that Lazlo's letters had not been carefully read, let alone considered. The book inspired laughter, but not a zeal for letter writing.

Another discouraging factor is that our relationship to the written word is changing. Fewer people are reading newspapers and serious magazines these days. Most adults consider themselves too busy to read. And children reared on television and PlayStation have shorter attention spans. Living in an atmosphere saturated by video games, junky writing, and stupid television and movies, we are finding it difficult to muster much optimism for what Carol Bly calls "the passionate accurate story." It is easy to think, Why even bother?

Yet, paradoxically, our discouragement can be the very impetus that motivates us to write. We may feel the need to be that voice crying out in the wilderness. We may feel compelled to shout "Fire!" or "Man overboard!" or simply "The emperor has no clothes!"

> We can do no great things, only small things with great love.—MOTHER TERESA
>
> Nothing is more powerful than individuals acting out of their own conscience.—VÁCLAV HAVEL

Writing turns out to be one thing we can control in a world where much feels beyond our control. Most of us will not be spearheading protest marches against the World Trade Organization, masterminding boycotts against sweatshops in China, or leading the charge against oil exploitation in Nigeria. We won't be building orphanages for children in South Africa. But we do what we can.

We write. Every day we witness the degradation of much that we value. We witness sorrowful examples of unfairness, ignorance, and cruelty. We see our children educated to want all the wrong things. And so we write. We write with a sense of urgency. We write because we discover that we have something we alone can say. And we struggle on because we still believe in the power of words, just as Anne Frank believed in goodness despite powerful evidence to the contrary.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky lived in a hopeless time and place, a world of pogroms, starvation, filth, and syphilis. His life was plagued by epilepsy, mental problems, and poverty. Yet he left us this message:

> Love all of God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love