

Writing as a Way to Live

Kent School Summer Writers Camp 2006



by Julia Bolus

Words can save your life.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

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Writing as a Way to Live *(in process)*

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also see www.artists-writers.com

cover photograph by Leigh Rader

I write as much to discover as to explain.

Arthur Miller

Begin

All you have to know is what you actually think and feel
and every sentence will be a revelation.

Allen Ginsberg

You sit at a desk, on a park bench, in bed, in a restaurant booth, on a bus or train, and open your notebook. When you make the first mark on blank paper—or the first keystroke—you assert yourself as writer, as maker. If beginning is difficult for you, take comfort in poet Robert Creeley’s advice: “Don’t be discouraged if, at first, nothing much happens at all.”

One of the most difficult things is the first paragraph.
I have spent many months on a first paragraph, and once I
get it, the rest just comes out very easily.

Gabriel García Márquez

Writing practice helps avoid the awkward strangeness of a blank page after long silence. Novelist Margaret Atwood noted: “If I waited for perfection, I would never write a word.” Write every day—in your journal, notes to friends, fragments of dreams—anything to keep your hands familiar with paper or keyboard and your mind open to the flow of language. Then when a new project appears, or an old one calls for completion, your hands reflexively reach for your tools. Your mind will clear for the words to come.

Generally I’ve found this to be true: I have forced myself to begin writing when I’ve been utterly exhausted, when I’ve felt my soul as thin as a playing card, when nothing has seemed worth enduring for another five minutes . . . and somehow the activity of writing changes everything.

Joyce Carol Oates

Novelist Willa Cather noted: “Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen.” Don’t wait. Begin with anything or nothing. Trust the images and phrases that come to you. Follow them. Poet James Merrill said: “If you follow trustfully, it’s surprising how far an image can lead.”

There is nothing to wait for that isn't here.

Robert Creeley

Space

It takes a lot of time to be a genius. You have to sit around
doing nothing, really doing nothing.

Gertrude Stein

Finding a place and setting aside time to write encourages practice, and practice inspires stronger writing. You may make a place to write at home, but your own space sometimes can be distracting, too. Carry your tools for writing with you and experiment with different environments. Enlist your friends, teachers or family to help find the space, materials and solitude you need. You can also create amazing opportunities for others by sharing resources and inspiration.

Anyhow: from my standpoint the only thing—if you're some
sort of artist—is to work a little harder than you can at being
who you are

e. e. cummings

Privacy and silence are precious resources for a writer, and rare. Ideally you'll find a place of your own that is always available, but you can seek out temporary places, even if they are only "yours" for a few hours at a time—an empty classroom, a quiet corner of a library, a grassy patch under your favorite tree, or the kitchen table in a quiet moment.

Bring the muse into the kitchen.

Walt Whitman

Journals

There is a saying that ‘paper is more patient than man’.
It came to me on one of my slightly melancholy days. . . .
Yes, there is no doubt that paper is patient.

Anne Frank

Write anything in your journal. Let the paper become another way of breathing. If the outside world is drowning out the voices inside you, your journal can be a lifeline.

Katherine Mansfield wrote of journal writing: “Nothing affords me the same relief. What happens as a rule is if I go on long enough, I break through.”

Nothing has really happened until it has been recorded.

Virginia Woolf

Friends, family, or teachers may encourage your work. Then you are lucky. But often you may need to give your voice a way to emerge when no one is asking to hear it, or when the world around you seems to prefer silence. Your journals can transform your thoughts and feelings into private books. Capture what otherwise might be lost in the rush. You don’t need to limit your entries to news or “facts.”

So the point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking. That would be a different impulse entirely, an instinct for reality which I sometimes envy but do not possess.

Joan Didion

Rereading your journal can bring back stories and moments you’ve forgotten. And a journal’s blank pages may contain the mysteries of your future. Journals also provide a way to collect dreams and explore recurring images. What do you dream of over and over again? Is there a dream you wish you could re-enter? Try keeping paper and pencil where you sleep. What do you know upon waking? Write down anything that comes to you.

Painting is just another way of keeping a diary.

Pablo Picasso

Keep a journal of your dreams and days. Keep a journal of books you've read, or ones you want to write. Write letters in your journal to the person you have been, are now, or could be. Poet Mark Strand said, "Each moment is a place you've never been." Make a scrapbook of your inner travels, your crossroads, detours and discoveries. Listen closely to the entries you make: they bear witness to the person you are becoming.

Whom do I tell when I tell a blank page?

Virginia Woolf

Learning

I'd like to know whether what happens to me happens
also to others.

Pablo Neruda

If you're in school, is it a place where you can explore your voice and pursue what intrigues you? Can you say what you need to say? Maybe you've found that writing a certain way will please a teacher or earn a higher grade, or that writing without imagination seems safe because it won't draw attention. Hopefully in- and outside the classroom, you can experiment with new ways of thinking.

Over two-hundred years ago, John Stuart Mill wrote: "that so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of our time." More recently, the poet e.e. cummings described the challenge: "To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody but yourself—"

When you learn to write just by following instructions or a textbook model, you may lose the possibility of discovering your own process. Story writer Flannery O'Connor said, "A teacher can help you understand the nature of your medium . . . and guide you in your reading." She also said, "A teacher who tries to impose a way of writing on you can be dangerous." Keep your mind open to what you can learn from others, and remember to follow your intuition too.

There was a moment in college when I was doing my best to write good academic papers in anthropology and English and so forth, learning how to get it out with footnotes and documentation, and I was still not able to say what I wanted to say. So then I turned to poetry. There are things you cannot say except in poetry, and those are the things I need to say.

Gary Snyder

A classroom is only one place to learn. Shunryu Suzuki suggested, "You need a teacher so you can become independent. If you are not attached to him [her], the teacher will show you the way to yourself." Make yourself the center of your education. Immerse yourself in what you want to know. Develop your own writing practice.

It is possible to learn something and not be taught.
It is possible to be a student and not have a teacher.

Peter Elbow

Your Voices

When I wrote, I was me.

Davyne Verstandig

Sometimes people speak of finding “your voice” as if it were a concrete, unchanging thing, and once you uncovered it, the search would be over forever. Brenda Ueland wondered: “But how to single out your true self, when we are all so many selves?”

Nobody can be exactly like me. Sometimes even I have trouble doing it.

Tallulah Bankhead

Your writing voice, like your speaking voice, is constantly transforming. Think of how you speak with different people, or how your voice changes between day and night, inside a building, or outside, under the sky. Poet Robert Hass suggested noticing “the way language changes when you move from one subject to another.” Finding your voice may mean finding many voices that are part of you.

. . . write things down which you’ll not publish and which you won’t show people. To write secretly, to write for nobody’s eye, nobody’s ear but your own, so you can actually be free to say what you want.

Allen Ginsberg

How can you know which voices are longing to speak, and what they have to say, unless you give them space to breathe? Listen to each layer of your experience: family, culture, childhood, inner worlds

There’s probably a natural grammar at the tip of your tongue. You may not believe it, but if you say what’s on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents and your street and friends you’ll probably say something beautiful.

Grace Paley

Memory

The past is more infinite than the future.

Toni Morrison

Memory is a magic box you always have with you. What you remember is more than fact, and deeper than the years you've lived. Memory calls you back to what is incomplete or whole, vivid or blurred. Do you share some memories with others? Do you have memories that are completely private? What are your future memories?

Because I am living, I can remember you.

Marie Howe

One way to excavate your memories is to make a memory timeline or map—a visual autobiography. You can concentrate on certain time periods and elaborate with drawings, photographs or mementos. Ask older people for stories from before your memory began.

Dreams can also be recorded and pieced together. Deena Metzger suggests first listing the dreams you remember. Then: “Write your autobiography—that is the autobiography of the dreamer—by referring only to your dreams. Tell your life story by revealing only the experiences of your dream life; include your dream family, your dream work, your dream residences, your dream aspirations and fears. Incorporate your most important dreams as events of the dream life. Do not indicate that these are dreams or dream images. Tell them as if they happened—they did. Write as if this is reality—it is.”

I write to understand.

Eli Wiesel

Landmarks

Each one of us, then, should speak of his roads, his
crossroads, his roadside benches; each one of us should make
a surveyor's map of his lost fields and meadows.

Gaston Bachelard

In an unfamiliar city, I called the bus station to ask for directions and a nearby landmark. The woman who answered the phone sounded insulted: "I don't know what you call a landmark," she said, "this building's the oldest one on the street." With my New England upbringing I pictured an imposing granite structure with wide front steps. The station turned out to be a dilapidated steel building the size of one small waiting room with a tiny, faded sign hanging out front.

Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize
until you have tried to make it precise.

Bertrand Russell

It's easy to write like the woman gave directions: *she* knew what the building looked like, everyone in town knew where it was—how could I miss it? Sometimes the geography of our material is so familiar to us, we forget that readers may need to get their bearings. Novelist John Irving observed, "A writer's job is to imagine everything so personally that the fiction is as vivid as memory." Whether you are inventing the landscape or recalling it from memory, offer a few landmarks or a compass point to help readers orient themselves.

I see but one rule: to be clear. If I am not clear, all my world
crumbles to nothing.

Stendal

Concentrate on your physical senses and your intuition as well. Gaston Bachelard wrote about the subtle power of memory in *The Poetics of Space*. He believed "The houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us . . . The feeling of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands." To describe a place you know "by heart," imagine seeing it for the first time, or perhaps through someone else's eyes. Make a drawing to focus on space,

shadow, texture, light and color. Visualize the time of day or night, the season. Imagine objects and gestures. Observe the natural world. Let the details of a place help you truly see. Writing is one path toward greater attention.

Details are the life of prose.

Jack Kerouac

Reading

She read anything that came her way and a great deal
came her way.

Gertrude Stein

Each writer is a world. Each poem or story is a continent; each line is a mountain, field, road or river. Each word can be a clearing or cave--expansive or shelter. Travel through language. Use books to transport you. P.D. James believed, "You must read widely, not in order to copy, but to find your own voice. It's a matter of going through life with all one's senses alive, to be responsive to experience, to other people." Reading and writing are as closely linked as listening and speaking. Toni Morrison observed that both rely on imagination: "Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's imagination, for the world that imagination evokes."

As with writing, you don't need to finish everything you start. Read beginnings and endings. Examine wherever the book falls open. Enjoy the physical beauty and mystery of books—type, paper, fabric, binding, thread. Let the books themselves lead you.

I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read.

James Baldwin

You will find people writing about things that are important to you, things you imagined no one else knew, things you thought were secret or unspeakable. Many people don't see their experience reflected on required reading lists or in the mass media. A book can set loose your wildest dreaming.

One night [at college] a friend lent me a book of short stories by Franz Kafka. I went back to the pension where I was staying and began to read *The Metamorphosis*. The first line almost knocked me off the bed, I was so surprised. The first line reads, 'As Gregor Samsa awoke that morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. . . .' When I read the line I thought to myself that I didn't know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago. So I immediately started writing short stories.

Gabriel García Márquez

Through writing and publishing, reading and sharing, you expand the world. In prison, just before he turned eighteen, the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca taught himself to read and began writing, inspired by the power of spoken language:

There I met men, prisoners, who read aloud to each other the works of Neruda, Paz, Sabines, Nemerov, and Hemingway. Never had I felt such freedom as in that dormitory. . . . While I listened to the words of the poets, the alligators slumbered powerless in their lairs. Their language was the magic that could liberate me from myself. . . . When they closed the books, these Chicanos, and went into their own Chicano language, they made barrio life come alive for me the fullness of its vitality. I began to learn my own language, the bilingual words and phrases explaining to me my own place in the universe.

How will you find the books you need? Ask friends who enjoy reading. Teachers, librarians and people who work in bookstores can be helpful too, especially if you have an author or interest you want to pursue. Richard Rodriguez described trying read the classics of adult literature at age nine: “Librarians who initially frowned when I checked out the maximum ten books at a time started saving books they thought I might like.” Many schools and libraries also give away or discard books and magazines that are no longer used. Check for a “Free” box or table.

I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.

Jorge Luis Borges

Process

How do I work? I grope.

Albert Einstein

We write from need or desire—who can tell us how to approach our true work? Sometimes the material itself guides us. Phrases, rhythm, images and bits of story swirl through your head. A story or a poem might unfold. You may write the piece over again to flesh out its shape. Or read it to a friend—to hear what it sounds like out loud. Begin to sense what to keep and what needs changing.

I don't have a very clear idea of who the characters are until they start talking.

Joan Didion

Your process develops as you write. Writing is like deep friendship: consuming, difficult at times, and radiant with all the energy you give it. Write anything in your first draft. Use writing as a way to discover new ideas—not just to demonstrate what you already know. Give up expectations of what writing “should” be. Let your own voice lead you. Brenda Ueland advised: “when you write, speak with complete self-trust . . . Later if you find what you wrote isn't true, accept the new truth. Consistency is the horror of the world.”

When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know.

James Baldwin

Many writers struggle with their work: they also discover freedom and possibility in it. Poet Mark Doty described how his own writing gave him hope in a time of great crisis: “How to survive after the worst has happened is a central question in contemporary art. For me the habit of making something—making poems—has saved my life. We can lose everything, but our ability to give shape to our experience cannot be lost.”

The act of writing inspires me.

E. M. Forester

Honor what is unclear or unfinished. Respect especially the places in yourself that are made of many things. Consider yourself a mapmaker, whose vocation is to chart the shifting geographies of your world. What are your islands and rivers, your oceans and shores? Where are your mountain ranges, your deserts and valleys? Imagine the all layers underneath.

Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.

Jelaluddin Rumi

Everything can nourish the writer—the dictionary, a new word, a voyage, an encounter, a phrase heard An exhibit of painting, a concert, a voice, a letter, a play, a landscape, a skyscraper, a telephone conversation, a nap, a dream, a sleepless night, a storm, an animal's greeting, an aquarium, a photograph, a newspaper story.

Anais Nin

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