

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

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Why We Write

HOW TO ARTICULATE THE WORD'S COMMANDING NEED? In a stunning book about writing, Donald Murray listed twelve reasons why authors must write. Here in this list you will find simple rationales why you write, and why you're reading this. Myself? These twelve work for me. I fritter away hours imagining the motives of writers I respect through Murray's lens, guessing at their interior selves. Here they are, in their illogical glory.



To Discover Who I Am: Virginia Woolf said, "I was in a queer mood, thinking myself very old: but now I am a woman again - as I always am when I write."

Like Woolf, I am myself again as I write. Writing gives me back the humanity and complexity that workaday life scrubs away. When I write, I am more than a list of tasks that need accomplishment, a series of barter and transactions that pries me out of bed and dumps me back into it at the end of day. The story is more than the sum of a human's parts.

To Say I Am: The powerless voice, suddenly awake and awaking us. Allen Ginsberg, smothered under an American blanket of materialism, of bigotry and conformity, surely he stood up for himself - and for other disenfranchised artists - when he first read "Howl" aloud.

To Create New Aspects of My Life: David Morrell tells his students and his readers, "Don't write what you know, write what you want to know." I would add, write who you might become. We contain multitudes.

To Understand My Life: I surmise Richard Russo unraveled Empire Falls to illuminate what his relationship with his mother and what his thwarted dreams had been. I believe James Jones had to write and rewrite the military novel. He had to sift through his life for his own thin red line.

Someday I will be good enough a writer to type out my broadside on corporate life. I will illuminate thirty years of that stranger who dedicated sixty hours a week, committed to teams that struggled mightily, kow-towed to authority that blindly thrashed out misery, and quit out of childish ego. And then I'll get it. Perhaps.

To Slay My Dragons: Harlan Ellison transmitted major shocks of fear into his readers, fear that had to erupt from somewhere. Ellison, above all the horror writers I know, must have had dragons and bugs in his head waiting to be exorcised. "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" - could he again sleep at night, once this piece hit paper?

Have you imagined going blind, or having two legs being pulverized by an IED? Have you jarred awake after dreams of burning or drowning or raping? My characters can make these fears into real lives, and I need only listen to be healed. Or at least soothed.

To Exercise My Craft: Consider Herman Melville, a writer we return to again and again, maybe the first modernist and a magician with his words. So few of his contemporaries could have written works that still

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matter now, as implacable change drives language generation after generation. Years wash away meagre talent, but not Melville's craft.

To write is a responsibility. To write well is a personal goal, unreachable, but one sought by writers I admire. How can there be authors who write casually, crapulously, who depend on charm and plot pacing to hurry the reader past literary debacle?

To Lose Myself In My Work: Dylan Thomas, addicted to young admiring women, slipping along the alcohol fault-line to desperate damaged health: Thomas returned again and again to a beguiled childhood along the heron-priested shore – searched for who he had been to avoid the grayness of who he had become.

If to pay attention is our endless and proper work, how can we obsess about ourselves while we pay attention to the character? I've turned off endless self-maundering with five first drafts, freeing myself from myself. Don't we all, as we stare into the page?

For Revenge: Did Melville mean Billy Bud as a revenge spelled out against a corrupt maritime system? Did Faulkner portray his neighbors as the boorish debauched Snopes's to get back at the Southern abuse heaped upon him?

Yes, I too portray the petty bullies who made life a misery, but in surprise, I rediscover them as interesting humans, if not sympathetic. Revenge is best if true, and cooked up into words.

To Share: Of authors I am reading now, Bruno Schulz stands out as the loneliest and most isolated. He sent his book Cinnamon Shops letter by letter to a friend, shared in a secret way. A stuffed envelope in the mail – Schulz's only artistic outlet. But even Schulz had to launch his work out into the world.

To Testify: When Roddy Doyle writes Paula Spencer or John Steinbeck gives us Tom Joad, a writer champions those who have no voice.

For me, to bear witness drives writing as much as any selfish authorial ego. Someone should speak for the working poor, the brown, the dismal white, the men and women so battered they also batter, the child so persecuted that only rage remains. I think I can be and should be one of those authors.

To Celebrate: I believe Richard Brautigan wrote to celebrate, to spin out fantasies both outrageous and free, chanting a poetic line into the reader's sense of wonder. I believe Torrington wrote Swing Hammer Swing as an unashamed love song to Glasgow's tenements, even as the planners tore down the best and the worst.

To Avoid Boredom: Boredom often attacked Kerouac. Indeed, he had a vast need for his words to be important to someone – But the bottom of it all, below the ego's need, he drifted through the Beat world rummaging around for something to fascinate him – whether it was the ramblings of a male prostitute strung out on bennie or William Burrough's imagined world-order of druggies, whores, artists and writers.

One of the many reasons I write stems from how boring I am. Once a departing girl friend compared me to a sphere, present in life but perfectly

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featureless. Scathing, but close enough. But other people, now, that's a different thing.

People are kaleidoscopic and they don't know it. Locked in despair, chained to a daily treadmill, they live thoughtlessly. They wall themselves up alive with their own rationalizations about small failures and they miss their own triumphs. They don't know how fascinating they are. Try it out – if you ask, they will tell you the damndest things. And all you can answer is, "Really? What happened next?"



These people slide into fiction and march around in my head. Sometimes when I'm out wandering with my dog in the morning, I will snap into awareness – first person point-of-view, present tense. The signs I've been absent show clear, the changes I haven't marked: wet boots, my jeans soaked up to the knee. The coffee has been drunk, the dog wants me to catch up. I've been talking to Maudy or Grace, Little Jan, Ezekias or Tommy the Rat in my head and they've been answering back.

"That goddam horse shied back and quick as a flash, she jerked my thumb off."

"No, I woulda nevah touched her, 'cause I'm not bi."

"When he finally died, that's when the beatings stopped. The day after the service, I carried all of his clothes into the vacant lot next door and I burned them."

"He was liquid fire. I couldn't help myself. When he asked me to pack a bag and slip into the car, I did. That was ten small towns back, when I knew my name."

"This tattoo, see, on the back of my hand? It's for the time they raped me. I stare at it all the time."



When on these morning rambles Maudy and Ezekias stop talking, I have to sort out where I am, what overgrown thicket of fir and spruce I'm in. Trudge downhill – I'll stumble onto the road. The next day I might be ready to write down what one of them whispered to me.



With all these people tramping around in my head, how can I not write? And they have to receive the voice they each deserve. The writing has to be good. They deserve great, in fact. And so the language has to be worked, over and over. Until they say it's right.