
Writing a Present

these people think about me is none of my business. I got to write books about my father and my best friend, and they got to read them before they died. Can you imagine? I wrote for an audience of two whom I loved and respected, who loved and respected me. So I wrote for them as carefully and soulfully as I could—which is, needless to say, how I wish I could write all the time.

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Finding Your Voice

I heard a tape once in which an actor talked about trying to find God in the modern world and how, left to our own devices, we seek instead all the worldly things—possessions, money, looks, and power—because we think they will bring us fulfillment. But this turns out to be a joke, because they are just props, and when we check out of this life, we have to give them all back to the great propmaster in the sky. "They're just on loan," he said. "They're not ours." This tape changed how I felt about my students emulating their favorite writers. It helped me see that it is natural to take on someone else's style, that it's a prop that you use for a while until you have to give it back. And it just might take you to the thing that is not on loan, the thing that is real and true: your own voice.

I often ask my students to scribble down in class the reason they want to write, why they are in my class, what is propelling

them to do this sometimes-excruciating, sometimes-boring work. And over and over, they say in effect, "I will not be silenced again." They were good children, who often felt invisible and who saw some awful stuff. But at some point they stopped telling what they saw because when they did, they were punished. Now they want to look at their lives—at life—and they don't want to be sent to their rooms for doing so. But it is very hard to find their own voice and it is tempting to assume someone else's.

Every time Isabel Allende has a new book out, I'm happy because I will get to read it, and I'm unhappy because half of my students are going to start writing like her. Now, I love Ms. Allende's work, as I love a number of South and Central American writers. When I read their books, I feel like I'm sitting around a campfire at night where they are spinning their wild stories—these crazy Rube Goldberg clocks, with lots of birds and maidens and gongs and bells and whistles. I understand why this style is so attractive to my students: it's like primitive art. It's simple and decorative, with rich colors, satisfying old forms, and a lot of sophistication underneath that you feel but don't really see. I always feel like I'm watching a wild theater piece with lots of special effects—so many lives falling apart! But, more important, this style offers the nourishment of imagination and wonder. I love to enter into these fantastical worlds where we feel like we're looking through the wrong end of the binoculars, where everything is tiny and pretty and rich, because real life is so often big and messy and hurtful and drab. But when someone like Allende polishes

and turns and twists her people and their lives and their families and their ghosts into universal curves and shapes, then the writing resonates in such a way that you think, Yes, yes, that's exactly what life is like.

I love for my students to want to have this effect. But their renditions never ring true, any more than they ring true a few months later when Ann Beattie's latest book arrives and my students start submitting stories about shiny bowls and windowpanes. We do live our lives on surfaces, and Beattie does surfaces beautifully, burnishing them, bringing out the details. But when my students do Beattie, their stories tend to be lukewarm, and I say to them, Life is lukewarm enough! Give us a little heat! If I'm going to read about a bunch of people who drive Volkswagens and seem to have mostly Volkswagen-sized problems, and the writer shows them driving around on top of the ice, I want a sense that there's a lot of very, very cold water down below. I eventually want for someone to crash through. I want people who write to crash or dive below the surface, where life is so cold and confusing and hard to see. I want writers to plunge through the holes—the holes we try to fill up with all the props. In those holes and in the spaces around them exist all sorts of possibility, including the chance to see who we are and to glimpse the mystery.

The great writers keep writing about the cold dark place within, the water under a frozen lake or the secluded, camouflaged hole. The light they shine on this hole, this pit, helps us cut away or step around the brush and brambles; then we can dance around the rim of the abyss, holler into it, measure

it, throw rocks in it, and still not fall in. It can no longer swallow us up. And we can get on with things.

A sober friend once said to me, "When I was still drinking, I was a sedated monster. After I got sober, I was just a monster." He told me about his monster. His sounded just like mine without quite so much mascara. When people shine a little light on their monster, we find out how similar most of our monsters are. The secrecy, the obfuscation, the fact that these monsters can only be hinted at, gives us the sense that they must be very bad indeed. But when people let their monsters out for a little onstage interview, it turns out that we've all done or thought the same things, that this is our lot, our condition. We don't end up with a brand on our forehead. Instead, we compare notes.

We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must. Otherwise, you'll just be rearranging furniture in rooms you've already been in. Most human beings are dedicated to keeping that one door shut. But the writer's job is to see what's behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words—not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues.

You can't do this without discovering your own true voice, and you can't find your true voice and peer behind the door and report honestly and clearly to us if your parents are reading over your shoulder. They are probably the ones who told you not to open that door in the first place. You can tell if they're

there because a small voice will say, "Oh, whoops, don't say that, that's a secret," or "That's a bad word," or "Don't tell anyone you jack off. They'll all start doing it." So you have to breathe or pray or do therapy to send them away. Write as if your parents are dead. As I've said, we will discuss libel later in this book.

"Why, though?" my students ask, staring at me intently. "Why are we supposed to open all these doors? Why are we supposed to tell the truth in our own voice?" And I stare back at them for a moment. I guess because it's our nature, I say. Also, I think that most of your characters believe, as children believe, that if the truth were known, they would be seen as good people. Truth seems to want expression. Unacknowledged truth saps your energy and keeps you and your characters wired and delusional. But when you open the closet door and let what was inside out, you can get a rush of liberation and even joy. If we can believe in the Gnostic gospel of Thomas, old Uncle Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is inside you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don't bring forth what is inside you, what you bring forth can destroy you."

And the truth of your experience can *only* come through in your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else's voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else's clothes. You cannot write out of someone else's big dark place; you can only write out of your own. Sometimes wearing someone else's style is very comforting, warm and pretty and bright, and it can loosen you up, tune you into the

will be an abstraction because it will not have sprung from direct experience: when you try to capture the truth of your experience in some other person's voice or on that person's terms, you are removing yourself one step further from what you have seen and what you know.

Truth, or reality, or whatever you want to call it is the bedrock of life. A black man at my church who is nearing one hundred thundered last Sunday, "God is your home," and I pass this on mostly because all of the interesting characters I've ever worked with—including myself—have had at their center a feeling of otherness, of homesickness. And it's wonderful to watch someone finally open that forbidden door that has kept him or her away. What gets exposed is not people's baseness but their humanity. It turns out that the truth, or reality, is our home.

Look at the two extremes. Maybe you find truth in Samuel Beckett—that we're very much alone and it's all scary and annoying and it smells like dirty feet and the most you can hope for is that periodically someone will offer a hand or a rag or a tiny word of encouragement just when you're going under. The redemption in Beckett is so small: in the second act of *Waiting for Godot*, the barren dying twig of a tree has put out a leaf. Just one leaf. It's not much; still Beckett didn't commit suicide. He wrote.

Or maybe truth as you understand it is 180 degrees away—that God is everywhere and we are all where we're supposed to be and more will be revealed one day. Maybe you feel that

writing on job. The physical body is acknowledged as dust, the personal drama as delusion. It is as if the world we perceive through our senses, that whole gorgeous and terrible pageant, were the breath-thin surface of a bubble, and everything else, inside and outside, is pure radiance. Both suffering and joy come then like a brief reflection, and death like a pin."

But you can't get to any of these truths by sitting in a field smiling beatifically, avoiding your anger and damage and grief. Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth. We don't have much truth to express unless we have gone into those rooms and closets and woods and abysses that we were told not to go in to. When we have gone in and looked around for a long while, just breathing and finally taking it in—then we will be able to speak in our own voice and to stay in the present moment. And that moment is home.