

SAN DIEGO BOOK AWARDS KEYNOTE SPEECH, MAY 16, 2009

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It's an honor to address you tonight. Some of you are writers, and some of you have a good deal to do with writers, and to you I must say thank you for allowing the writer in your life, time to contemplate, which is the basis for good writing.

I speak from the perspective of mainstream fiction, but I hope those of your writing in others genres can find something of value in these remarks.

I'd like us to consider why we are writers [and by the way, publication doesn't make you a writer. Writing makes you a writer]. Why we do this sometimes torturous, sometimes joyful work is a mystery to those who love us or live with us. I suppose one reason we do is the exquisite pleasure we feel when we realize we have reached into someone's heart and made him a better or deeper or more understanding or more enlightened person.

For encouragement in this regard, I turn to William Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech given 1950, beginning of the Cold War. Here are some selections:

Our tragedy today, [he said], is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?

Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing.

He must learn them again,...leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed -- love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.

Until he does so, ...he writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion...He writes not of the heart but of the glands.

Until he learns these things, he will write as though he stood...and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man...I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.

Conversely, I believe that when a skillful writer writes a shallow, cynical, merely amusing book, he has wandered far from the realm of the values of which Faulkner speaks. In my mind, an earnest writer settling for cheapness and easy entertainment has committed a fault of the soul.

You say that the marketplace expects and shallowness or stylish cynicism? Let us not be slaves

to the marketplace. Let us work to change the marketplace and not sacrifice what is good in us to the lowest common denominator.

There's a scene from *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the Negro slave Jim tells Huck about hitting his daughter for not closing the door when he told her to, and then the wind slammed shut the door, "ker-blam, en my land', de chile never move. She never budge! Oh, Huck, I bust out a cryin' en grab her up in my arms en say, de Lord God Almighty fogive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to fogrive hisself as long's he live. Oh she was plumb deaf en dumb, Huck, plumb deaf en dumb--en I been a'treat'n her so."

and elsewhere in the same scene, Huck tells us,

"When I waked up, just at daybreak, he was setting here with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself...I knowed what it was about. He was thinking about his wife and his children way up yonder and he was low and homesick...I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural but I reckon it's so. He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was."

This is what I call a **Huckleberry moment**, a startling revelation of something **unexpected** outside one's own experience, which **changed** him. **Huck's imagination was activated, and as a result he became larger than he was before.**

As writers, that's our business: to create Huckleberry moments, moments of enlightenment, expansion of sensibilities, enlargement, in the Whitman sense: "I am large. I contain multitudes." If we, every one of us, really achieved that "containing of multitudes," there would be no more war. But we can move a few steps in that direction, and take our readers along with us.

Consider the word "humanities." We are practitioners developing the humanity, the milk of human kindness, the compassion born of imagining the lives of others, fictional or real.

Inability or unwillingness to take that leap into someone else's skin is a move toward isolation and the ultimate failure of a human being. As writers, it is our **charge, our privilege** to prevent that failure by **luring the imagination to come alive.**

I've said this before here, but I'll say it again. Where there is no imagination, there is no human connection. Where there is no connection, there is no compassion. Without compassion, then community, commitment, lovingkindness, human understanding, peace--they all shrivel. The isolated, the disenfranchised turn cruel, and that can result in indifference at the very least, and domestic and civil violence, terrorism, and genocide at the other extreme.

BUT

Each time we enter imaginatively into the life of another, like Huck did, is a small step upwards in the elevation of the human race. I'd like to repeat that: Each time we enter imaginatively into the life of another is a small step upwards in the elevation of the human race. **That is why we write and read and teach. It is our privilege to elevate the race--one heart at a time.**

William Carlos Williams tells us:

It is difficult to get the news from poems

**yet men die miserably every day
for want
of what is found there.**

Once I taught a writers workshop in Colorado. At week's end, a woman came up to thank me. She told me about her son's death in Faluja just two months earlier. She held up her wrist. The big, hulky military watch she was wearing had been her son's, Lance Corporal Aaron Miller. It was set to Bagdad time, and the alarm was set to go off when he had to wake up to go out on a mission. 3:30am. I asked if I could touch it. For me, that was a Huckleberry moment. She said, "I didn't think I could ever get back that wanting to write, but now, after this week, I think I can."

That woman is a container of poems or stories or essays. Her cup runneth over. She knows in every cell what Joseph Campbell tells us:

"The source of our first suffering is born when we accumulate silent things within us."

I don't remember the last words my father said to me the hour, the day, the weeks before he died twenty-five years ago. That hurts me now, makes me ashamed. I lost more than I needed to. If I had written a poem that week, or even a paragraph, I would have more of him now, and of what I was then.

Fiction, poetry, memoir, creative nonfiction are all about the moment.

Like that woman's life, our lives are filled with **moments of personal meaning with universal significance**. They need to be recorded. How many of us wouldn't long to have even a paragraph of how we felt on significant days of our lives--

when we fell in love for the first time
when we conquered something significant, or failed to conquer
when we knew we would marry John or Jane
when we knew we would have a child,
or when we said goodbye to that child going off to war
when our parents died
when we felt the presence of God.

Stephen Dunn wrote a poem called **The Vanishings**. Here's a portion of it.

One day it will vanish,
how you felt when you were overwhelmed
by her, soaping each other in the shower...
One day one thing and then a dear other
will blur and though they won't be lost
they won't mean as much, ...
That motorcycle ride on the dirt road
to the deserted beach in Cadiz,
already history now, merely *your* history,
which means everything to you.
Her goodbye, causing the phone to slip
from your hand, doesn't hurt anymore,
too much doesn't hurt anymore....

One day there'll be almost nothing
except what you've written down,
It's vanishing as you speak, the soul-grit,
the story-fodder...

I decline to accept the gloom and doom projections and statistics of reading in America. Look at all the grass roots literary festivals in small communities across the country. Look at how book clubs are bringing reading into the social milieu.

What we must do, though, is to eschew reading for **escape, and replace it with reading for engagement with themes that matter--issues of faith, morality, mortality, humanity, artful living, literature that explores the ways that Love can make a difference in this world.**

Every book you read is in the book you write.

Consider what kind of readers and readership we want to stimulate. I'd say...

--those who can tell the difference between literature that will last, and here-today, gone-tomorrow commercial fiction

--those who **look** for subtleties, who appreciate the delights of language and complexity of character and depth of meaning.

And what a service to our nation that is. We ought to feel privileged to be in this vital position, as elevators of taste.

In his *Writer's Notebook*, Somerset Maugham wrote --

Art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom, magnanimity. The value of art is not beauty, but right action.

And Leo Tolstoy, tells us--

The present task of art is to make the feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, which is now shared only by the best members of society, the customary feeling, even the instinct, of all human beings.

Henry James' advice to new writers was to try to be a person upon whom nothing is lost. I take this to mean: Look for significance in all things, for that develops your spiritual sense. Know that there are no small things. Be grateful for all ideas, for gratitude opens us to receive more. Be receptive to all that the universe is offering, and write without concern for the fate of it.

And remember this evening, for tonight each of you who have submitted work have joined a community, the long stream of writers who, like you, have struggled to make a character realistic, an issue understandable, a plot compelling, a narrative moving. Perhaps like Scott Fitzgerald you have written out of your own pain, and thus have made it bearable because you have created order out of the messiness of memory. If so, you have done what his friend Ernest Hemingway told him to: "Forget the damn pain. Use it."

You join Jack London who sent out "To Build a Fire" 42 times. To keep on taking defeat and to keep on trying gives a person author-ity. You join Irving Stone who sent out his first novel 26 times before it was purchased by a publisher for \$500. The novel? *Lust for Life*, about

Vincent van Gogh. You join the short story icon Raymond Carver who routinely wrote 20 to 30 drafts of a story, whose students said he grew rhapsodic about "putting words in and taking words out." When Hemingway showed *A Farewell to Arms* to Gertrude Stein, she read it, then returned it to him with a note: "Begin again, Ernest. And this time, concentrate." You know how he must have felt.

If you have been reluctant to share your work, you have a sister in a woman named Margaret who was panic-stricken to show her manuscript, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, to an editor. She sat trembling, waiting for the editor's response. He liked everything but the title. He changed it to *Gone With the Wind*.

You join Shakespeare who must have dragged himself off to bed bleary-eyed, fearing that what he would read tomorrow of what he wrote that night would be laughably pathetic. In a low moment at the last stage of writing *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote in a letter to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, saying, "All my books are botches."

But, if you have felt one glimmer of love for a sentence or a passage you have crafted, then you are capable of understanding John Steinbeck when he said, "Oh Lord, how good this paper feels under this pen. I can sit here writing and the words slipping out like grapes out of their skins and I feel so good doing it...You started out putting words down and there are three things--you, the pen, and the page. Then gradually the three things merge until they are all one and you feel about the page as you do about your arm. Only you love it more than you do your arm."

You join the nameless storytellers of centuries past, around the campfire, or after the hunt, or in the mead hall. You join the Latina cantadoras whose archetypal myths have given women direction, and models, and hope, myths which have sweetened pain. You join Indian crones and chiefs whose stories have explained the seasons, stars, storms, whose tales of massacres have taught the young how to bear injustice, honor their ancestors, learn to die.

You share with me the longing, as palpable as a hot wave, to make it brilliant, moving, worthy. If only by the intensity of our longing could be granted this gift. You know the feeling now that prompted Ralph Waldo Emerson to say "All writing comes by the grace of God."

The moment you submit your work, you send up a prayer, not unlike the Old Testament David's, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight."

Celebrate this evening for what it has made you, one of a long and respectable tradition: a teller of tales, a mover of mankind.

Susan Vreeland May 17, 2009

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