

## Four Noble Truths

### 1. No *You* Turns

A. We don't give advice, make suggestions, or try clarify first-draft work. We don't say, "What you should do here is . . ."

B. We focus on the writing, not the personal life of the author. We don't respond by offering personal remarks such as "I'm sorry you lost your dog" or "How did you feel when he said that?" Or imagine, for instance, that I were to write a comic piece on how much trouble I can have making coffee in the morning before I'm entirely awake and capable of counting to five confidently and remembering details like pouring water in the tank. Don't suggest that I need to get a coffeepot with a built-in clock so that I can set it all up the night before. *That's not the point. The point is the writing—not my coffeepot.*

C. Even when an author writes in the first person, we refer to the speaking voice of the piece as *the narrator* not as *you*. As authors, we must create the voice that tells the story, the voice that speaks the poem. In the vocabulary of literary criticism, that created voice is called *the narrator*. Similarly, if first-person narrator speaks about "my mother," then in our discussion we refer to *the mother character* not *your mother*. These conventions of literary criticism do more than protect our privacy. They also draw everyone's attention to the fine points of craft whereby a speaking voice or a character comes to life on the page.

### 2. Writing stays on the page.

A. Honor confidentiality. Do not discuss either the form or the content of anyone's writing with anyone—*with anyone*—outside the group. Even if you do so without naming the author, information can combine with other information and then leap to unexpected places. It's a small world out there, and the Internet makes it smaller yet. Violations of confidentiality can set off the equivalent of nuclear weapons in people's personal lives.

B. We assume that everything anyone writes is fictional. It's made up. It's *entirely* made up. It's not true of the author personally, nor are the characters real people in the author's life. Assuming that an author's work is biographically factual violates the author's privacy and her personal boundaries. It is also terribly destructive of the delicate, circuitous path whereby we find our way to our own most powerful writing. Literary forms

serve (among other things) to contain or set healthy limits to extraordinarily deep feelings. Assuming everything is fiction will help all of us to write "down to the bones" without getting drawn into complicated, revealing, messy discussions of our personal lives.

This is a writing workshop. We are not a therapy group, although writing can be healing. We are not a support group, although we are supportive in our own way. This is not like conversation among friends over lunch, although we will become friends. We are here together as writers—as *poietes*, which in Greek means "one who makes things up." All of us have friends with whom we can talk freely about our literal lives. We are here together to do something far more rare and difficult: to be present to one another *as writers*. We do that best when the writing stays on the page.

### 3. Hear what works.

A. In this workshop we learn from our successes, not our failures, from our inspired moments, not our fumbling ones. "Learning from mistakes" can be very efficient if you are memorizing the multiplication tables or irregular verbs in French. But it's not how writers develop craft. Writers know—or discover—that it is easier to go from third-rate work to first-rate work than it is to go from a blank page to anything. Our first task, then, is to get something down on the page, and to get there however we can.

First drafts are like seedlings: they are fragile; and who knows what they will grow into given enough time and care. There is a midrash that says every blade of grass has its own angel bending over it, urging, "grow! grow!" We come together as writers to be that sort of angel for one another—to bless the thin green blades of new work. We identify what is strong or good or memorable about a piece of writing. That's all. It's a powerful way to learn craft and to develop voice.

This means that you will be asked to learn how to offer praise, and how to accept praise. This may be disconcerting for some people. It can also be remarkably healing, especially if you have ghosts of abusive teachers hovering over your keyboard from time to time.

B. You will also be asked to do something far more difficult than finding fault or giving critical, opinionated advice. You will be asked to learn how to recognize what works. What works—what works really well—tends to be invisible. The greatest achievement of craftsmanship is to look effortless or

natural or inevitable. But it's not effortless, and it's certainly not inevitable. Think about watching gymnasts or ice-skaters at Olympic competitions. The very best of them make what they do look effortless too. I can attest with my whole heart that recognizing success teaches craftsmanship in a remarkably direct and energizing way. I've taught writing in a variety of situations since 1973, and nothing that I have ever tried has evoked such rapid development in the writers I have worked with. *And it's such fun!*

#### 4. Conserve energy.

A. The point of these in-class writing exercises is to stretch and flex the creative process and to get some supportive feedback so quickly that the voices of inner doubt and editorial damnation can't get a word in edgewise. We are here to play with words, to discover and to rediscover that writing is great fun. If we discuss our writing exercises with one another during break, we dissipate into social exchange the energy we need to be directing toward the page. Discussing writing exercises during the break may also tempt everyone into violations of privacy and personal boundaries. The value of this requirement may only be apparent after a few weeks have gone by.

B. In parallel fashion, when your writing is discussed by the group, please try to listen silently. Do not try to explain what you were getting at or to thank people for their praise. Just listen. Save your energy for continuing your work on this piece later on. We can get off-track quite a ways when people start trying to explain *what they meant* rather than letting the rest of us struggle with our richly different perceptions of *what we heard*. Writers in touch with their own deepest creativity can say something quite a bit richer than they "intended" to say.

C. Don't respond to a story someone tells by telling an anecdote of your own. Don't explain your response to what someone reads by launching into some explanation of your own prior experience or personal history. If you were discussing a Shakespeare sonnet in an English class, you would probably not say, "I like the images of aging in this piece because it reminds me of my grandfather, who . . ." and then launch into some account of your grandfather. In a college literature class, everyone's attention stays on the text. So also with us. In community-based memoir-writing groups, it's very common for people to use the writing group primarily as a basis for self-disclosure. There's a place for such groups. But that's not what we are about. We are here for the writing and for one another as writers.

On the other hand, please do observe that urge to talk about your grandfather!! *Take a note to yourself: "I need to write about the time when . . ."* Stories in any form naturally elicit story-ideas in others: take this gift and conserve it for your writing. Being aware of the full range of your responses to a piece can make the workshop a richer experience for you. That's not at odds with being appropriate in your comments in class.

D. Arrive on time: it's fabulously distracting when someone walks in amidst our centering exercise or amidst the writing time that follows. Don't miss class casually: it really does matter to everyone when you are not here. We are an intentional community, and that demands a certain level of commitment from everyone. Inescapable responsibilities already introduce a certain level of instability: let's not add to that! If chaos has erupted in your life and you are going to miss, I always appreciate an email or a phone call. I am up & wrapped around my first cup of coffee by 6 a.m. at the latest: don't worry about waking me up.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

This workshop method was developed by Pat Schneider, author of *Writing Alone and with Others* (Oxford University Press, 2003), although this way of explaining it is my work not hers. I recommend her book highly: it's wonderful—as is her poetry. I am certified as a workshop leader by the organization she founded, Amherst Writers and Artists (<http://www.amherstwriters.com/>).