

A Gift from the Gods:

Writers, Wordcraft, and the Sacred in Modern Thought

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Human creativity mirrors the creativity of God: like God, writers create a world through speech. "It was a dark and stormy night," we say, and it is so. For thousands of years, Western thinkers have tried to understand the uncanny power of words. A quick survey of this quest yields surprising insight into strategies writers might use when the flow of words strangles to a stop.

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The dog had died. I sat beside the heat duct on the floor of my bedroom, fighting off a darkness that enveloped me like a flood of breathlessly cold air. Emptiness was everywhere. If the dog could die then I could die. Mom and Dad could die. Anything could happen, and I could be lost forever in this cold dark. I had not known the world could be so treacherous. I stared into the depth of that betrayal as if into a well of meaningless depth, as if someone had reached down my throat with a knife and carved out my heart. And it all seemed so pointless, so entirely unnecessary. Why did the dog have to die?

I fled downstairs to the kitchen, to my mother. She laughed. "It's only a story," she said, and turned away. I looked at the thin novel I was still clutching, its cheap orange binding warped and smudged by countless hands. Only a story. Only a *story*? Stories could do this?

What did she mean, *only a story*? I retreated to my room, struggling now with a loss that had grown even larger. First Grandma died, and now this. What next?? Did no one

understand? At dinner that night Mom regaled my father and the big kids with her ridicule of my tear-stained face. My brothers smirked; my sister looked away, embarrassed and cold. I did not dare to look at my father. Mom still laughs about that Saturday afternoon. She's almost 90 now, but she still tells the story vividly, confidently, with great animation. It's clearly one of her favorite funny stories about me, her baffling bookish daughter—named for the mother whom she idolized. Mom and I have confused one another for decades, and the ghosts of innumerable ancestral Cates have silently floated in the air around us. Our big Irish clan was full of ghosts.

In the fifty years since that afternoon, I've come to a more sympathetic reading of my mother's overwhelming grief over her own mother, and hence her distance from mine. I have also learned my mother is not the only one who has been astounded—and perhaps a bit dismayed—by strong emotional responses to literary works. Aristotle wondered about it too. What is this weird emotional power that stories have? How do writers do that to people? Much of Aristotle's *Poetics* is framed by this question. Plato kept writers out of his ideal republic because he thought we could not be trusted to use this uncanny power in morally-appropriate ways. Two thousand years later, Hamlet too is puzzled. He watches actors on stage and marvels at their tears: "who is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her?"

The meaning or validity of this audience response becomes a huge issue in England during the 17th and 18th centuries, because Shakespeare failed to follow the French classical "rules" for drama—and yet audiences loved him. Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson all weighed in on the issue. How can the literary world swamp our awareness that we are really just sitting in theatre seats, or really just sitting alone in our bedrooms, reading a novel? Isn't that a bit irrational?? Excessive?

So I admit—I freely admit—that my mother had a point. What's a mere novel against the real grief of real loss?

But the fact remains that I had never felt death like this before. I had never felt death as an intimate, immediate, devastating reality. A novel illuminated something vitally important, something I immediately recognized as true. The "real events" of my grandmother's real death a few years earlier had not been that illuminating. My "real life"

was not as clearly focused, as highly unified, as a good novel. Real life is hard. It's messy and confusing and all too often so overwhelming that we shut down emotionally. Real life needs an editor! It needs a re-write!

So of course I went on to read every book by Albert Payson Terhune that the library held. I read them gingerly, cautiously, fascinated and awestruck but terrified. *Only a story*. Only a story can provide that intoxicating elixir of the real. This fact has puzzled thinkers for thousands of years.

And for thousands of years, the key explanation has been that language itself has mystic significance and mystic power. There is some monumental, dangerous, powerful connection between words and divine power or divine authority. The power of language to create reality is purely uncanny, weird in the etymological sense of preternatural. If a writer begins a novel, "it was a dark and stormy night," then by golly it is a dark and stormy night. Who else can do that but God? More potently yet, perhaps, remember the relief you have felt at times when someone else "put words to" a bewildering situation or a bewildering feeling with which you were struggling. We all have favorite statements, favorite wise sayings, favorite lines of poetry that we carry around like talismans. WHY? Language is inherently uncanny. It is inherently tied to the whole spiritual realm of life's deepest significance, life's ultimate realities, to what matters most about what matters most.

It's no wonder, then, that the ability to use words adeptly has always been recognized as a sacred gift. That's what we mean, at root, when we talk about writers being "inspired." Every writer understands, gut level, that our ability with words is never entirely under our control. What we say can surprise even us. (And when we were kids, and less guarded in what we verbalized, this verbal facility got all of us into trouble at times . . .) Even now we find ourselves unexpectedly in tears at times, right there at the keyboard. And when the writing is going especially well, it can feel particularly independent of our control, intention, or volition.

I realized with a terrible jolt one day that this may be the experience recorded in ancient texts by statements like, "the angel of the lord appeared unto me and said . . ." Because

that's what it feels like sometimes. That's exactly what it feels like. It feels like listening, like watching words appear on the screen almost—almost—as if of their own accord. And then I look up, and four hours have gone by, or six, and I'm starving or suddenly so exhausted that I get up from my keyboard, stagger into my bedroom, and sleep soundly for hours, often with Technicolor dreams.

In a world less twitchy about transcendence than ours has become, they called that "possession." Nowadays it's called "flow" and it's attributed to brain waves, not angels. Call it what you will. My point here is that in classical antiquity and even before that, back beyond the earliest stories we have from three thousand years B.C.E., such experiences were understood as an immediate contact with the sacred. As, in fact, a dangerous rivalry with the god for control over the world.

In this ancient world, no story was "just a story." Every writer was "divinely inspired." The word *Scripture*, after all, is essentially synonymous with the word *literature*: etymologically, both words simply mean *Writing*. The word *Bible* literally translated means *book*. That's very clear in Spanish: *Biblioteca* is the Spanish word for *library*. People who read or collect lots of books are called *bibliophiles*, and lists of books are called *bibliographies*. In fact, the Jewish and Christian Bibles we have today were not assembled into continuous documents until fairly late antiquity. Prior to the third or fourth century of the Common Era, there was no "Holy Scripture." There were sacred writings, plural, lots of them, lots lots more than ever made it into "the Bible."

"Just a story"—the merely literary—was a category invented after the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity by imperial decree. That imperial decree set off a monumental crisis in education. In the ancient world, education centered around the literary classics of Greece and Rome. Did "conversion" to Christianity mean that the whole educational system had to be changed?? The crisis was averted by the argument that the Iliad and the Aeneid are not in fact the sacred scriptures of pagan religion—although of course they were. These are "just stories," it was said, and thus the idea of "literature" was born.

"Literature" was an odd bureaucratic solution—a bit of ancient world spinmeistering—that eventually took on a life of its own. It solved one problem by creating many others.

In the end, the concept of “just a story” greatly impoverished our ability to understand and talk about the kinds of truth and the kinds of meanings that we find when we read, whether we are reading script-ure or litera-ture. Both religion and literature have suffered deeply as a result.

The complicated relationship between literature and scripture has been studied extensively. What no one has explored or described—at least not to my knowledge—is what this “just a story” business has done to writers’ self-understanding. Just as the accusation “just a story” disguises or denies the searing power of literature, so also the accusation “just a storyteller” disguises or denies how the act of writing can be a searing encounter with the sacred *no matter what you are writing*. I can attest, first hand, that nonfiction is not non-dangerous. Our encounter with the sacred is disguised or hidden from us because the corrolary of “just a story” is “writers are just making it all up.” As if—as if—we are completely in control. As if we are simply getting all this stuff—fiction or nonfiction, poetry or prose—from within our own psychological and creative resources, plain and simple.

But we are not. We are not. For thirty years I have read everything I can get my hands on about what widely recognized writers and artists—ancient and modern, fiction and nonfiction—have said about their own creative processes. One fact stands out. One fact: this is a gift, people say. Things come to me, unbidden, unexpected, and I have to pick it up from there. Academic studies of creativity across the board report the very same essential dynamic even among high creatives in math and science. A chemist dreams of how carbons arrange themselves into a circular bond—and later he says, yes indeed, this came to me in a dream. John Ciardi says somewhere that a line or two of poetry “falls from heaven,” and then it’s up to him to write an appropriate next line, and the next one, and the next one. Anne Tyler describes how characters walk through her front door, sit down somewhere, and wait patiently for her attention as she copes with the demands of her family. Nonfiction topics walk through front doors all the times. “Well, it just occurred to me . . .” a writer says in an interview. Or as they used to say, “well, the angel of the lord appeared and said, hey how about writing a book on . . .”

Writing is a sacred gift, a sacred encounter with ultimate realities that take shape or that come to life through words on the page. As writers we have in our hands, quite literally in our hands, something deeply holy. Writers have known this and said this for thousands of years. Thousands of years. And philosophers and theologians and literary critics have stood around trying to figure it all out, each in their own terms. But what about our terms? How do we talk about this, how do we understand this, as ordinary working writers? How do we cope with the psychological challenges and the moral demands of being a writer?

Ponder this, just for starts: *It is said* that one cannot look upon the fact of God and live. Perhaps that explains why writing can feel like a near-death experience day after day after day. Perhaps that explains what we are avoiding when we decide to tidy closets or clean out the gutters rather than showing up at the page. *And perhaps that explains why we continue to write, why we need to write and make space in our lives for writing, despite all the contrary demands of our other responsibilities.* There's something holy here. And we have very few ways of useful ways thinking or talking about it. There's a lot of vague new-age stuff out there, of course, but most of that strikes me as narcissism raised to a cosmic principle. But as all of us know first hand, sustained writing, sustained professional-quality writing, demands steadfast self-discipline. Finishing a major manuscript is like finishing a marathon in less than four hours: the self-indulgent and the narcissistic don't have what it takes.

I want to sketch a few ideas about how we might understand what I'm going to call the spirituality of writing, or more precisely perhaps the spirituality of language. This is a sketch. It is only a sketch. If it were a fully developed argument it would be a very thick book with lots of footnotes. I've been struggling for months now to pull from that big project a few useful bits of advice for working writers. The key issue here, I propose, is this: "Language itself has ancient, mystical significance, or an immediate, uncanny connection to ultimate spiritual reality—however it is that your tradition names that ultimate reality. *But how does know that help the working writer in our endless struggle to find the right word?*"

In two ways, I suggest, one from philosophy of language and one from neurobiology. First: Philosophers argued for a long time about whether words name ideas or whether word name things. For example, if I come to you sobbing and say, “the dog died,” is that primarily a description of the dog? Or is it primarily a description of the content of my consciousness? Does language reveal “the real world,” or does language reveal its human author? It does both, obviously; but which is primary and which is secondary? People argued about this for centuries. Centuries! The best answer, I think, is *none of the above*. Words name relationships. If I say “the dog died,” that’s not essentially a statement about what I know, nor essentially a statement about the dog. It is essentially a statement about the relationship between me or my consciousness and the dog. Language is essentially part of the overarching human imaginative potential to see patterns, to create patterns, which is to say to create relationships. The dog in that novel was not a “real dog,” but my relationship to it was certainly real. When the dog died, it mirrored my relationship to my grandmother who had died.

So if an editor says, “you need to be more specific” or “we need more detail here,” don’t just look at the dog. Remember that. *It’s not just about the dog*. There is a certain kind of bad writing that piles on detail after detail after detail, but none of it works. None of it comes together, because it’s all just staring at the dog rather than attending to what really matters, which is the relationship between consciousness of the writer and the subject matter under discussion. Writers describe what we are looking for as the “telling detail,” and I like that phrase—the telling detail. What does the telling detail tell us? It tells us both about the dog and the girl—both simultaneously—because what it is trying to name is neither the girl nor the dog but the relationship between them.

But how do we get into that relationship? A little neurobiology comes in handy here. In the brain, emotions are centered or regulated by what’s called the limbic system. The limbic system is very poorly or weakly wired into language centers, but it is wired very densely indeed into our midsection. The limbic system is very directly tied to the adrenal glands, for instance. They sit on top of your kidneys, producing adrenaline—goosebumps, a pounding heart, sweaty hands. a clench in your gut. We do in fact have a whole array of “gut-level” feelings, which we ignore at our peril. These gut-level

reactions are the biologically strongest and quickest guide to the entire wealth of our prior experience. And gut-level reactions become conscious as emotions: fear, anger, jealousy, relief, delight, curiosity. In fact, one neurologist argues that our emotions function quite literally as a 6th sense, providing vital information about our environment and what's going on around us.

So what does this mean for writers? If you are looking for a word, if you are trying to decide what should come next in a manuscript, look at the situation you are trying to describe—and center your awareness on your midsection. Wait for your gut to get clear. Center and breathe and breathe and wait. Let your gut direct your attention, and it will speak to you in specifics—because that's the only language it knows. The gut does not communicate to us in abstractions, because it's not wired into the brain-centers that generate abstractions.

And God is in our guts as well, God by whatever name you want to use. The holy, the sacred, the transcendent, “The Word,” as Christians say, is also deep inside us--or it is no where at all. I'll have a lot more to say about this next week, when I talk about writing as a spiritual practice, but let me leave you with this much. Inspiration happens inside, but it connects us to the world around us. And Truth—truth capital T—is a relationship too, a relationship between consciousness and the world, a relationship between inner and outer realities. The sameness of thing and thought, as scholastic philosophers insisted. Our most mundane struggles to make a manuscript work nonetheless echo the creative power that sustains the reality of the real world. Our troubles tie in too the spiritual dimension permeating reality.

Just a story. Fiction or nonfiction, poetry or prose: just a story. Just what some writer said. Just about the most powerful thing on earth.

Next time: Writing as a Spiritual Practice