

On Writing

by Trenton White

It is in those periods of intense inspiration that we first aspire to be writers. Something happens, externally or internally, that spurs this action. It could be an act of nature, of man, of writing itself. It could be a realization or epiphany that has long awaited, latent within. At this moment, the emotion, raw and unprocessed, seeks to burst from your heart. Annie Dillard, author of *The Writing Life*, claims, “a work in progress quickly becomes feral” (52). It is alive and wild: its own master. In a panic, that it might choose to evaporate, you seek to record it, and you do so by writing.

Writing frees this pent up energy in an intensely personal way. You transcribe the feelings on to paper, and it undergoes a transformation. Before, the feeling was that of something greater than you, some higher power that possessed your body, mind, and soul. It is impossible to truly relay this experience; only you can understand it completely. Rather, translating it into words and sentences adds a piece of you into the equation. The shift between the original feeling and your writing does not lessen it in any way. In fact, the variance is what makes it interesting. Fundamentally, the words do not describe the experience; they describe *your* experience in the way you have chosen to express it. The difference is vast.

The acts of reading and writing are liberating. They expand horizons and alter minds. There is so much depth in the paragraphs, sentences, and letters, yet each element is just as important as the last. Every aspect of a piece drives it forward towards the end result, and it is only by dissecting and examining this multiplicity that you may understand the whole.

In an art class, we worked on charcoal drawings of a composition the teacher had arranged in the center of the room. Simple items like pieces of wood, cloth, and springs were piled together on a table. We surrounded the mound, each with a large board and sheet of paper to draw on. The teacher gave us all the same instructions: draw the composition. After a half hour of work, we removed the sheets of paper from our boards and hung them on the wall.

As was to be expected, each student’s work displayed very different versions of the compilation. We were all at different angles to the table, and each piece showed a different side of the subject. Also different were the styles and focuses of the students. Some used a loose, sketchy technique that emphasized shapes and lines, while others honed in on shading and form. Some included just the pile, while others drew in the table, as well as the floor, walls, and other students in the background.

Given the same stimulus and directions, we had produced greatly varied works, yet none of us were surprised. We each had our different perspective, interpretation, and way of creating art. Not one of us stood up, pointed at a drawing, and exclaimed, “they did it wrong!” We respected each other’s viewpoints and choices.

Outside the classroom, everything is different. We are judged, critiqued, laughed at, all for what end? Ignorance breeds hate; understanding breeds love. Everyone is welcome to their own opinion, but to block out other points of view makes you blind. There are as many sides to an argument as there are stars in the sky, but depending on where we are on Earth, we see different constellations.

Some people may feel that they have nothing to contribute to the world of writing, or even the world itself. We are taught to fear being “wrong”, but it’s never really stated what “wrong” means. Wrong can be many things: hitting someone, stealing, having an opposing view. And yet, the definition of wrong remains elusive and ever changing. In writing, nothing is “wrong.” Some would argue that spelling and grammar rules are necessities, but they are still arbitrary rules denoted by some individual. We are taught to fear this great unknown thing that is “wrong,” and the fear paralyzes us. Whether you feel that your writing will not be loved, or that someone else could write it better, or that you cannot adequately explain it, they remain excuses for fear. If writing is personal, entirely personal, then how can it be wrong? Such a label not only discredits the work, but also the individual. Dillard, who uses her own experiences as the foundation of all her writing, poses the question, “Why not shoot yourself, actually, rather than finish one more excellent manuscript on which to gag the world?”(12)

Why not indeed? If you are told that your work is insufficient, what is the point of writing at all? Surely writing seeks to convey the unknown to the reader so that they might understand, but if it fails at this, what good is it doing?

A man from a village would wake up each morning at dawn and set off towards a muddy valley. There, he gathered several stones before approaching a large boulder. He would climb to the top of the boulder, take each stone, and hurl it northwards as far as he could. Then the man would climb off the boulder and go to see where his stones had fallen.

The thick mud of the valley puckered where each stone fell, leaving a deep hole. At the furthest hole, he would draw a line. Each time a stone went past this line, he drew a new one. Every day, the man would throw rocks before returning to the village and his work. On certain days, other villagers remarked that he was working with the strength of three men; it was these days that he had been allowed to draw a new line.

One day, a young boy accompanied him to the valley. The man told him that every month or so, he would gain another few inches on his record. After watching the ritual, the boy asked why he woke so early every morning and slogged through the muddy valley, all just to throw a few stones, especially with such little progress.

The man answered that if it was possible to push his limits just a tiny bit further, it was worth all the effort in the world. The action of drawing a new line signified a new barrier crossed, a new

challenge overcome: “Nothing on earth is more gladdening than knowing we must roll up our sleeves and move back the boundaries of the humanly possible once more” (Dillard 98).

Just because writing can't be “wrong” doesn't mean it's perfect. On the contrary, writing, like any art, can never truly be finished. It can constantly be improved on, revised, rephrased, all with the goals of constructing better sentences, clarifying meaning, and so on. Every piece has the potential to be something great, and with the proper care and construction, it will be. The most trying aspect is abstaining from the heavy emotions that accompany anything as personal as writing: “The feeling that the work is magnificent, and the feeling that it is abominable, are both mosquitoes to be repelled, ignored, or killed, but not indulged” (Dillard 15). Giving in to these concerns draws your attention from the greater picture. There is always time for revision; if the details consume you from the start, you have already lost.

Our reading and writing spaces are an essential part of the experience. The environment can drastically change the end result. I remember when I read Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*. I was visiting family over the summer, staying in our cabin tucked away in a Colorado valley. Mountains surrounded us, and below, the Rio Grande river flowed unrestrained and wild. One day, I walked down the slope to the water and lay on a dead dry log by the bank. In the far reaches of the wilderness, there are no sounds of cars or planes. The only noises were the rushing of water and the buzzing of insects. The sun hung lazily in the sky, casting long afternoon shadows over the landscape. It was there, upon my log, that I experienced *Nature*. I do not use the word “read,” because it would diminish the activity. I have never felt such a strong connection between my mind and surroundings as I did that day.

The most effective aspect of my *Nature* setting was that it added without taking away. Many times, the space where you work will introduce distractions that detract from what you are trying to focus on. It can be challenging to find the balance between mind-numbingly boring and so interesting that you cease to work. The work itself has an impact on the relationship as well. If you are struggling to focus and it seems that any stimulus will distract you, you will fare best in a room with nothing but a desk and your materials. On the other hand, when the task is engaging, a more dynamic space could serve to enhance the experience.

When I began to read *The Writing Life*, I was sitting on an air hockey table in a stuffy basement surrounded by friends who were supposed to be studying. On paper, this may seem like a terrible place to focus, yet once I started, the distractions dissipated. The book was so absorbing that nothing could draw away my attention. I can imagine reading it on a grassy hill at a park, with a myriad of diversions such as children and dogs running around me. The content of the piece deals with spaces in such an involved way that I couldn't bear the thought of reading it in a quiet, stark room, with no external stimuli. Dillard understood just how isolating walls could be: “I opened the blinds a crack like eyelids, and it all came exploding in on me at once – oh yes, the world” (31). No work is so encapsulating that it requires one's surroundings to be reduced to nothing.

The Greek philosopher Parmenides entertained the notion that everything that exists has always existed and always will exist. Nothing new is ever created. This extends past a physical sense, although his theory came far before that of the conservation of matter. It applies in terms of ideas, thoughts, even the so-called creation of art. His claim was that something cannot come from nothing, and that “new” discoveries or ideas were already present in another form. No epiphany occurs randomly; it is the result of outward influences and internal thoughts coming together to form a new combination of old ideas.

In this vein of thought, writing is a collection of a near infinite number of factors. Chiefly, there is the mind of the writer, which includes every experience and influence in his life, every person he interacted with and changed him ever so slightly, including his parents and everyone who affected them, and so on and so forth. There is also the element of how he wrote it: whether he typed it on a computer or wrote it longhand, or in what language he wrote in. In whole, the piece of writing is not only the result of the entire human experience, but of every event that occurred in the universe. Without any of these essential fragments, the very nature of the piece would be altered. Regardless of the technical expertise, descriptive language, or content, each literary addition is a stepping-stone that pushes our known universe in a new direction.

Everything is precious. Everything is progress.

Works Cited

Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1989. Print.