

## EXPLORATION & INSPIRATION & MAGIC

### WRITING AS EXPLORATION

Let's start by talking about fear. Everyone here is a successful user of language. Everyone here is afraid, sometimes, to write. There are many reasons for that, but I don't want to talk about them. Talk won't make the fear go away; it likely will always be with you. I want instead to suggest a perspective on writing that I find allows the writer to accept and handle the fear, and even use its energy.

Writing is **Going Exploring**. Every time you write, you are Going Exploring in uncharted territories, unmapped places, *terra incognita*. Here there be dragons. The territory you are going to explore is the inside of your own head, and it is filled with various and exciting terrains. All sorts of scary things live in them; here swamps and quicksands, teeth and love and mom and dad, there, violent weather and pitfalls and hostile voices, over on this side are memories, down there, things that scrape against the tent in the night, and in the distance, mountains too awesome to climb. But those terrains are also filled with promises of discovery: jewels and truth and redemption, knowledge and beauty, the sudden catch in the throat and the possibility of joy. I approach writing with apprehension, yes, but also with eagerness.

I'm suggesting a strategy to use with the fear of writing, or any of its attendant disguises: helplessness, anger, fatigue. What you do with the fear is say *Yes, OK, it's there—but it's built into the situation of exploring, and it gives it a little edge*. All explorers make an agreement with themselves that if they don't find it this time, they'll try again. Soon. You don't go exploring with the prospect of finding treasure every time, or even very often. That's inevitable, built in, parcel and part of this process we call writing. So you have to make a deal with yourself: It is OK not to succeed. It is OK to screw up. It's OK not to end up with a keeper. And the second half of the contract: But I won't let that stop me from going exploring again.

Writing is a risk venture with no guarantees of success. If you count all your beginnings and false starts and throwaways, it has a low probability of success. This is the nature of exploring the unknown. This is the nature of making something where before there was a blank sheet. I'm suggesting that you accommodate to this brute fact by being reasonably kind to yourself. Don't expect success every time, and don't put yourself down about the pieces that don't work.

Writing is more a process of exploration than of performance. If you first judge your writing on performance criteria, if you demand success every time, you won't write

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much. You won't produce. Since we learn to write largely by pushing words around on paper or a screen, by practicing, that's a serious problem. So you learn to remind yourself that your expeditions are well-funded and well-supplied—you have an entire lifetime of experience to draw on, and five actively working senses—and you can go out exploring again and again. You also remind yourself that will probably need to explore often if you're going to find what you are looking for.

### INSPIRATION AND THE MOMENT WE SIT DOWN

Many people still have the idea that the way to create is to wait around until, like lightning, inspiration strikes and dictates to them. Inspiration: now there is a convenient idea. *I wasn't inspired or I couldn't get inspired*—the classic excuse for not getting much writing done. Originally, inspiration meant to draw the breath of a god into your lungs, and then proceed to speak in the god's voice. The speaker/writer is simply a conduit for something larger than herself or himself. Inspiration theories have one wonderfully attractive feather: you don't have to revise. Who is presumptuous enough, outside of theologians, to revise a god?

We do, I think, sense something true when we want to have to be inspired. We sense that in order to write, we have to enter a different state of being. Practiced writers cannot afford the time to wait around for inspiration (although something like it certainly does happen sometimes), so every writer discovers some ways to enter a state of being which enables their writing.

Arthur Koestler (in *Janus*) talks about a phenomenon which is universal to all human discovery and creation: what he calls 'the step back to leap.' The physical metaphor fits our situation. A standing broadjumper, getting ready, takes a step back, leans back, gathers his energy, then leaps. Think of 'step back to leap' analogues you've observed—before a free-throw is taken in basketball, before batting in baseball, the conductor at the podium just before launch. This sort of thing happens in making art, science, therapy. It is a temporary regression, followed by a surge forward. It can be a sort of 'shaking down,' and then a gathering together. I can't tell you how to enter the state that enables you, personally, to write. I can suggest that most writers go through some sort of process that have elements in common:

- Deciding to begin. You get writing done by deciding to do it. This is a simple statement; it is not a simple-minded one. Decision is a way to release energy.

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- When I've decided, I take my version of this 'stepping back.' For me, this is necessity. I get excited. Confused. Fragmented, jumbled, barely in control. And this sort of falling apart—which alarms others in the house, is my regression to an earlier stage, an unorganized stage, which precedes—
- Focus/concentration/attention. It is a state in which I attempt to integrate all the disparate parts of myself, a state in which I attempt to give all the voiceless parts of myself the power of speech.

### WORD MAGIC: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON STARTING:

We all believe in it. We believe the written word to have more significance than the spoken. We've felt that way for thousands of years. So what we do when we sit down to write is this: we prepare to work magic, prepare to cast spells. Now, even when we're busy reminding ourselves that not all spells work, we know that the working of magic requires some preparation. So we surround our beginning-to-write with self-made rituals, little ceremonies before we start. Some people sharpen eight pencils, no more, no less, and re-adjust their typing chairs. Some put the cat out and pour a cup of coffee. Some make announcements, to the family or to the air. Some put on Mozart or makeup. It doesn't matter what you do—what is essential is that you do something. The purpose of ritual (as distinct from habit) is to return to a familiar place, to quell or channel anxiety, to make things possible. My advice here is to indulge yourself. If you don't have a writing ritual, get busy and invent one. These things have real function. These are preludes to the casting of spells.