

# Introduction

## *Why I Write*

Perhaps in the beginning I wrote to get attention. I was an only child, given to behaviors that would probably now be described as hyperactive. H. L. Mencken said the writer's "... overpowering impulse is to gyrate before his fellow man, flapping his wings and emitting defiant yells. This being forbidden by the police of all civilized countries, he takes it out by putting his yells on paper. Such is the thing called self-expression." Of course, Mencken wrote before we were gender sensitive. We now know that female writers often gyrate as well. And in addition to flapping my wings, I have written to be hired by newspapers and written not to be fired (although that didn't work on *Time* magazine). I have certainly written for money, freelancing fulltime when our children were young and we were all hungry.

I began to write long before I could read, even before I could print my name—even before I was born. We lived with my grandmother, who told me stories of Scotland and coming to America. I was brought up in a house of narrative. I was told stories of moral instruction. I also overheard stories I was not supposed to hear by sneaking out of bed and lying on the cold winter floor, my ear to the open grate that allowed heat—and stories—to rise to the second floor. I don't remember when I could not read. I entered the page to serve with Robin Hood, Long John Silver, Rob Roy and as a Knight of the Round Table. We were hard-shell Baptists, and I was instructed by parables. The Bible was a story about stories.

In this good Christian home that a social worker might now describe as “dysfunctional” I not only received stories, I made them up: I can remember stories I told myself to explain the swirling cross-currents of love and guilt, control and anxiety in every house in which we lived—and I can retell the stories I told to escape. I had a secret family who lived in the wall, and a ceiling covered with *National Geographic* maps.

Of course I did not escape my family—none of us does—but I still tell myself—and now others—the stories I need to create and recreate, to celebrate and understand the life I have lived. Catherine Drinker Bowen once wrote, “Writing, I think, is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice. Once in reality and once in that mirror which waits always before or behind him.” I have lived my life not once, but a hundred times in night dreams and day dreams, in imaginings and fantasy, in the essays, stories, poems I have told myself—and my readers.

I can not believe my good fortune in being able, through story, to live a life of memory and imagination—leaving the dinner party, the lecture, concert, book, TV show, drive in the car, the conversation—to enter that other life, and each morning to slide into that bubble of quiet concentration where the page tells me what I didn’t know I knew, as I weave still another life.

As I pass into my seventies, friends advise me to escape the weekly column and book deadlines, to be relieved of the obsessive compulsion to put more words on paper and count them every day, to make up more stories, more poems; but writing is not my punishment, it is my delight. And yet, I suppose, I should take account and try to identify the reasons I set the alarm for 5:30 A.M. but often rise before it goes off, eager to get to the desk where I craft my life.

### *I Write to Say I Am*

When I write, I create myself, and that created self, through writing, may affect the world. As Anita Brookner said, “I started writing because of a terrible feeling of powerlessness: I felt I was drifting and obscure, and I rebelled against that. I didn’t see what I could do to change my condition. I wanted to control rather than be controlled, to ordain rather than be ordained, and to relegate rather than be relegated.”

Most of us feel invisible. We are not seen. We wait on tables and the diners do not see us, talking about us as if we did not exist. When we write we become visible, we are players in the game of life. We—our writings—have to be dealt with. It is far more difficult, unfortunately, to

ignore a memo, argument, proposal, published article, than it is to ignore a human being.

The ability to collect and organize information, discover its significance and make that available to others, gives the writer significance. Through writing the writer can influence and persuade. The writer becomes a presence, existing in a way that he or she does not when silent.

### *I Write to Discover Who I Am*

Of course I began writing to become what I was not. When we are young we try on roles; I wanted to escape my skin and become Ernest Hemingway, Kenneth Roberts, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, Willa Cather. But soon I learned that writing reveals—always. Wynton Marsallis explains, “You can’t play different from who you are.” I wrote, and there was Don Murray on the page.

The fear of exposure by writing is a rational fear. But in the act of exposure, writers discover themselves. I meet myself on the page and after decades of writing I have come to accept myself—I’d better—and in the process of writing I have learned who I am—and have found a person with whom I can live and work, a person I keep needing to rediscover.

More than that, I have discovered my strengths are my differences. Difference is a terrible thing to a child. I hungered for acceptance, to conform, but part of me always stood apart, at the edge of the playground. My imagined or reflected life—my ability to enter the skins of others, my need to construct stories, my compulsion to live in books as much as on the street, my habit of daydreaming, my need to connect, my delight in contradiction, my love affair with language—I always thought a weakness, and so did my parents and most of my teachers. But these “weaknesses” have paid my bills and, more importantly, the opportunity to develop my “weaknesses” through writing has given me a blessed life.

### *Write to Create Your Life*

Becoming myself, I become others. When Flaubert was asked who Madame Bovary was he answered, “C’est moi.” And Hortense Calisher said, “The novel is rescued life.”

This mysterious and enriching process is demonstrated in a poem of mine.

## THE OTHER LIFE

My mother imagined an only child,  
 sold my unnamed twin for folded  
 cash, never told my father why  
 his son came home alone. My twin  
 lived in Iowa and I was sure  
 he knew the secret of airedales,  
 how to get oatmeal globs down  
 his throat, was not afraid

when water rose above his head.  
 Liked school, could pole vault,  
 lived in a single family house,  
 knew his parents wanted him.

During my muddy war he braced  
 his feet against Pacific swells  
 on a destroyer, later studied art  
 in New York City, Paris, Florence,

has lived in San Francisco 34 years  
 with a printer named George. My twin  
 is lean, bald, but with a beard.

He rides a racing bike, plays bassoon,  
 high stake poker every other Thursday  
 night, adopted a walrus at the Aquarium.  
 Each day he draws fewer lines, watches  
 as they reveal more, imagines his twin.

Until I wrote the poem I did not have a twin, but I do now.

When writing we do not leave ourselves but extend ourselves. In a novel I became a person paralyzed from the neck down; in nonfiction articles I became the United States Secretary of Labor, a mental patient, the New York Police Commissioner, a world-famous classical violinist, a woman alcoholic, an orthopedic surgeon.

*I Write to Understand My Life*

Joan Didion says, "Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own ere would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find t I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. want and what I fear." I write this book and others to learn as

much as I can about the magic I have always found on the page. I write my weekly newspaper columns to understand my aging; my novel to understand my war; my poems to understand the images, memories, and fragments of language that have the power to illuminate my world.

*I Write to Slay My Dragons*

During the past year, I suffered short periods—measured by hours, not days—from a depression or unexpected terror that seemed both physical and mental. The attacks were sudden and frightening. I had never suffered from depression before and suspected the attacks were caused by a drug I was taking. Prescriptions were changed but I did not escape the fears that lay in ambush.

I did, however, remember Donald Barthelme's advice to "Write about what you're most afraid of." When I was able to force myself to write, my internal enemy would retreat.

Now I have some emergency pills that help relieve the depression—and therapy that has made the pills—but not the writing—less important. If I write, the dark shadows move away from my desk. Telling myself stories was my comfort in my childhood and in combat. In the hours between my heart attack and my by-pass operation, I dictated a column to Minnie Mae, who understood I didn't write so much out of a compulsive obsession with productivity instead to name and therefore defeat the dragon that waited, snorting flaming bad breath, in the operating room.

*I Write to Exercise My Craft*

I find joy in learning my craft and comfort now that I am old enough to know I will never stop learning to write. Each year I better understand the Japanese artist Hokusai who said, "I have drawn things since I was six. All that I made before the age of sixty-five is not worth counting. At seventy-three I began to understand the true construction of animals, plants, trees, birds, fishes, and insects. At ninety I will enter into the secret of things. At a hundred and ten, everything—every dot, every dash—will live."

I am happiest when I am rubbing two words together to produce an unexpected insight, when I feel the sentence turn under my hand, the paragraph shrink or rise until it breaks in two, the narrative flow toward rapids I can hear but do not yet see. The draft is always, for me, alive with possibility. The task may seem routine, even dreary, as I approach it;

but once I am in the act of writing it makes its own demand and carries me along on another adventure in meaning.

I spend my mornings messing around in language, learning the rules and then breaking them, making up words, listening to the beat and melody of language, putting in and taking out, fitting and shaping, moving and removing, playing language into meaning.

### *I Write to Lose Myself in My Work*

"If it is winter in the book, spring surprises me when I look up," said Bernard Malamud, who knew that concentration is one of the great healing gifts of writing. When I am within a draft, I escape the headlines, the family crisis, the distractions of life around me. I write to music—this chapter was drafted to Bach's *B Minor Mass*, revised to Mozart's *Twenty-second Piano Concerto*, revised once more to Stravinsky's *Pulcinella Suite*—but when the writing goes well, the music is unheard and when I am interrupted I can return to this place within the writing that absorbs all my senses, all my thoughts and emotions, all my energy. These quiet moments of craft are the anchor to my life.

### *I Write for Revenge*

I reacted so violently against the statement of John Hawks that "Fiction is an act of revenge" that I realized he had found me out. I write in retaliation against the family that thought I was ugly and strange, against the teachers who said I was stupid, against the officers who sent me into battle.

### *I Write to Share*

The writing act is an escape from loneliness. I need aloneness to write, to read, to think, to imagine, but I also need to escape this necessary loneliness—after the writing is done. Heather McHugh described one reason I write when she said, "I began to write because I was too shy to talk, and too lonely not to send messages."

I am surprised and nurtured by the reaction of my readers. Books are years in the making and I may never meet a reader even after they are published, but one of the pleasures of column writing is that strangers, acquaintances, neighbors, and friends respond to columns within hours of publication.

And when I am willing to write about the most private things—the memory of the daughter we lost, how easy it was to pull the trigger when an enemy was in my rifle sight—I get the most reader response. We forge communities when we share who we are, what we feel, what we think; and writing allows a sharing beyond the room, even beyond our lifetime. The best writing often rises out of loneliness, but it is a momentary escape from loneliness or, in a way, a celebration of loneliness. By sharing our solitude we come both to respect it and to create a door that allows us to leave and return to the essential loneliness from which so much writing comes.

### *I Write to Testify*

I may not stand up in Wednesday-night prayer meeting, but I have not escaped the Baptist tradition of giving testimony. Elie Wiesel speaks of the importance of his bearing witness to the Holocaust: "Writing is a duty for me as a survivor. I entered literature through silence; I seek the role of witness, and I am duty bound to justify each moment of my life as a survivor." I also bear witness to the horrors of war, to the shame of describing a child who learns differently from others as "stupid," to the wonder of my unexpected life. We can bear witness *for* as well as *against*. And as writers, we can do it without taking to the streets. Emily Dickinson gave witness from her secluded life in Amherst, Massachusetts. All writers have an obligation to testify what they have witnessed and to testify how they have survived.

I write about war because I think it is the duty of old soldiers who have survived infantry combat—where death and injury often come from flying body parts—to tell those who make wars about the realities of combat. I bear witness to how it feels to do badly in school, what it is like to have a child die before I do, how it feels to be old. We all need to tell our stories and our stories need to be heard.

### *I Write to Avoid Boredom*

Since leaving school, I don't think I have ever been bored. When Gish Jen was asked why she wrote, she said, "I think I'm trying to keep myself from being bored. When I think about why I would be a writer, why I should continue to be a writer, it seems to me one of the few things you can do where you're never bored."

I write about the world in which I live, my external and internal life, finding as I write that the most trivial events have meaning. Writing instructs me about the life I live. And if I ever am bored, I will write an essay on boredom.

*I Write to Celebrate*

To celebrate means to respect, and all my writing is a celebration of life. Writing makes me aware of the extraordinary in the ordinary. Writing increases the texture of my life and my appreciation of that texture. Colors are bright, smells more flavorful, sounds—even the sounds of silence—are stronger when I write them down. Writing increases memory and awareness. I am most alive when I am writing. As the artist Louise Nevelson said, “My work is a feast for myself.”

## 1

*Before Writing**Give Yourself Permission to Write*

There is no censorship in the world as powerful as self-censorship. Many of us hunger to write, need to experience our world once in reality and then to understand it through the insights of art, seeing with words what we had not seen at the moment of experience, discovering patterns that reveal meaning in experience. We need to write and to be read.

Writing is not a turning away from life but a turning toward life, a way of extending the experience. Catherine Drinker Bowen explained, “Writing, I think, is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice. Once in reality and once in that mirror which waits always before or behind him.” Those of us who are readers of books and of life, imaginers, make believers, players with language, censor this need only at great risk.

*Writers Who Don't Write*

Most writers never write. They want to be writers. They intend to write this weekend or next, on Monday or the following Monday, on summer vacation or winter vacation, when the kids start school or graduate from college, when they retire and have more free time. They *are* writers in that they tell themselves the story of their lives, see their lives in a writerly way: recording images, fragments of conversations, observation of what is and what should be, making connections, making story from chaos.