

WHY IT IS RIGHT TO WRITE

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This talk at a Dean's Convocation offered me the chance to prove that I am capable of practicing what I preach to so many students from my writing workshops: that I am capable of taking the knife and, starting at the tip of the forehead, cutting myself open down the middle until I have opened myself up fully and exposed the values, fears, dreams and hopes that lie therein—just as capable as I expect them to be and plead for them to be in our workshops at Brown.

There is a devil in us all, and we don't have to read Freud to recognize this possibility or the importance of dreams, or of sex and childhood in our psychological make-up. But our dreams, our views of sexuality, our memories of childhood *must* form the basis of fictional writing even in those rare instances where these influences are so below the subconscious that the writer insists he is not writing from his own experiences—as if admitting he does is at the same time erecting a barrier between the imagination and experience—but purely from some physiologically unsound premise termed the imaginative faculty. Matter cannot be created—and especially not from nothing. From where could imaginative leaps spring but the genesis of experience? The experience is what we build upon, and there can be no fanciful invention without this basic building block.

We must begin with experience. If you are a homosexual and refuse to confront that fact in your fiction, you cheat the world out of an important perspective. If you are an alcoholic, or like Eugene O'Neill, know about it, write about it. The writer owes it to the world is what I pound into the heads of my workshop authors. The reader wants sustenance. He or she wants to be assured that other human beings act as she or he; have the same headaches, fears, desires, idiosyncrasies, attitudes, expectations. And if the reader encounters characters who act in a manner that the reader couldn't have contemplated, that is therapeutically all the better.

Let me try to support my point: I think I want to say simply that I am unalterably associated with a view of writing that places primacy of experience and the imaginative refashioning of that experience as cornerstones of fictional craftsmanship. The writer must purge himself and forget about the reader who might confuse the invisible narrator with Ralph Ellison, Moses Herzog with Saul Bellow, Portnoy with Philip Roth, and Huckleberry with Mark Twain. What, finally, does it mean anyway if the reader thinks you are a homosexual, alcoholic, wife-beater, masochist, Midwesterner, or Republican?

So here I am with the knife, starting at the top, at the forehead. I feel fine, now, positive that it's right to write, that it is proper and necessary—to extend the meaning—for me to apply myself as seriously as I can to the craft of writing. This incision is an affirmation of faith in myself, a symbolic rise from the ashes, a confident espousal of a life's direction. I say it's right to write because the term represents the personal commitment I have made.

Odd as it may sound, I have never been as sure of the meaning of that commitment on any other birthday as I was on my thirty-fourth recently. And the commitment didn't come easily.

I made the commitment very recently after a tumultuous three years of shaken confidence, years which were to witness me wondering where I was going, what I was doing, and who I was. I had actually reached that precipice in human affairs where one ruminates seriously on the value of his chosen direction. My feet were so close to the crumbling granules falling away from the cliff. I was so close to discarding an artistic predilection which had been nurtured from within and encouraged from without that now I am able to look amazedly back at those years and feel grateful for surviving.

Best stated, I can describe the years' bitter chronology beginning with the torment of a marital separation that was to lead to divorce. We had been married for seven years, had two children, had just returned from a Florida vacation, had discussed our differences and difficulties, and suddenly—suddenly we were the characters on one of those day-time television shows. We were sitting in the living room and facing our son and our daughter and telling them as best we could that Daddy and Mommy needed some breathing room from each other, that Daddy was moving out. No one had seen the script and therefore each of us waited for the other to remember a line. We were resident fellows in the West Quad but the entire West Quad had never been so quiet as it was that night while the four of us glanced at bookcases or bare walls or out windows as each tried to reconstruct the sudden, battered shards of the stable world he or she had been accustomed to.

There was no hockey playing, no imitations of girls' screams, no Frisbee throwing in the hallway; just the four of us in the comfortable, silent living room and feeling uncomfortable with our silence.

The separation was to inspire for both an intensity and a level of self-examination that neither of us could have anticipated. Dark, devious natures surfaced. Violence was threatened. Lies, tricks, warnings were exchanged. Daily tears, frustrations, fears became normal expectations. *A deus ex machina* had appeared to lift us out of one familiar reality into another of rapidly shifting scenes that had no precedent for us experientially and therefore dragged us unequipped over a foreign landscape. Like puppets we grabbed for and at, sensed and sought for, a meaning that would stabilize our unpracticed stances on a wobbly new earth.

My head was definitely too fuzzy to decode the process; it was fog over smog. I could find no joy, no smiles. I was in slow motion, not wanting to answer the phone, not wanting to see the children, not wanting to sit in front of a classroom, not wanting to talk and yet knowing in an almost masochistic way that these were the very things I needed to do.

And most importantly, I couldn't write. My stomach was all drawn up and my muscles were too tight. My head pounded, my mind skipped, I couldn't concentrate. I didn't want to write, either. I didn't want to do anything but close my eyes until someone

shook my shoulders and informed me that it was all over.

It seemed as if I confused not being able to maintain the mental stamina to write with not having enough time to write. Rather than admit the truth, that I was depressed, I argue that I didn't have the time to create after the hours spent preparing for class.

Yes, the initial separation was the authentic cause for my writing production's dropping to zero. The separation was responsible for the numbness of creative spirit. But I directed my antennae toward another signal, one encouraging me to see my inability to write to be linked to overwhelming teaching duties; moreover, I determined I should leave teaching altogether and go back to private industry.

I seized upon the idea. Here now is what I needed to do. Give up writing altogether—well, if not that drastic, at least for a while. Argue that so little time is left after teaching duties are completed. Argue that you are tired of teaching anyway, that you need a break, that you want to do something, that you can do something different, that ...

In a series of swift movements so sudden that they hardly stick in the mind, I made a dramatic announcement that I was planning to resign from the faculty. Hours, it seems, after that announcement, I had submitted a letter of resignation. I resigned from the faculty of Brown University.

To summarize the ensuing events, I can say that good friends and good sense won out and that I was able to rescind my resignation and was given a special arrangement, a sabbatic leave for non-tenured faculty, for the academic year. I would be able to write at least for a year without the interruption of classes, independent studies, or meetings. Okay.

Then something happened during the year, something that shook my confidence with such violence that the event would be responsible for a seriously protective stance toward the publishing industry as a whole, and would prompt me to review the series of bad breaks from publishers and cumulatively to link these misfortunes under one category.

Not only did I not find publishers to be solid citizens, but also I found the need to declare that I would have nothing to do with them any more.

Look what they had done. The paperback version of my second novel has, without my agreement, a cardboard insert advertising Kent cigarettes. The English paperback publisher of my first novel had produced a new edition with an entirely new title and a lascivious scene on the cover of a half-naked black woman's buttocks being fondled by a white male hand. *The New York Times Book Review* assigned ten baseball books for me to comment on in a roundup review, urged me by telephone to complete it by a certain date, and then decided not to publish it, but never notified me formally that the review would never see print. Even their check came without a note. I add to this catalogue of sequences of disrespect the usual form letters from the Guggenheim Foundation and NEH regretfully informing me that they shall be unable to grant ... and

so forth and so on. ...

But the real blow came by telephone one month after I had submitted the completed manuscript of my third book to a publisher who had drawn me away from another project to write a biography of a Harlem basketball player they thought had an attractively tragic enough life to make a salable book. After hearing the news from my attorney (who had warned me as soon as I picked up the phone that I should sit down), I stared at my desk with my left eye jumping nervously. The floor began to move up, then the ceiling began to move down, and the walls of my study began to push inward and the ceiling lights began to flash on and off. I ran down the steps, grabbed my sweater, and went out the front door before the house could collapse on me.

I felt nothing. I started the car and backed out of the driveway and soon I was on a back road in the northern stretches of the Rhode Island woods. It was a pleasantly sunny day in April and I hated it for not being the usual Providence overcast gray. I rode through the narrow, two-lane streets in the country and tried to put the conversation I had just had with my New York attorney in perspective. I pulled over to the side and got out and put my foot on the fender of the Volkswagen and started crying.

They had rejected the manuscript I had spent two years on. Two years of tape-recorded interviews, travel to Manhattan, library research, typed drafts, editorial conferences. For what?

“How can they do this?” I had asked my attorney. “Can they just say that it’s unacceptable without giving me an explanation? Don’t they have to say that it’s badly written or badly organized or too long or too short or too late or too early or too something?”

No. They don’t.

I turned sour. I hated publishers, I hated basketball players, I hated editors, I hated books, I hated writing, I hated sports. I was tired of these fools trying to drive me crazy. This publisher had actually produced a book by a famous New York Knick player via Princeton, a book that was as heady and insightful as a watermelon, and they were rejecting my work as unacceptable. *My work*. Didn’t they know who I am? I scrambled around for laudatory reviews and read them over and over: *The New York Times Book Review, Washington Post, Mademoiselle, Publisher’s Weekly, Hartford Courant, Denver Post, Library Journal, San Francisco Bee*. Couldn’t I write? Haven’t I written? Won’t I write? You mean to tell me my book won’t be on sale because some crazy white editor has decided it won’t?

Well, look, shove the whole thing. I’ll go into isolation. I’ll stop writing. I’ll start my own publishing firm. I’ll sue. I’ll bomb that damn building on 53rd Street.

First, though, I needed to sit and plan, ruminating and digest.

People do not realize how well off they are. One evening, many months after that ride to the country, midway between thirty-three and thirty-four years old, I was struck almost mediumistically with that thought. I reviewed my list of complaints, looked again at the hell I thought I had gone through with my change in marital status, considered my quarrel with the Guggenheim people and NEH, too—looked at these so-called misfortunes and was without warning overcome with an intense sense of relief, confidence, and clarity of vision. In a brilliant, illuminating moment in which the past, put into the perspective of the future, slipped by my consciousness, I realized that I had little to complain about. And if I did, the complaint could hardly be raised to a level of significance demanding my serious contemplation of ending a fastidious approach to the writing of fiction.

They'd like me to give up, I kept telling myself. If I get that frustrated, they will have beaten me. If I do anything but signal my intention to continue, they will write me off. I can't play into their hands like that. This isn't simply an issue about writer-editor disputes; it goes even further when the full impact is considered. The issues are really those of cultural-social dynamics and involve matters like the control of culture in this country, and the need for a black intellectual renaissance.

I must remain strong and realize the importance of saying it is right to write. When we are doing our jobs, writers, although isolated in our knowledge of truth and art, should announce that which no man foreshadows. We must understand the higher value society places on the act of creation as opposed to our more practically oriented vocational contributions, which are related invariably to the manipulation of people through institutions.

The world expects the writer to give sustenance and guidance, rules to live by, a value system. The world waits for him to tell us what to do. The world needs him to tell us who we are and what we are. The world expects him to sustain the consciousness of the past and to transmit that consciousness throughout the future and the present. There is a tremendous, weighty onus on the literary artist, and perhaps that explains why we don't seem to be living up to our charges in this country. But this onus is a further incentive to me. The responsibility is too great to ignore. No artist can ever allow himself the luxury of withholding his gift from the public. They need these works. And so once the writer recognizes how right it is to write, how absolutely necessary it is once he knows in his heart that this is the gift he or she has been awarded and that it must be treasured and nourished and by no stretch of the imagination—no stretch—be laid dormant, he can never seriously contemplate being so overwhelmed by unnatural, counterproductive forces that the gift may be called into question.

Related to this necessity of sustaining the gift is the very special nature of the black writer in this society. How simple, as an aside, these matters seem to me at thirty-four but were so hazy at thirty-three. We blacks stand in terrible limbo in 1978. We have no leaders, we have no unity, we have no national organization, we have no communicative vehicle. We have, it seems, a substantial middle-and upper-class body who, although enjoying the fruits of affluence, see no avenue yet for harnessing the

burgeoning body of black professionals and intellectuals in our country. I believe that so many young and middle-aged blacks are about their own thing—operating and performing as they should as attorneys, doctors, accountants, business executives, administrators, faculty members and the like—that we may expect within the next five years a group of leaders who will be more sophisticated and more capable than any we have had in the history of this country. The groundwork is being laid now.

The black writer must realize that his contribution is needed valuably. While the undercurrent of black professionals develops its expertise, coterminously the writer must offer his gift. Again, it is right to write. It is necessary. There is no time for the luxury of roll-over-dead-capitulation-frustration-perplexed-disgruntlement with a publishing system which is about money first and quality second. Our own growing cadre of black business professionals will handle these heartless capitalists. It is right to write, and it is necessary to give to black people works that they are not accustomed to, for we as black writers have not examined our culture thoroughly enough to know yet what we are not used to.

I'd like to mention two or three areas I think any black writer who believes it is right to write, that it is necessary to write, needs to investigate as one approach to sustaining our roots.

First we need, believe it or not, a black fiction of love between a black man and a black woman who represent positively the possibilities of heterosexual passion, warmth, tenderness, and understanding. As black writers we have unfortunately been so duplicitous in our examination of white American writers that we have failed to pinpoint their disinterest in portraying a healthy, passionate relationship between man and woman. It is so right to write this story; it is so necessary, needful as air, to use Robert Hayden's words. We need this fiction so badly.

Secondly, we need, and it is right to write, a sociocultural study of what black people are about in this last quarter-century. Who are our intellectuals and what contributions are they making? What are the elements of black culture that have been preserved over the years through the offsetting circumstances of integration? What do black people think? Where are we going? Where do we want to go? No matter that a publisher hasn't asked a black writer, but chose Stephen Birmingham instead to write an analysis of the black middle class. Somewhere, there is a publisher who will realize that it is right to write this book.

Finally, in looking over the bulk of our literature, I see another paradoxical omission. Despite our supposed preoccupation with fun and laughter and dance, there exists no major black American comic novel, a work whose basic success is described by its ability to *keep* the reader laughing. I speak of a large, outrageous, successful, sportive novel.

It is right to write, then, because I discovered by the age of thirty-four that by the time you reach that age, you have positioned yourself in either of two philosophical

camps. Either your will is indomitable and nothing will subdue you ever; that you do not recognize the word *failure*, that you think progress constantly and success always, that you believe the human spirit will win out over evil—or you don't.

I do. I believe it is right to write and I hope you who have reached this conclusion years ago will accept me into your ranks.