Care and Feeding of the Work in Progress

I want to begin with a story that was found among other ancient scrolls in a clay jar in the near the town of Nag Veridas, which is just east of Nag Hamadi in North Africa. Religion scholars are still hotly debating its authenticity, of course, and certain elements do seem quite dubious. But it is nonetheless a key text for the famous "ex nihilo" controversy, which claims that God did not create the world "from nothing." On the contrary: God created the world by speaking, which is to say God was the first creative user of language—the first poiétés or maker. The story goes like this . . .

In the beginning, when the earth was without form, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, God said, "let there be light." And there was light. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.

And in the heavens, the angels watched. One of them said, "Light versus dark is a really clichéd image. Don't you think that's overworked?"

A second angel commented, "Be careful about giving your characters such obvious names. Agents will object to that right away."

God hesitated. A third angel spoke up. "You're beginning with a strong contrast," she said. "There's real dramatic tension in that."

God glanced around and went back to work. And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters that are below from the waters that are above." And it was so. God called the dome

Sky. And then God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. And God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering together of the waters God called the Sea.

And the first angel said, “You’re spending too much time on setting.”

And the second angel said, “You need a catchier lead. An agent won’t read past all this description.”

The third angel spoke up. “I like the three pairs of contrasting terms,” she said, peering down at the Earth suspended in the inky silence of space. “And I like how the names Sea and Sky echo one another. That really works: look, you can see that the clouds are mirrored in the water. Cool!”

God nodded, encouraged, but God cast a worried look at the first two angels. They sat, arms folded, shaking their heads.

God went back to work, resolving to get more done before sharing this project with anyone. “Let the earth bring forth vegetation,” God said, And it was so: grass and grain and fruit trees. And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, a greater light to rule the day and a lesser light to rule the night, so as to mark days and seasons and years.” And it was so. Then God created the whales, and fishes, and web-footed water birds, and everything that lives in and around the sea. And God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful! Multiply!” And so they did. And then God said, “Let the earth bring

forth living creatures of every kind: animals and birds and creepy things." And it was so.

God was very pleased with how all this turned out. God invited the angels to take a look.

And the first angel said, "I really don't see the point here. You have been at this for five days now and there's still no plot. No plot at all!! Where <u>are</u> you going?"

And the second angel said, "Animal stories are only for children. And the children's market is terribly competitive. Is that where you want to go?"

God had so enjoyed what She was doing that She had not stopped to worry about where She was "going." The work had flowed, and God had flowed with it, and nothing in God's life had ever been so glorious. She was crestfallen.

But, God, being God, and thus terribly objective, thought to herself, "Well, maybe these editorial angels are right. They have a point of view I need to consider: maybe this project really isn't going anywhere. Maybe I should go back to *let there be light*," God thought, "and try again. Stick with the astrophysics of that Big Bang and never mind this Earthy stuff."

Meanwhile, the third angel was still looking and thinking and looking harder. Her name was Mnemonsyne, which in Greek means memory, and she was trying to remember back across five eons cosmic time to that initial burst of unexpected light. Finally she spoke up.

"Y'know," she said, quietly, speculatively, "I like the progression here. There's a series of very sharp, increasingly dramatic contrasts—light versus dark, the seas and the dry land, all that. The energy keeps building until it erupts into all these living things, everything from whales to hummingbirds. This is good stuff. This is really promising.

"It's as if"—and here she paused—"it's as if *opposites* are some sort of generative principal. That's intriguing. I wonder"—and she paused again, looking down at all the being fruitful and multiplying happening on earth—"I wonder if any of these creatures feel that fundamental tension."

God hesitated, watching thousands of wildebeests migrate with their spindly-legged calves across the golden plains of the Serengeti.

"I have no idea," God said to her quietly. "Y'know, I'm really not sure where this is going. I've never done anything like this before. And I really don't know the market as I should. I mean, I know this needs work. Maybe I should stop and get an agent. This is just a first draft, after all. I have other projects going that I should get back to."

God gazed off vaguely, into the middle distance, trying not to notice that how the other two angels sat whispering to one another. "Maybe I need to set this aside for now," God said. "Then outline some serious revisions."

Mnemosyne frowned. "I think you should just keep working. Don't lose your momentum. I'd like to see more of this."

And so, on the sixth day God returned to work. After much hesitation and several long silent hours silently watching the dance of whooping cranes, God created humankind. In God's own image She created them, male and female she created them. And she said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply. Cherish the fish in my sea, and the birds of the air, and the cattle and all the wild animals of this earth. Rejoice over all of it, over the fruit trees and the grain and the little creepy things that creep upon the earth, keeping the soil rich and fertile." And so it was.

And the first angel said, "those two things are supposed to be your image? I don't see any resemblance at all."

And the second angel said, "Wait a minute. Stop right here. Is this going to be a novel or some sort of memoir? Stop right now and get that straight."

And so God stopped. She had created the two humans on an impulse, on a whim. And now God really wasn't at all sure where God was going with this project. The watching angels saw God's hesitation.

"Have you outlined your plot?" the first angel demanded. "You have to have a plot outline for godsake!"

"And nakedness will never sell in the children's market," warned the second angel. "Those two things, whatever they are, need some serious fur."

"I need a break," God thought.

It is written that on the seventh day God rested, but writers always say that when they are not writing. "I need a nap," writers say, but we all know what that means. Creation was left unfinished That explains a lot.

While God napped, the first two angels flew down to earth to take a look around. On earth they came to be known as Harpies. Of them it is written, "they are frightful flying creatures with hooked beaks and claws. They always leave behind them a loathsome stench, sickening to all living creatures." When God woke up, and saw where they had gone, and what they had become, God turned to Mnemosyne in dismay.

"My humans need help," God said. "Every time they try to create something—every time they lay hold of the divinity within themselves--they are beset by those damned Harpies! They're ruining my work!"

Mnemosyne flew to earth, bringing nine of her daughters with her. They are the Muses, and they know a thing or two about creativity, because their mother Memory is the deepest source of creative invention. Even today, wise humans still turn to the Muses for solace and for guidance in their art when they are beset by Harpies.

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That's where the scrolls ends. There's a lot of debate in the scholarly sources and in classical literature about the specific duties or domains of each Muse, but here's one reliable list of who they are and what they do.

Clio, angel of storytelling (& history, or so it is said)

Urania, angel of plot structure

(& astronomy, because the stars dictate our fate)

Melpomene, angel of tragedy

Thalia, angel of comedy

Terpsichore, angel of rhythm, timing, and pace (& hence the dance)

Calliope, angel of thematic coherence

(& guardian of both epic poetry and novels over 500 pages)

Erato, angel of character, motive, & human relationships (& love poetry)

Polyhymnia, angel of divinely perfect word choice

(& hymns to the gods, which demand the highest polish)

Euterpe, angel of lyric poetry

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To this day, Mnemosyne and her daughters come to the aid of besieged writers, just as Mnemosyne herself did at the primordial dawn of time. God knows we need them—which is why God allows them to stay among us, and why artists have always worshipped them as gods in their own right. Whether or not you know a Muse by name, I'm sure you know the Harpies and all of their innumerable offspring. All of us know the Harpies. Writers contend with Harpies at every turn.

Harpies show up as the inner voices of self-doubt and corrosive self-criticism. Harpies can speak through the fault-finding habits of editors, teachers, or classmates. They can speak through the fault-finding reactions of anyone to whom we show our work. Although every writer wants and needs feedback, when we do so we run the risk of Harpies. That's daunting. That's very daunting. And every single one of us know how that feels.

But there are ways to deconstruct the Harpies. First, I want to explain in fairly rigorous and abstract ways why fault-finding doesn't work—why the Harpies are not helpful. And why it's dangerous to think that they are. Until I convince you of that fact, responses to your work that are generous and compassionate may seem non-serious or unprofessional. Ultimately, I'm going to argue that it takes a lot more brains and critical sophistication to respond as Mnemosyne responds than with the snippy judgmentalism of the Harpies.

Second, I want to explain what sort of feedback does help, and how to ask for exactly that sort of feedback when you hand someone a manuscript. Third, and in conclusion, I'll try to answer the most obvious objections to what I'm suggesting.

What's Wrong with Fault-Finding.

The greatest problem with fault-finding is simply empirical: it <u>is</u> discouraging. It reverses a writer's momentum, driving her back upon what

has been written rather than forward either toward continuing the work or toward genuine development of her essential vision. In this regard, caring for a manuscript is not unlike raising children. The best parenting advice anyone ever gave me was "catch your children behaving." Praise them for doing what they should. Name it—name it and be glad. That seemed so simple. Almost suspiciously simple.

But over decades of mothering, I slowly discovered that "catching them behaving" was dramatically effective. We easily underestimate how much our children want to please us, how deeply they yearn for our approval and for our respect. As a battered older parent, I have come to understand that bitching and nagging are ultimately barren. Children become hostile, resentful, inhibited, fearful, and ultimately depressed. So do manuscripts. Manuscripts slam doors and pout and refuse to talk.

But why? Why is fault-finding barren? Fault-finding is barren because it assumes that revision is simply a matter of correcting faults. Incessant critical fault-finding generates works that are both highly polished and entirely flat, utterly without life. The overwhelming dullness of 18th century English poetry testifies unequivocally to how an obsession with correctness drains the life out of a piece. But revision is not, in fact, the process of correcting faults. Correcting of faults is called copy-editing. Now I agree that copy-editing does have its place—at the very very end of the writing process. At the very end. But revision comes first.

Revision is continuous; it is incessant; it is a vital part of the writing process. Revision is the renewing and the development of *vision.* Re-vision is the effort to see and to develop further what's right about a piece, what's good, what's successful and engaging. We need re-vision because our very best work comes from such deep levels of the psyche that we are never fully conscious of what we are doing. Writers say all the time that they were not aware of and consciously intending the elaborate patterns and structures that close literary analysis reveals. And of course writers are not fully conscious of these elements: there is a huge instinctive, intuitive, visceral component to any art.

Creativity is not a rule-governed mechanical process like laying bricks or hanging wallpaper or assembling a widget in a factory. But we live in a post-Enlightenment culture that tends to see the whole cosmos as nothing more than a rule-governed mechanical process. To protect your work from the Harpies, you have to be willing to imagine that there is more to reality than logical, rule-governed processes. That's a spiritual issue. It's a colossal spiritual issue. Is there more to you than what I can see? But we don't have time here for metaphysics: let me just acknowledge this issue aside and set it aside. The spirituality of writing is a topic for another day.

What Sort of Feedback Helps?

Let me turn instead to a very practical question: what kind of feedback from readers really will help in the re-vision process? How do you ask for that

sort of help? What sort of directions can you give your readers—or follow in your writing group—that will maximize your chances of getting truly helpful feedback?

I have several suggestions. They are based brilliant theoretical work on the writing process done since 1973 by a scholar named Peter Elbow, whose books are published by Oxford University Press. Beginning in the late 1970s, a poet named Patricia Schneider began to turn Elbow's insights into a method designed for community-based writing groups of all sorts, including those for at-risk populations. Later she set up a small foundation to train workshop leaders in this method. Schneider has a book now too, also from Oxford. All this is in the bibliography.

My first bit of advice—their first bit of advice—is to be both clear and explicit with your readers about what you want from them. If you don't offer specific guidelines, then your reader will probably remain trapped within the corrosive model of fault-finding and disputation. As historian John O'Malley argues in *Four Cultures of the West,* university culture assumes that to engage seriously with anything is to look for faults and flaws and problems. What's good gets brushed aside; what's bad becomes the center of attention. This assumption comes powerfully into play whenever you had someone a manuscript and ask them to respond. If you are not clear with your readers about what they should do, they will start finding faults. If they are too polite or too unsure of themselves to dispute what you are doing, they will resort to

the mindless opposite of mindless fault-finding: useless make-nice platitudes such as “I really enjoyed this, thank you for sharing.”

The second point is remarkably simple. Ask your readers to underline or to draw circles around whatever words, phrases, or passages strike them as memorable, evocative, effective, or just plain fun. What are the “good parts”??

Some readers will mark a lot, of course; others will mark just a little. Most of the reasons why have to do with readers’ personalities, not the quality of your text. Some people are simply more enthusiastic than others; some are more aware than others of how they are feeling as they read. Many people don’t have much confidence in themselves as readers and so they will hesitate to make any marks at all until they are well into the second half of a manuscript and sure of where you are going. So when you do this, don’t worry about what *doesn’t* get marked. Simply pay attention to what *does*.

I can almost guarantee that you will be surprised by what people like. They are apt to like most the moments that felt edgiest to you—the most daring, the most deeply vulnerable, the parts you would be most willing to take out precisely because you are not clear about what you are doing or why. These are the growth edges, the places where you dared to trust your talents—to listen to your muse--and to go with the flow from your own psychic depths.

You will also be surprised—and liberated—by how different people will react to different things. As you realize—gut level--that there is no way to

please all of the people all of the time, it will get easier to please yourself. That's a very important step in your development as a writer. It's a lot easier to see where you are going—and to get there—when you stop looking over your shoulder.

When you ask people to underline the passages that resonated for them, invite them to explain in the margin what they liked about the passages they marked. Don't require this, because they may not be able to say. We all know how some works in a book simply shimmer for us, laden with a significance we can't quite put into words ourselves. (Maybe that's why we read.)

It can be very useful to understand what our readers liked about a phrase, or a passage, or about some larger structural or thematic strategy. The more literary training and experience readers have, the more likely it is that they will see—and enjoy—structural elements or patterns of which we are only dimly aware. Until we have become aware, of course, our re-visions will be limited. The job of even the most skillful reader-of-manuscripts, I contend, is supporting and eliciting the author's vision. Such reading is far more work simply finding faults and flaws and plain mistakes.

Your helpful readers have a second task as well. Ask your readers to put question marks in the margin at any place where they get lost, or bored, or confused. Just question marks and, then, perhaps, some brief statement of what they are confused about.

Bear with me for a moment, if you will. This is a subtle point, and I want to be as clear as I can. When I'm reading for someone, and the manuscript breaks down for any reason, I have an editorial choice to make. As it happens, I have the sort of high-formalist academic training that equips me in most circumstances to "fix the mistake" and "get things going again." I've been paid very good money by scholarly journals to clean up nonfiction manuscripts in just this way. But if I'm working with an author directly, then 90% of the time my "fixing things" is a colossal mistake. Just a colossal mistake. It's a mistake because the muddled passages are usually growing edges, and my "fixing" them will stop the new growth that might have happened.

The work grows and develops much further if I turn to the author and say, "hmm, look here, page 27. Talk to me about what was happening with you on page 27. There's something blurry here but there's a lot of good energy too. Talk to me." And they will. And usually there's an ahah! moment.

Ahah! here's the issue. Ahah! here's a new awareness of what's going on. Ahah! here is the germ of something brilliantly alive. Here is the beginning of an important creative leap that unfolds into a major revision. I have seen manuscripts open up. I have seen writers re-vision their work into something I would never have expected or predicted. It's profoundly uncanny, both for them and for me.

Let me repeat: most troubles are not problems to be fixed. They are something like a doorway. Picture platform 9 ½ in the Harry Potter books: it looks like a wall, but try running straight at it and see what happens. Going at these places with a Harpy's red pen will nail the door shut every time.

Furthermore, with this method you can ask for feedback from the kinds of readers who will really buy your books some day, not simply from other literary professionals. You can ask for feedback from quirky, interesting, spiritually deep people that you know, and if they say "but I don't know anything about writing!" you can tell them that really doesn't matter. It does require a lot of fancy critical vocabulary to circle the "good parts" and put question marks whenever you get lost. Just about anyone can do that—if, of course, they have generous, compassionate, creative spirits. And—And!—if they have been convinced that this kind of reading works to help a writer grow.

As writers, we need to cherish our reader's responses because they can show us what we are doing that hovers, for now, far beyond our conscious control. Creative work has a huge unconscious dimension. It has a huge spiritual dimension. Understanding where our readers are delighted and where they are confused can help us to become more conscious of the vital, creative core of what we are doing. When your readers are confused that is not a problem, and when your readers are delighted that does not mean you are the next William Shakespeare. But both responses are indeed a gift, a gift

that can help you to see your work more clearly, to keep writing, and to develop your work to a higher level of artistic achievement.

Why Does This Method Work?

Sounds great, doesn't it? Sounds wonderful. Is it too good to be true? Is "catch your children behaving?" true? Or is it escapist, it is dereliction of parental duty? Let me ask the obvious question: does what I'm advocating turn into namby-pamby self-indulgence? Is this "abandon all standards and be happy in your own mediocrity?" Is this just "make nice"? Is it—dare I say—estrogen poisoning?

No, in a word. Not a chance. But the question is a good one, a serious one, and it's a question I want to answer with great care.

What I'm advocating—what Elbow and Schneider advocate—differs from "make nice" blandness in two ways. First, it is highly specific. "This was really wonderful; I enjoyed it a lot" is a generalization. It doesn't tell you anything.

Specifics will tell you something. And underlined words, metaphors, phrases, lines of dialogue—these are all perfectly specific. These reach us where we live as writers, which is right there on the page, word by word by word.

So here's what to do with these passages when you get a manuscript back: remember what you were feeling when you wrote them. Remember

where these words seemed to “come from” and then feel around to other places in the manuscript, to other words, that have the same origin and the same feeling about them. If you are not simultaneously distracted by the need to explain and defend yourself, if you are not simultaneously distracted by your embarrassment over flaws that need to be fixed, if you are not distracted by the need to fend off someone else’s ideas about what you should be doing, then this very specific feedback can be wonderful. It can provide clarity, energy, and confidence that will draw you back into the manuscript with new energy and enthusiasm. You won’t walk home thinking, “hmm, wow . . . I really need a break.”

And there’s another reason why this works. When the reader identifies the words that resonated, the words that felt memorable, the words that sort of shimmered there on the page, the reader is in effect pointing to the places where her imagination connected with yours.

That’s why energy flows from this kind of feedback. That’s why energy comes from offering this kind of feedback to others. This kind of feedback, whether given or received, helps all of us to hear the voice of the Muse. Just as writing reaches deep into the unconscious, so does sensitive reading. In such underlining, two souls can meet at an intensely creative level. The spark of the sacred in me can connect to the spark of the sacred in you. That’s why we read, after all. That’s why all of us started out as voracious readers. As we

read, something profound in us, something deeply holy, can stir to life. That's why both theologians and literary critics talk about "grace."

Let me repeat: any sensitive, generous, mature person can read like this for you. Rigorous training in literary criticism is not required. It helps, of course. It helps a lot. English majors develop a very useful vocabulary, as Mnemosyne demonstrated in my little parable. I'm a huge believer in the value of old-fashioned formalist literary criticism, because it gives us ways to name what shimmers, and why, and how all the shimmery parts hold together.

But professional training in literary criticism begins from the very same place: notice what you notice. Where, exactly *where,* do you sit back and say to yourself, "oh, wow"? Notice what you notice. Notice what you react to, and underline it. Sit with it for a minute, maybe, just feeling what you are feeling, wordlessly, with what the Buddhists call "non-attachment." And then, later, read again, and read again, and again and again. Notice more. Keep wondering what it is that you are seeing, and why, and how it all holds together. Look for patterns. Look for resemblances and contradictions and repetitions.

Spend years reading with such deep and patient attention, and you will become a highly reactive reader. A highly responsive reader. That's why we tell young writers to read widely, to read carefully, to read and to re-re-re-read the works that move them, the works to which they resonate deeply. Writers <u>are</u> readers—this kind of deep, attentive readers—because it feeds our own

art. It quickens our responses to our own words on the page. It makes us more sensitive to our own manuscripts—and therefore better at re-vision.

But only if we refuse to let the Harpies in the room. Only if we refuse the egotistical, controlling urge to judge, to evaluate, to find fault, to find mistakes that we can fix with our magic fix-it-all red pen..

It's quick and it is easy to find fault with anything anyone writes: personal taste is a powerful thing, and it's always available to us. The witches in *Macbeth* are sexist stereotypes. The subplots in Dickens are excessive. Emily Dickinson's punctuation is outrageous. Wendell Berry is sort of obsessed with the woods, don't you think? Maybe he needs a month in New York. Marilyn Robinson's newest: a whole novel as a retrospective monologue from an old man? Give me a break!

If an unknown author had brought that novel into most writers' workshops, she'd have been pilloried. But it is exquisite. It's a tour-de-force. It should have been completely impossible and instead it is haunting, the best novel I've read in decades.

I argue that it takes far greater maturity, far greater vulnerability, far greater generosity of spirit to recognize the words that shimmer, and then to admit that they touched you, that something deep inside you shimmered too. And then, and then, it is remarkably more challenging intellectually to look back over all that shimmered and try to explain what's going on. That's part of why Mnemosyne—the goddess Memory—is the mother of the

Muses. Genuine literary criticism is an intense form of introspection, and introspection is a function of memory. That's also why the Muses themselves are nine in number, and so incredibly specific in function: this kind of reading is highly focused on specific details. That's why it's so challenging, so sophisticated.

It demands nothing more than generosity of soul to underline a phrase and say "oh, wow." But it demands literary training and it develops critical insight to ask the further question: "why the wow?" *Why the wow? How exactly does this work its magic on us?* In a recent essay for the *New York Review of Books,* Joyce Carol Oates insisted on the difficulty of answering this further question: "Contrary to what might be assumed, it is far easier for the critic to revile than to reveal; to deride and dismiss than to illuminate, especially when difficult work is being considered. In ordinary language, to be 'critical' means to find fault, justly or unjustly. In fact, is there an art more exacting, more risky, more vulnerable to censure, than the art of intelligent appreciation? . . . Such criticism requires of the critic not only intelligence and taste, but a more rare talent for self-effacement." Her sharply paired verbs suggest an edgy passion, something close to real anger: *revile* vs. *reveal*, or *deride and dismiss* vs. *illuminate.* Merely critical criticism, she suggests, is too often both lazy and cheap.

By contrast, what Oates praises as "intelligent appreciation" is both difficult and demanding, because what succeeds appears so natural. It seems

spontaneous and so it looks easy. The right rhyme, for instance, the absolutely, exquisitely right rhyme, feels inevitable. It feel like the only word that could possibly come at that place in the line. Never mind the fact that most words in English have a handful of synonyms, some of them quite close in meaning. There's nothing remotely "inevitable" about the exquisitely right word, about the telling image, about the perfect moment of dialogue, or the moment when a character does something both wholly unexpected and entirely in character. There's nothing inevitable about any of it. It's an achievement, but it's never an entirely conscious achievement, and it's certainly not the end-point of a mechanical process, like the shipping dock of a factory.

Artistry, when it's working well, hides in plain sight, which is the best disguise on earth. Art offers something like an illusion of "real experience," and that's why artistry has always had about it an air of the uncanny, a whiff of the Holy One. How art does what it does is simply weird. That is, literally, Unearthly. And often, then, morally suspect, dangerous, subversive.

There's a Korean aphorism that I love. It goes like this: "If your only tool is a hammer, all your problems will look like nails." *If your only tool is a hammer, all your problems will look like nails.* If you are tired of feeling pounded, if when you consider your work you feel flattened and discouraged and you just want to take a nap, maybe you are approaching your work with a limited and essentially hostile set of tools.

I offer you here another set. They are very simple, as the classical tools always are. They are both demanding and gracious, which is to say they will help you to grow both as a reader and as a writer. And maybe as a person too: generosity and compassion are potent spiritual practices.

Better yet, this is glorious fun to do in a group. It is just unbelievable fun. Astounding energy is generated in a room when everyone is sharing the lines they loved. And when highly engaged readers try to make collective sense of their perceptions, the quality of insight that flows can be astounding. I have never seen so much in a single paragraph—not in all my years of professional, scholarly literary training—as I have seen when a group of good-hearted, amateur, community-level writers start paying close and generous attention to one another's work. And as we realize that we can do something effective without intention, with non-attachment, as a moment of grace, then writing becomes fun again. It becomes free again. And we discover that compassion for other writers feeds our own souls as well. The writing flows.

And ultimately that's what we are looking for when we look for feedback. We don't want advice. We don't need advice. We want and need something that will send us back our keyboards in gladness and singleness of heart. We want feedback that will revive the glow of our own creative energy.

Here's a way to get that sort of feedback. The Muses are among us still, closer than you think.

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