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Hard Laughter

Rosie

Joe Jones

All New People

Operating Instructions

Bird *by* Bird

Some Instructions on Writing and Life

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DOUBLEDAY
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND

Short Assignments

The first useful concept is the idea of short assignments. Often when you sit down to write, what you have in mind is an autobiographical novel about your childhood, or a play about the immigrant experience, or a history of—oh, say—say women. But this is like trying to scale a glacier. It's hard to get your footing, and your fingertips get all red and frozen and torn up. Then your mental illnesses arrive at the desk like your sickest, most secretive relatives. And they pull up chairs in a semicircle around the computer, and they try to be quiet but you know they are there with their weird coppery breath, leering at you behind your back.

What I do at this point, as the panic mounts and the jungle drums begin beating and I realize that the well has run dry and that my future is behind me and I'm going to have to get a job only I'm completely unemployable, is to stop. First I try to breathe, because I'm either sitting there panting like a lapdog

or I'm unintentionally making slow asthmatic death rattles. So I just sit there for a minute, breathing slowly, quietly. I let my mind wander. After a moment I may notice that I'm trying to decide whether or not I am too old for orthodontia and whether right now would be a good time to make a few calls, and then I start to think about learning to use makeup and how maybe I could find some boyfriend who is not a total and complete fixer-upper and then my life would be totally great and I'd be happy all the time, and then I think about all the people I should have called back before I sat down to work, and how I should probably at least check in with my agent and tell him this great idea I have and see if he thinks it's a good idea, and see if *he* thinks I need orthodontia—if that is what he is actually thinking whenever we have lunch together. Then I think about someone I'm really annoyed with, or some financial problem that is driving me crazy, and decide that I must resolve this before I get down to today's work. So I become a dog with a chew toy, worrying it for a while, wrestling it to the ground, flinging it over my shoulder, chasing it, licking it, chewing it, flinging it back over my shoulder. I stop just short of actually barking. But all of this only takes somewhere between one and two minutes, so I haven't actually wasted that much time. Still, it leaves me winded. I go back to trying to breathe, slowly and calmly, and I finally notice the one-inch picture frame that I put on my desk to remind me of short assignments.

It reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame. This is

all I have to bite off for the time being. All I am going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story in my hometown, in the late fifties, when the trains were still running. I am going to paint a picture of it, in words, on my word processor. Or all I am going to do is to describe the main character the very first time we meet her, when she first walks out the front door and onto the porch. I am not even going to describe the expression on her face when she first notices the blind dog sitting behind the wheel of her car—just what I can see through the one-inch picture frame, just one paragraph describing this woman, in the town where I grew up, the first time we encounter her.

E. L. Doctorow once said that "writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. This is right up there with the best advice about writing, or life, I have ever heard.

So after I've completely exhausted myself thinking about the people I most resent in the world, and my more arresting financial problems, and, of course, the orthodontia, I remember to pick up the one-inch picture frame and to figure out a one-inch piece of my story to tell, one small scene, one memory, one exchange. I also remember a story that I know I've told elsewhere but that over and over helps me to get a grip: thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time,

was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

I tell this story again because it usually makes a dent in the tremendous sense of being overwhelmed that my students experience. Sometimes it actually gives them hope, and hope, as Chesterton said, is the power of being cheerful in circumstances that we know to be desperate. Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong. It is no wonder if we sometimes tend to take ourselves perhaps a bit too seriously. So here is another story I tell often.

In the Bill Murray movie *Stripes,* in which he joins the army, there is a scene that takes place the first night of boot camp, where Murray's platoon is assembled in the barracks. They are supposed to be getting to know their sergeant, played by Warren Oates, and one another. So each man takes a few moments to say a few things about who he is and where he is from. Finally it is the turn of this incredibly intense, angry guy named Francis. "My name is Francis," he says. "No one calls me Francis—anyone here calls me Francis and I'll kill them. And another thing. I don't like to be touched. Anyone

here ever tries to touch me, I'll kill them," at which point Warren Oates jumps in and says, "Hey—lighten up, Francis."

This is not a bad line to have taped to the wall of your office.

Say to yourself in the kindest possible way, Look, honey, all we're going to do for now is to write a description of the river at sunrise, or the young child swimming in the pool at the club, or the first time the man sees the woman he will marry. That is all we are going to do for now. We are just going to take this bird by bird. But we are going to finish this *one* short assignment.

Shitty First Drafts

Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant

Looking Around

Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on. Now, if you ask me, what's going on is that we're all up to *here* in it, and probably the most important thing is that we not yell at one another. Otherwise we'd all just be barking away like Pekingese: "Ah! Stuck in the shit! And it's *your* fault, *you* did this . . ." Writing involves seeing people suffer and, as Robert Stone once put it, finding some meaning therein. But you can't do that if you're not respectful. If you look at people and just see sloppy clothes or rich clothes, you're going to get them wrong.

The writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in "The Farmer in the Dell" standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes. You're outside, but you can see things up close through your binoculars. Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you

are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others. It's simple in concept, but not that easy to do. My Uncle Ben wrote me a letter twenty years ago in which he said, "Sometimes you run into someone, regardless of age or sex, whom you know absolutely to be an independently operating part of the Whole that goes on all the time inside yourself, and the eye-motes go *click* and you hear the tribal tones of voice resonate, and there it is—you recognize them." That is what I'm talking about: you want your readers' eye-motes to go click! with recognition as they begin to understand one of your characters, but you probably won't be able to present a character that recognizable if you do not first have self-compassion.

It is relatively easy to look tenderly and with recognition at a child, especially your own child and especially when he is being cute or funny, even if he is hurting your feelings. And it's relatively easy to look tenderly at, say, a chipmunk and even to see it with some clarity, to see that real life is right there at your feet, or at least right there in that low branch, to recognize this living breathing animal with its own agenda, to hear its sharp, high-pitched chirps, and yet not get all caught up in its cuteness. I don't want to sound too Cosmica Rama here, but in those moments, you see that you and the chipmunk are alike, are a part of a whole. I think we would see this more often if we didn't have our conscious minds. The conscious mind seems to block that feeling of oneness so we can function efficiently, maneuver in the world a little bit better, get our taxes done on time. But it's even possible to have this

feeling when you see—really see—a police officer, when you look right at him and you see that he's a living breathing person who like everyone else is suffering like a son of a bitch, and you don't see him with a transparency over him of all the images of violence and chaos and danger that cops represent. You accept him as an equal.

Obviously, it's harder by far to look at yourself with this same sense of compassionate detachment. Practice helps. As with exercise, you may be sore the first few days, but then you will get a little bit better at it every day. I am learning slowly to bring my crazy pinball-machine mind back to this place of friendly detachment toward myself, so I can look out at the world and see all those other things with respect. Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don't drop-kick a puppy into the neighbor's yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper. So I keep trying gently to bring my mind back to what is really there to be seen, maybe to be seen and noted with a kind of reverence. Because if I don't learn to do this, I think I'll keep getting things wrong.

I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?

Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at

least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious. Try walking around with a child who's going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!" And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!" I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe. Taped to the wall above my desk is a wonderful poem by the Persian mystic, Rumi:

God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flowerbed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
now a cliff covered with vines,
now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
till one day it cracks them open.

There is ecstasy in paying attention. You can get into a kind of Wordsworthian openness to the world, where you see in everything the essence of holiness, a sign that God is implicit in all of creation. Or maybe you are not predisposed to see the world sacramentally, to see everything as an outward and

visible sign of inward, invisible grace. This does not mean that you are worthless Philistine scum. Anyone who wants to can be surprised by the beauty or pain of the natural world, of the human mind and heart, and can try to capture just that—the details, the nuance, what is. If you start to look around, you will start to see. When what we see catches us off guard, and when we write it as realistically and openly as possible, it offers hope. You look around and say, Wow, there's that same mockingbird; there's that woman in the red hat again. The woman in the red hat is about hope because she's in it up to her neck, too, yet every day she puts on that crazy red hat and walks to town. One of these images might show up dimly in the lower right quadrant of the imaginary Polaroid you took; you didn't even know at first that it was part of the landscape, and here it turns out to evoke something so deep in you that you can't put your finger on it. Here is one sentence by Gary Snyder:

Ripples on the surface of the water—
were silver salmon passing under—different
from the ripples caused by breezes

Those words, less than twenty of them, make ripples clear and bright, distinct again. I have a tape of a Tibetan nun singing a mantra of compassion over and over for an hour, eight words over and over, and every line feels different, feels cared about, and experienced as she is singing. You never once have the sense that she is glancing down at her watch, thinking, "Jesus

Christ, it's only been fifteen minutes." Forty-five minutes later she is still singing each line distinctly, word by word, until the last word is sung.

Mostly things are not that way, that simple and pure, with so much focus given to each syllable of life as life sings itself. But that kind of attention is the prize. To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that it presents a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one.

The Moral Point of View

If you find that you start a number of stories or pieces that you don't ever bother finishing, that you lose interest or faith in them along the way, it may be that there is nothing at their center about which you care passionately. You need to put yourself at their center, you and what you believe to be true or right. The core, ethical concepts in which you most passionately believe are the language in which you are writing.

These concepts probably feel like givens, like things no one ever had to make up, that have been true through all cultures and for all time. Telling these truths is your job. You have nothing else to tell us. But needless to say, you can't tell them in a sentence or a paragraph; the truth doesn't come out in bumper stickers. There may be a flickering moment of insight in a one-liner, in a sound bite, but everyday meat-and-potato truth is beyond our ability to capture in a few words. Your whole piece is the truth, not just one shining epigrammatic

Writer's Block

There are few experiences as depressing as that anxious barren state known as writer's block, where you sit staring at your blank page like a cadaver, feeling your mind congeal, feeling your talent run down your leg and into your sock. Or you look at the notes you've scribbled recently on yellow legal pads or index cards, and they look like something Richard Speck jotted down the other night. And at the same time, as it turns out, you happen to know that your closest writing friend is on a roll, has been turning out stories and screenplays and children's books and even most of a novel like he or she is some crazy pot-holder factory, pot holders pouring out the windows because there is simply not enough room inside for such glorious productivity.

Writer's block is going to happen to you. You will read what little you've written lately and see with absolute clarity

that it is total dog shit. A blissfully productive manic stage may come to a screeching halt, and all of a sudden you realize you're Wile E. Coyote and you've run off the cliff and are a second away from having to look down. Or else you haven't been able to write anything at all for a while. The fear that you'll never write again is going to hit you when you feel not only lost and unable to find a few little bread crumbs that would identify the path you were on but also when you're at your lowest ebb of energy and faith. You may feel a little as if writing a novel is like trying to level Mount McKinley with a dentist's drill. Things feel hopeless, or at least bleak, and you are not imaginative or organized enough to bash your way through to a better view, let alone some interesting conclusion. You know where every idea, quote, and image came from; none of them is fresh. You're so familiar with what you're saying that your words all sound utterly commonplace. Writers are like vacuum cleaners, sucking up all that we can see and hear and read and think and feel and articulate, and everything that everyone else within earshot can hear and see and think and feel. We're mimics, we're parrots—we're writers. But knowing the source of all our stuff deprives it of its magic, because then the material feels mundane, clichéd; you didn't have to discover it because it was already there for all to see. You may start to feel that you are trying to pass off a TV dinner as home cooking.

We have all been there, and it feels like the end of the world. It's like a little chickadee being hit by an H-bomb. Here's

the thing, though. I no longer think of it as block. I think that is looking at the problem from the wrong angle. If your wife locks you out of the house, you don't have a problem with your door.

The word *block* suggests that you are constipated or stuck, when the truth is that you're empty. As I said in the last chapter, this emptiness can destroy some writers, as do the shame and frustration that go with it. You feel that the writing gods gave you just so many good days, maybe even enough of them to write one good book and then part of another. But now you are having some days or weeks of emptiness, as if suddenly the writing gods are saying, "Enough! Don't bother me! I have given to you until it hurts! Please. I've got problems of my own."

The problem is acceptance, which is something we're taught not to do. We're taught to improve uncomfortable situations, to change things, alleviate unpleasant feelings. But if you accept the reality that you have been given—that you are not in a productive creative period—you free yourself to begin filling up again. I encourage my students at times like these to get one page of anything written, three hundred words of memories or dreams or stream of consciousness on how much they hate writing—just for the hell of it, just to keep their fingers from becoming too arthritic, just because they have made a commitment to try to write three hundred words every day. Then, on bad days and weeks, let things go at that.

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I remind myself nearly every day of something that a doctor told me six months before my friend Pammy died. This was a doctor who always gave me straight answers. When I called on this one particular night, I was hoping she could put a positive slant on some distressing developments. She couldn't, but she said something that changed my life. "Watch her carefully right now," she said, "because she's teaching you how to live."

I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I am dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in the way that life is for children. They spend big round hours. So instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?" Then I can decide to read Wallace Stevens for the rest of the morning or go to the beach or just really participate in ordinary life. Any of these will begin the process of filling me back up with observations, flavors, ideas, visions, memories. I might want to write on my last day on earth, but I'd also be aware of other options that would feel at least as pressing. I would want to keep whatever I did simple, I think. And I would want to be present.

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In the beginning, when you're first starting out, there are a million reasons not to write, to give up. That is why it is of extreme importance to make a commitment to finishing sections and stories, to driving through to the finish. The discouraging voices will hound you—"This is all piffle," they will say, and they may be right. What you are doing may just be practice. But this is how you are going to get better, and there is no point in practicing if you don't finish.

I went through a real crisis of faith about two-thirds of the way through my last novel. The thing is that I had gotten twenty-seven bad reviews in a row on my previous novel, and I was feeling just the merest bit unsure about my skills and the joys of publication. But during that crisis of faith, I made a commitment to the characters in the new novel, instead of to the book itself. So I spent a little time at my desk every day, just writing down memories of my family, my youth. I went for walks and to lots of matinees, and I read. I spent as much time as I could outdoors while I waited for my unconscious to open a door and beckon.

It finally did. I did not have some beautiful Hallmark moment when I threw back my shoulders with a big smile, dusted off my old hands, and got back to work. Rather, it was like catching amoebic dysentery. I was just sitting there minding my business, and then the next minute I rushed to my desk with an urgency I had not believed possible.

It helps to resign as the controller of your fate. All that energy we expend to keep things running right is not what's keeping things running right. We're bugs struggling in the

river, brightly visible to the trout below. With that fact in mind, people like me make up all these rules to give us the illusion that we are in charge. I need to say to myself, they're not needed, hon. Just take in the buggy pleasures. Be kind to the others, grab the fleck of riverweed, notice how beautifully your bug legs scull.

All the good stories are out there waiting to be told in a fresh, wild way. Mark Twain said that Adam was the only man who, when he said a good thing, knew that nobody had said it before. Life is like a recycling center, where all the concerns and dramas of humankind get recycled back and forth across the universe. But what you have to offer is your own sensibility, maybe your own sense of humor or insider pathos or meaning. All of us can sing the same song, and there will still be four billion different renditions. Some people will sing it spontaneously, with a lot of soulful riffs, while others are going to practice until they could sing it at the Met. Either way, everything we need in order to tell our stories in a reasonable and exciting way already exists in each of us. Everything you need is in your head and memories, in all that your senses provide, in all that you've seen and thought and absorbed. There in your unconscious, where the real creation goes on, is the little kid or the Dr. Seuss creature in the cellar, arranging and stitching things together. When this being is ready to hand things up to you, to give you a paragraph or a sudden move one character makes that will change the whole course of your novel, you will be entrusted with it. So, in the meantime,

while the tailor is working, you might as well go get some fresh air. Do your three hundred words, and then go for a walk. Otherwise you'll want to sit there and try to contribute, and this will only get in the way. Your unconscious can't work when you are breathing down its neck. You'll sit there going, "Are you done in there yet, are you done in there yet?" But it is trying to tell you nicely, "Shut up and go away."

Part Four

Publication—and Other Reasons to Write

you are going to suffer in ways you never heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty blank face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome blind face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

I know that if you write a novel about your marriage, and your spouse is a public figure—a politician, say, or a therapist—and you say really awful inflammatory things about this person, all of which may be true, including the part about his wearing the little French maid's outfit when you made love and that awful business with the Brylcreem, you will get a visit from your publisher's lawyer, who will be very anxious and unamused. The problem is that the publishing house will be liable for millions of dollars in damages if this spouse of yours can convince a jury that he or she has been libeled. The best solution is not only to disguise and change as many characteristics as you can but also to make the fictional person a composite. Then throw in the teenie little penis and anti-Semitic leanings, and I think you'll be Okay.

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Try not to feel sorry for yourselves, I say, when you find the going hard and lonely. You seem to *want* to write, so write. You didn't have to sign up for this class. I didn't chase you down and drag you by the hair back to my cave. You are lucky to be one of those people who wishes to build sand castles with words, who is willing to create a place where your imagination can wander. We build this place with the sand of memories; these castles are our memories and inventiveness made tangible. So part of us believes that when the tide starts coming in, we won't really have lost anything, because actually only a symbol of it was there in the sand. Another part of us thinks we'll figure out a way to divert the ocean. This is what separates artists from ordinary people: the belief, deep in our hearts, that if we build our castles well enough, somehow the ocean won't wash them away. I think this is a wonderful kind of person to be.

Now there is only a little time left in the class, and it feels like that last half hour at camp when you've all gathered in the parking lot, waiting for your duffel bags to be loaded on the bus.

I think I've told my students every single thing I know about writing. Short assignments, shitty first drafts, one-inch picture frames, Polaroids, messes, mistakes, partners. But a lot of these people came to my class with the best ten pages they've ever written, hoping to get published, and now they wonder if this was just a pipe dream. I don't think so. Maybe

most of them are not going to be published in big magazines or by big presses. They are not going to end up on talk shows and best-seller lists, are not going to be David Letterman's best friend or show Sharon Stone a good time. They are not going to buy big houses and pedigreed dogs and fish forks as a result of their writing. Many of them want these things more than anything else. They don't believe that if they got these things they'd probably end up even more mentally ill and full of stress and self-doubt than they already are. Anyway, it is not going to happen for very many of them.

I still think they should write with everything they have, daily if possible, and for the rest of their lives.

When I suggest, however, that devotion and commitment will be their own reward, that in dedication to their craft they will find solace and direction and wisdom and truth and pride, they at first look at me with great hostility. You might think that I had just offered them membership in my embroidery club. They are angry people. This is why they write.

So let me go further. There are a lot of us, some published, some not, who think the literary life is the loveliest one possible, this life of reading and writing and corresponding. We think this life is nearly ideal. It is spiritually invigorating, says a friend, who converted at eighteen from Christianity to poetry. It is intellectually quickening. One can find in writing a perfect focus for life. It offers challenge and delight and agony and commitment. We see our work as a vocation, with the potential to be as rich and enlivening as the priesthood. As a writer, one will have over the years many experiences

that stimulate and nourish the spirit. These will be quiet and deep inside, however, unaccompanied by thunder or tremulous angels. My friend Tom, the gay Jesuit priest, said that he has longed for spiritual experiences all his life but that when he was drinking, he longed specifically to go into a church and have the statue of Mary wave back at him. And sometimes it did, when he was drinking—just quick little waves and then she'd sit down. But after he got sober, he could tell he'd had a genuine experience when he'd feel a sense of liberation afterward, in his chest, his lungs, his soul. This feeling is something my students report, especially those in writing groups, this feeling of liberation that, ironically, discipline brings.

Becoming a writer can also profoundly change your life as a reader. One reads with a deeper appreciation and concentration, knowing now how hard writing is, especially how hard it is to make it look effortless. You begin to read with a writer's eyes. You focus in a new way. You study how someone portrays his or her version of things in a way that is new and bold and original. You notice how a writer paints in a mesmerizing character or era for you, without your having the sense of being given a whole lot of information, and when you realize how artfully this has happened, you may actually put the book down for a moment and savor it, just taste it.

There are moments when I am writing when I think that if other people knew how I felt right now, they'd burn me at the stake for feeling so good, so full, so much intense pleasure. I pay through the nose for these moments, of course, with

lots of torture and self-loathing and tedium, but when I am done for the day, I have something to show for it. When the ancient Egyptians finished building the pyramids, *they had built the pyramids.* Perhaps they are good role models: they thought they were working for God, so they worked with a sense of concentration and religious awe. (Also, my friend Carpenter tells me, they drank all day and took time off every few hours to oil each other. I believe that all my other writer friends do this, too, but they won't let me in on it.)

The society to which we belong seems to be dying or is already dead. I don't mean to sound dramatic, but clearly the dark side is rising. Things could not have been more odd and frightening in the Middle Ages. But the tradition of artists will continue no matter what form the society takes. And this is another reason to write: people need us, to mirror for them and for each other without distortion—not to look around and say, "Look at yourselves, you idiots!," but to say, "This is who we are."

In this dark and wounded society, writing can give you the pleasures of the woodpecker, of hollowing out a hole in a tree where you can build your nest and say, "This is my niche, this is where I live now, this is where I belong." And the niche may be small and dark, but at last you will finally know what you are doing. After thirty years or more of floundering around and screwing up, you will finally know, and when you get serious you will be dealing with the one thing you've been avoiding all along—your wounds. This is very painful. It stops a lot of people early on who didn't get into this for the pain.

They got into it for the money and the fame. So they either quit, or they resort to a type of writing that is sort of like candy making.

Don't underestimate this gift of finding a place in the writing world: if you really work at describing creatively on paper the truth as you understand it, as you have experienced it, with the people or material who are in you, who are asking that you help them get written, you will come to a secret feeling of honor. Being a writer is part of a noble tradition, as is being a musician—the last egalitarian and open associations. No matter what happens in terms of fame and fortune, dedication to writing is a marching-step forward from where you were before, when you didn't care about reaching out to the world, when you weren't hoping to contribute, when you were just standing there doing some job into which you had fallen.

Even if only the people in your writing group read your memoirs or stories or novel, even if you only wrote your story so that one day your children would know what life was like when you were a child and you knew the name of every dog in town—still, to have written your version is an honorable thing to have done. Against all odds, you have put it down on paper, so that it won't be lost. And who knows? Maybe what you've written will help others, will be a small part of the solution. You don't even have to know how or in what way, but if you are writing the clearest, truest words you can find and doing the best you can to understand and communicate, this will shine on paper like its own little lighthouse.

Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.

You simply keep putting down one damn word after the other, as you hear them, as they come to you. You can either set brick as a laborer or as an artist. You can make the work a chore, or you can have a good time. You can do it the way you used to clear the dinner dishes when you were thirteen, or you can do it as a Japanese person would perform a tea ceremony, with a level of concentration and care in which you can lose yourself, and so in which you can find yourself.

Sometimes, no matter how screwed up things seem, I feel like we're all at a wedding. But you can't just come out and say, We're at a wedding! Have some cake! You need to create a world into which we can enter, a world where we can see this. There was an old desert dog in a comic strip yesterday, sitting with his back against a cactus, writing a letter to his brother that said, "At night the sun goes down, and the stars come out; and then in the morning the sun comes up again. It's so exciting to live in the desert." That's the wedding, right? To participate requires self-discipline and trust and courage, because this business of becoming conscious, of being a writer, is ultimately about asking yourself, as my friend Dale puts it, How alive am I willing to be?

The best thing about being an artist, instead of a madman or someone who writes letters to the editor, is that you get to engage in satisfying work. Even if you never publish a word, you have something important to pour yourself into. Your parents and grandparents will be shouting, "Don't do it, don't

sit down, don't sit down!," and you'll have to do what you did as a kid—shut them out and get on with finding out about life.

Then I look into my students' faces, and they look solemnly back at me.

"So *why* does our writing matter, again?" they ask.

Because of the spirit, I say. Because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.