

Radiant Footprints -- and Other Reasons to Write

Commencement Address

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Thank you; the vibrant and varied Student speeches at our graduations are always the best testament to the value of the degree you are all earning. I'm thrilled to have a chance to add my own thoughts. Many of you have told me how much you worry about keeping on with your writing as you face Life After Stonecoast. While I have struggled for a grander way to structure this speech, I find what I most want to share for these minutes are some musings and 'words of inspiration' on writerly communities and why we write; some thoughts that have helped to keep me writing for 20-plus years and might help you as you set out from the sheltering cove of Stonecoast into stormier seas.

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How to begin? I often tell my students to pay attention to things that stick in their minds and they don't know why. I often find myself recalling an incidental remark made by Playwright Wendy Wasserstein. Opening a literary event, she said, "We are here to honor writers for their integrity, craft, loneliness and insanity."

Not that the 'insanity' has to reach a clinical level, but there is a basic Romantic-with-a-capital-R craziness to our shared endeavor and I love Wasserstein's matter-of-fact acknowledgement of that. Another 'incidental' remark that sticks to my mind is what John Updike said when faced with the task of writing a speech to answer the question 'Why write?' He began by stating-- with what seems to me fine writerly insouciance-- that he was tempted to make the shortest speech in history and simply say, 'Why not?'

Yet for most of us, especially in these very troubled times, the question 'Why write' persists through what F. Scott Fitzgerald called our 'Dark nights of the soul.' Aren't we all, incidentally, grateful that-- however many he suffered himself-- F. Scott Fitzgerald 'got it together' to describe that state of mind so indelibly.

Rick Moody recently proposed in print alternative questions to the 'usual suspect' questions we ask of workshop stories. One was, "Is there any line in this piece you would take to your grave?" You will note my speech is 'quote-heavy'. The reason-- and probably the most basic reason most of us do write-- is that I love other writers' memorable lines and aspire to create a few of my own. Isn't that shared love what has brought us here to brave the wilds of winters-- and workshops—in Maine.

When our Stonecoast-listserve was recently set aflame with responses to yet another prominently printed attack on 'writing workshops' I recalled Winston Churchill's words, which I hear in my father's voice. Churchill famously described Democracy as "the worst form of government except for every other form of government." Even when left to our

own devices outside of academia, writers seeking to help each other do tend to revert to the sit-around-in-a-circle and discuss-the-piece model.

I myself could not have written my books without the help and support of my longtime 'Girl Group' workshop, which consists of me and two women writers who were my fellow students in Brown's MFA program. We have continued to meet regularly for over 15 years.

I am always telling my Stonecoast students, and will tell you yet again now, the single most valuable thing you can take from this MFA program is one or two like-minded fellow students. The most reliable antidote for writerly "Why write?" misery IS company.

Novelist Askold Melnyczuck wrote a letter to the New York Times defending writers' conferences after an article attacked them. He said when HE went to Breadloaf as a young aspiring writer, it was the first time he realized that kindred literary spirits existed, that all of life did NOT have to be like high-school.

That alone is reason enough, to me, to justify all of us 'meeting like this'. And once you do leave our Stonecoast cove, not only your small intimate writer's group but larger writer's organizations can offer you that priceless camaraderie. I work with PEN/New England, one branch of the international group PEN. PEN has branches and holds open events all over the country. PEN/New England North regularly hosts informal gatherings where they invite writers to come 'whine and dine' (that's w-h-i-n-e).

Certainly today's publishing scene gives us all plenty to whine about. The fact that millions today try their hand at writing is often bemoaned. But is it really so bad that so many in here and 'out there' are drawn to literature, that so many serious readers are--horror of horrors-- also aspiring writers? A wise writer once remarked that in their heart of hearts, all writers are envious of each other's work. But in their soul of souls, writers are each other's best, most generous and most passionate readers.

In the larger sense of 'literary community', I often feel that ALL writers share a foxhole together. I feel we are all on a sort of Crusade, bound together by our shared love of words. Some of us, through combinations of talent, skill, luck, will achieve great victories and acclaim. Others will march forward more as foot soldiers, but will savor their own sometimes equally intense if unsung moments of triumph. Still we continue marching, sharing our pain and passion and pleasure, together.

And what of the still larger world outside our own community, those looming issues of our times? One resounding answer to the question of Why write? is the power of the Pen to address and influence those issues.

Recently my 7 year old son became enthralled with the film ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN, about Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate investigation.

In the film's opening moments, the screen fills with a blank page; suddenly a gigantic typewriter key crashes down on the page, embedding huge letters that fill our sight. The power of words, we tell our son.

True, our country has changed since the days when two passionate and persistent reporters could bring down a corrupt administration simply by typing the truth. Still, even in our era of a more controlled and co-opted media, where would we be without our own intrepidly typing truth-tellers? I myself couldn't have survived the last five years without essayists like Paul Krugman or, in the field of poetry, our own Baron Wormser, whose *CARTHAGE* showed me a Zen way to get inside the 'banality of evil,' a way that was, as I told Baron, so much better than just Hate.

In Fiction, less directly but equally effectively, brilliant social satirists like George Saunders or gothic visionaries like Joyce Carol Oates capture the toxic poetic essence of our era.

When I had the privilege of introducing Joyce Carol Oates at a reading, I told her in front of the audience that I can't imagine NOT having read her work. My husband has said the novel *THE SUN ALSO RISES* 'saved his life'. Reader by reader, in its intimate and individual way, fiction does make its difference.

Last year when I read at a Hurricane Relief fundraiser, we readers were asked to read from Southern writers. I chose novelist Nancy Lemman, who wrote this short passage about New Orleans:

"The weather had turned fine. Dark fell. I looked into the glittering night. Suddenly a parade came out of nowhere and passed through the unsuspecting street, heralded by African drumbeats in the distance vaguely, then the approach of jazz, the smell of sweet olive, ambrosia, the sense of impending spectacle. Then it passed in its fleeting beauty, this glittering dirge, and as suddenly as it came I was left, rather stunned, in its wake. It is this passing parade which I chronicle."

Who can say which of the passing parades we chronicle will be remembered? Who remembers the War of Roses? This last question was posed in an essay on Shakespeare, the essayist pointing out, of course, how Shakespeare's WORDS have outlasted so many tragic and in retrospect often pointless battles.

In her essay entitled *WHY I WRITE*, Joan Didion began by pointing out all three words in that title share one sound: I, I, I. While I admire writers driven by a grander purpose, I think many of us --in the end-- can relate to the coach and Olympic runner in the film *CHARIOTS OF FIRE*, who memorably confess to each other that they have worked so hard not so much for their Country or even to prove to those prejudiced against them that they have the Right Stuff, but to make a mark for themselves, for 'I' and 'I'.

In Virginia Woolf's *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*, the character Lily Briscoe quietly and passionately persists in her painting. In a climactic dinner table scene which I love, as

high-minded talk of politics and academia surrounds her, Lily experiences a small unforgettable moment of private triumph when she lifts a salt shaker and realizes she must move a tree in her latest painting. It fascinates Lily, we learn: how to move from point A to point B on a piece of blank canvas. And Lily is given the last words in Woolf's magnificent novel, having had "her vision."

It's not clear in the novel how "successful" Lily's paintings are. The poet Borges remarked-- when asked the absurd question was Virginia Woolf 'better' or 'worse' than James Joyce-- "She was an interesting writer of her times; that is all that matters."

I see so many interesting writers of our times before me. In my years of teaching my students have given me so many memorable lines that 'stick in' and enrich my mind. One such line-- by a student years ago-- was from a description of a beach during the golden brightly lit hour just before sunset. A character gazes after his retreating lover and her "radiant footprints."

I love those 'radiant footprints' and I love each year at this ceremony to hear Baron read a few brief shining lines from each of our students. Maybe that is the smallest yet best reason to write: for each of you to leave your own radiant footprints across the sand.