

## Writing as a Spiritual Practice

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It took me a long time to be able to say, “I’m a writer.” I’d published a book, and several poems, and at least half a dozen meaty essays before I could answer “I’m a writer.” I’d say “I teach English,” or “I’m home with my kids,” or “I’m a freelance editor.” Not the plain, simple truth: *I’m a writer. Between the lines I have other roles and responsibilities, of course. All of us do. But what do I do? I write.*

I’m not alone in this difficulty. Now that I can say that I’m a writer, I’ve seen faces light up in recognition and in delight.

“You are?” some people respond. “So am I!” And then they pause. They hesitate. “Not a real writer,” they say, shame and yearning rising like a flush on their faces.

Sometimes they don’t even say that much. All I see is a flash of delighted recognition followed by a sad, haunting mix of shame and yearning.

I never know what to say at such moments. But I’m convinced that “I’m a writer” is something many writers yearn to say out loud, in public, and not just in safe places like Off Campus. Many people could—and should—say “I’m a writer,” if only they could give themselves permission.

I’m not here to give you that permission. Nope. That doesn’t work. You have to claim this identity yourself. But maybe if I sketch a few issues you will see for yourself what saying “I’m a writer” involves—and doesn’t involve—and why saying “I’m a writer” is simply telling the truth about yourself.

Saying “I’m a writer” means recognizing that writing is your core spiritual practice, the spiritual practice that centers and grounds your life. Publication is an entirely separate matter. That’s what I’m here to talk about today.

Motive matters. As Coleridge says somewhere, no one does anything for a single motive: all of us have an entire zoo full of motives for anything we do. Writing—creative work of any kind—is the Amazon jungle of motives: there are more species in those

woods than anyone has names for. If we are to begin to claim writing as a spiritual practice, as our way of relating the “the sacred” as I described it last week, we have to sort through these motives fairly carefully.

That’s harder than it sounds. It’s hard, because we live in a densely consumerist, capitalist culture in which it is assumed that by-definition we are driven by one and only one motive: making money. Maximizing economic utility. Seeing our own self-interest, narrowly defined as return on investment.

Needless to say, writers and other creative types seriously baffle economists. We drive those people nuts. They have marvelously convoluted theories for why we sacrifice the big bucks for our small books. The only thing that baffles them more, from what I can tell, is parents, especially people who shelve their hot careers to stay home with their kids.

I think this is a good thing. But if we are *not* doing this to get rich quick, why are we doing it? Our answers to that question—my own struggle to answer that question—provide the foundation on which one can begin to construct an understanding of how writing can be a spiritual practice. How writing is a spiritual practice, whether you realize it or not.

I want to approach *writing as a spiritual practice* from two angles. The first is writing and happiness. What does writing have to do with human happiness? As I did last time, I’m going to delve into a little neuroscience here. The second is writing and spirituality, because spiritual traditions are also centrally concerned with human happiness. Rather than concoct drugs to manipulate brain chemistry, however, the ancient sages developed practices—things to do, habits—that have a far more profound effect on human happiness than Prozac ever will. As I did last week, I want to allow generous time for conversation, which is to say I’ll pick up with writing and spirituality after the break.

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When I was young, I wanted to be published. I didn’t ask myself why. And if you had asked me to explain why, I’d have thought you were crazy for asking. For a writer, I

thought, the desire to be published is self-evident. Self-justifying. Why else do writers write? As I said, I was very young.

So I submitted a story to my high school literary magazine. They accepted it. They probably accepted every submission, but that thought never crossed my mind. I was a writer! I was thrilled.

I was so thrilled, in fact, that I was afraid to submit anything for the next issue. They might say *No*. That vulnerability was more than I could manage, despite the demands of the nun in charge.

Later still I was editor of my high school newspaper. I got to write two editorials for every issue. That too was thrilling at first. Then it was merely fun. Then, well, *satisfying*, and then, as the year wore on, a lot of work.

But I loved getting out of study hall to sit alone in the newspaper office, which was a tiny room off the gym. I spent hours alone in there, silent, sitting with a pad of paper, thinking, listening to the noise of gym classes, trying out sentences, playing with words, playing with ideas, drafting imaginary editorial arguments intended exclusively to drive the nuns berserk. It was introvert heaven, *circa* 1968. Driving the nuns crazy was my favorite indoor sport.

But seeing my work in print every month became less and less rewarding. The printed newspaper just didn't measure up to what fun I'd had with the writing itself. The page was not weighty enough, somehow, to hold that delight. This puzzled me. Eventually I decided that high school literary magazines and newspapers are clearly not *real* publications. This was just high school. *Real* publication would be different.

My college newspaper and its literary magazine didn't strike me as real either. I was 27 or so before I had my first *real* publication. I still remember the ecstasy of opening that letter: “. . . your essay has been accepted for publication in . . .” Bliss would be mine, forthwith.

But it wasn't. Once again, I was pleased. Gratified—for a few days, until I had told everyone I wanted to tell. But bliss? No.

I continued to publish anyhow, because “publish or perish” was the rule. But I was increasingly puzzled. Despite my growing list of publications, there I still was, in my own skin, in my own life, untransformed. Still just *me*, plain me. Still shy, bookish, somewhat awkward socially. Still stubborn, hot-tempered, passionate, when I yearned to be elegant, sophisticated, and self-possessed.

What was I looking for? A brass band marching down the street? A choir of angels in the clouds overhead, singing “hallelujah”? The Blue Bird of Happiness perching my shoulder to whisper, “hey, Babe, you have made it.”

Maybe the bird. Maybe that’s what I wanted: some cosmic, ultimate fix for all of my ordinary uncertainties about my work. About myself. Me. Looking back over all these years, I suspect now that some corner of my soul was convinced that *authors* live on some higher plane of reality. *Authors*, the great writers of the great tradition, rise above any shadow of doubt about the value of their work. They write long letters—now very famous, of course—discouraging boldly to one another about the true nature of poetry. They tower above my familiar morass, my own personal Slough of Despond, which is repeated revisions that merely change what’s wrong with a manuscript. *Real writers* float far above that trap. *Real writers* remote, serene, indifferent—indifferent to hostile colleagues, demanding editors, demeaning reviews, and the slow corrosion of self doubt. I yearned for that exalted status, for that enduring unshakable confidence. *I’d be happy, I knew, I’d be happy, if only . . .*

I had discovered what neuroscientists call this the “hedonism treadmill.” The word “hedonism” comes from the Greek word for “pleasure,” and the “hedonism treadmill” is the endless, pointless quest for pleasure. Publication was something like my recreational drug of choice. Neurologically speaking, I was running on same neurotransmitter treadmill that traps heroin addicts. It’s called the opiod system—like “opium.”

The “hedonism treadmill” process goes like this. We think to ourselves,

“If I only had A I’d be happy.”

It doesn't matter what A is. It can be publication, but it can also be a good laptop or plastic surgery or a promotion. A new rug in the dining room. It can be anything.

We get A. And A is pleasant enough. It's maybe even thrilling for a little while. But not for long, because the neurotransmitter system resets to its baseline. Evolution doesn't want us blissfully happy for long: we need to keep working if we are going to survive. We need to be vigilant! And vigilance pays off: pretty soon we are yearning for B.

"If only I had B! Then I'd *really* be satisfied."

And then C, then D, and so on, and so on, and so on. The hedonism treadmill.

So one day, after years on that treadmill, I found myself standing in the rain on my own front porch, looking at a cardboard carton full of Z. While I was out, UPS had delivered a whole case of books, my books, my books with my name on them!!

And a very bad case of shattered illusions. I had finally seen the treadmill for what it was. The jig was up.

For a writer, the hedonism treadmill often looks like this:

If I can only get this manuscript finished!

And revised of course.

If I can only get this published.

but in a bigger press next time

with a better publicity budget

with better reviews

and more sales

and more sales than I had last time

and more sales yet!!

And first serials, second serials, translations.

More of translations! More!

The cover of *Newsweek*. Oprah!

And so why not the Nobel Prize, huh??

Or a MacArthur genius award, or, or . . .

We are never satisfied. And it's not just writers. All of us, any of us: there is a restlessness at the heart of us, a yearning, a craving that cannot be stilled. This is the human condition. Focusing that yearning on publication—like obsessing over designer handbags or the shabbiness of your kitchen, or the shape of your butt—focusing that yearning on *anything* in the world around us is simply a formula for frustration. Frustration, disappointment, anger.

Consider this:

- No matter how many books you sell, you might have sold more.
- No matter how good your publisher is, or your publicist, or your editor, there might have been a better one somewhere.
- No matter how many good reviews you have, you might have gotten more and better ones.
- No matter how glorious a release your book enjoys, no matter what outstanding sales, before long your editor and your publicist and your mother-in-law start making pointed inquiries. Everyone expects you do to even better next time. A recent article in *Publisher's Weekly* on second novels insisted that brilliant first novels don't really count. What proves whether a writer has what it takes is a brilliant second novel. I pictured a world full of crestfallen brilliant first novelists, clutching the handrails of the treadmill. *that didn't count? it didn't? oh. oh, well . . .*

The whole situation calls to mind Coleridge's sad and solemn wisdom: "I may not hope from outward forms to win/ the passion and the life whose fountains are within." I was simply *wrong* in looking outside myself for some confirmation of the energy, the passion, the delight I experienced in writing. It is both wrong and dangerous to surrender

anything that important to agents, to editors, to the whims of a consumerist market, and to international communications conglomerates concerned exclusively with their own profit.

But wow are we tempted to do so. Wired to do so, in fact. We can, of course, take a wire-cutter to some of that yearning. Which is Coleridge's point: we have to keep in mind that our happiness, our satisfaction with our lives, arises within and has to arise we in. We have to like ourselves, just for starts. We have to be okay with ourselves, or we will endlessly look outside ourselves for something to affirm our identity and our value. That's harder than it sounds—which is why we need spiritual disciplines.

There's a second pleasure circuit that comes into play as well. It's the dopamine system, which is targeted by highly addictive, extremely dangerous drugs like cocaine. The dopamine system—and we all have one—generates is a hard-wired, insatiable, restless cravings and insistent desires that are never satisfied for long.

Such things can make us miserable. But they do serve evolutionary purposes, which is why we have them. There are major evolutionary advantages for a community if all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, are not content with the status quo. Somebody or other is always looking for a better way to gather grain, or chip an axe, or design a cell phone. Some folks are always willing to walk into the next valley, hoping the grass will be greener there, the blueberries sweeter. Call this the “better blueberries beyond” mechanism. The energy of this drive explains how humans walked out of Africa to every last corner of the globe. Nonetheless, all that craving and questing does not necessarily serve the best interests of the individual intrepid explorer—that person haunted by sweeter blueberries or by increased book sales.

Neurologists also explain that the dopamine system is particularly sensitive—particularly response—to craving whatever provides money, power, or social status. We react this way because wealth and social status are highly associated with reproductive success among social animals. In herds or groups of any kind, higher-status animals reproduce more often and with greater success than lower status animals.

The driving urge to publish may seem remote from questions of “reproductive success” but that's merely the blindness of the conscious mind. These neural circuits can and do

obsess over anything even faintly redolent of money, power, or social status. It is well and easily documented that people continue working extraordinarily hard to accumulate more and yet more money and influence, even though the additional money or status is not making them happier than they were already. In fact, people will keep working longer and longer hours for yet more money even when the stress of doing so is ruining their personal lives and making them miserable.

One might say, in fact, that such people are addicted to accumulating wealth and social status. After all, the depth of a smoker's craving for a cigarette is also not matched by the depth of pleasure he experiences standing outside, shivering in the cold, glared at by passers-by. He is not *enjoying* himself. He is coping with acute distress that only a jolt of nicotine can remedy. Or, for other folks, the jolt of making that big sale. Or, umm, signing that big contract with the fat advance and the huge publicity budget.

Which is only to say, of course, that money does not buy happiness. And neither does publication. Nonetheless we can pursue both money and publication with a single-minded energy that in fact can leave us unhappy, frustrated, and alienated from what is best and happiest and most meaningful about our own lives. It was a huge battle for me to write for my own reasons, for my own needs, for my own delight, rather than "for publication." I still fight that fight with myself from time to time, of course. If this were an Author's Anonymous meeting, I'd still be getting to my feet to announce, "I'm a publishing junkie."

The third neural circuit has to do with serotonin, made famous now by Prozac and other serotonin re-uptake inhibitors—drugs that slow down the process whereby the brain returns to baseline. Serotonin levels influence mood, and mood is inherently transient—unless, of course, your system is stuck on the "off" switch and you are clinically depressed.

But for most of us, most of the time, moods come and go like clouds in the sky. Life is a partly cloudy, partly sunny affair for all of us, and we are better off simply enjoying the sunny days without making too much of them—much less thinking that something, or anything, can keep the clouds away for good. No one will ever be as baseline happy as the faces in clothing catalogues. When you get home today, look critically at the faces in



whatever catalogue is lying around your house. Those catalogues are not just selling clothes. They are selling the promise of utter bliss.

I don't buy it. Furthermore, it's stunningly easy to influence people's moods, and so the array of research on this topic is enormous. My favorite study documented that if you arrange for research subjects to find a dime atop then photocopier that they will give significantly higher assessments of the happiness of their entire lives to date than do other research subjects who did not find the dime. A dime!

Compare a dime to having a piece accepted for publication! There's a serotonin high! But then, of course, my system reset to its baseline: quiet, introspective, introverted, philosophical—and *never* the life of the party. *Not* the Homecoming Queen.

Homecoming Queens do not get excited by publishing essays in scholarly journals. Or so I'd guess. I've never met a Homecoming Queen. That was not my crowd. I don't like crowds. Beaming exuberant extraverts commonly terrify me. But I envy them. Oh lord, I envy them. And the thrill of publication briefly jolted me out of my quiet introversion. Briefly.

Such things should come with government warning labels: "Caution, this experience is known to mess with your mind. Do not nominate yourself for Homecoming Queen under its influence."

So am I arguing "don't bother publishing"? Don't publish just as alcoholics don't drink, not even one small glass of wine? No. Sorry. It's not that simple.

Books have shaped my life and informed my sense of self. I'm immensely grateful to the authors I have enjoyed. I'm grateful that there are good people out there writing good books and sharing them in this way. I can't possibly claim that publication doesn't matter. It does matter. The world needs our work. It needs people who will speak truth to power. It needs the arts more now than ever. We need to be willing to publish whatever parts of our work are publishable, which means we have to be willing to do the marketing research that entails. But a simple willingness to publish is very different from the desperate craving I felt all those years. Willingness to publish is different from the

illusion that being published will remedy or solace some deep sense of inadequacy we carry around in our hearts.

We need to beware of our motivations for publishing. We need to be skeptical about our dreams for what publication will mean in your life. Our motives and our expectations may have everything to do with hard-wired status-seeking instincts and hard-wired restless craving that have nothing much to do with the permanent sources of genuine happiness. Or with the meaning of life. Our work is not rendered morally significant by being offered for sale by some outfit in New York.

And you will not feel better about yourself in any significant way. I don't know if there is a brain circuit for this, but there is a stunning consensus among wisdom traditions: everyone suffers from some unnamable something. We might call "inadequacy" or we might call "lost." We might call it "unloved" or we might call it "sin." We might call it "insecure" or "poor self-image" or "neurotic." Call it *wrongness*, maybe, but understand that whatever this is, it comes in thirty-one flavors. At least thirty-one flavors.

Having a piece published won't fix this, whatever it is. But writing as a spiritual discipline can certainly help. Or it can help. Any serious spiritual practice can, because that's what they are designed to do.

Publishing matters, but truth matters more. The grace and creativity and meanings of our lives matter more. Working diligently to develop your God-given talents *for their own sake*, as a spiritual practice, matters more than money or prestige or a review in the *New York Times*.

To align our work as writers with the genuine sources of human happiness means that we have to see our writing as soul work first, and *sold* work second—or maybe 28<sup>th</sup>, if at all. Soul work. Not sold work. The value of our work has to be something money can't buy.

And thanks be to God, the value of our work is something money can't buy. Writing can be a remarkably potent spiritual practice. I'll pick up with that after the break.

**After the break:**

Scholars of such things have said that the central question asked by all religions and all secular philosophies of life come down to this: how are we to be happy? If not in this life, then eventually. How are we to be happy? And if you are a writer, then writing makes you happy.

The usual array of religious and philosophical advice mirrors the three brain circuits that are the happiness-managers within the limbic system. Cravings—mere appetites—are deceptive, the sages say. Don't trust them. Pleasure is real enough but very fleeting. That's no basis for serious or permanent human happiness. And mood? The pursuit of "good moods" is chasing feathers.

Given this state of affairs—which the sages had figured out without help of neuroscience—what are we to do? Do something that is genuinely worthwhile, the sages say. Stand up straight and do what you know you should do. Show up at the page. Stop worrying about being happy or unhappy, published or unpublished.

Each tradition develops practices that help people attain such ends. Practices. What are practices?

Think about practicing the piano. Think about basketball practice. Practices are habits or habitual actions designed to build skill. From a neuroscience perspective, spiritual practices are designed to develop skillful control over cravings, appetites, and moods, so as to liberate us from evolutionary drives narrowly focused on survival and reproduction rather than wisdom, happiness, and human flourishing. Ancient traditions are remarkably emphatic that sustained meditation practice, for instance, should never be undertaken without professional supervision. You are messing with the motherboard of your mind.

Different religious and philosophical traditions have different techniques, and of course remarkably different conceptual or doctrinal foundations or explanations for these techniques. The differences are not trivial. Not at all trivial. Nonetheless, the resemblances among the very basic teachings are so acute as to be spooky.

Writing as a spiritual practice can be understood in two ways. First, it can be located as a spiritual practice within the array of spiritual practices taught by any given tradition. As a Christian, for instance, I might say I am a writer because God calls me to be a writer, and so my writing is an offering to God or a surrender to God's will or a participation in the creative prowess and lovingkindness that is God. Gail Sher has a great explanation of writing as a spiritual practice in Buddhist terms. If you already have an allegiance to one of the great traditions, you may already have worked this for yourself how to think about your writing as a spiritual practice. If so, it would be terrific if you could share your thinking with the group when we get to discussing all this. Many people who are unchurched don't realize what rich and subtle thinking is available within established religions—if, of course, if you know where to look.

There is a second way to understand writing as a spiritual practice, which is—more or less—to imagine that writing is itself a philosophy of life. In recent centuries philosophy has become a highly technical domain, with its own extraordinarily esoteric vocabulary. But it wasn't that way in the ancient world. In the ancient world, philosophy was a way of life. It was very much like religion, but without the gods or a god of any sort. The focus was not on pleasing or appeasing the divine, but on discovering the best way to alleviate suffering and to attain as much of happiness as this life allows. This aspect of philosophy was sidelined by the ascendancy of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Sidelined or not, visibly or invisibly, philosophies of various kinds continue to shape the lives and the vision of many people. And I'd contend that creative disciplines of any sort—writers, musicians, sculptors, what have you—do in fact function as exceedingly potent philosophies of life. Of course, many writers and artists and musicians also participate in one of the great global religious traditions. We are sort of bi-lingual spiritually. That works—it works very easily, in fact—because there is so much fundamental consistency in what both religions and philosophies understand about the human condition.

I'd like to sketch how writing works as a spiritual practice. And as I said last week, this is a sketch. It is only a sketch. Hold what I have to say very lightly. I am keenly aware that

I'm on very holy ground here, and I don't want to create pain or to create obstacles for anyone.

It seems to me—it seems to me—that writing as a spiritual practice both demands and teaches us the following four things.

1. Compassion for others, compassion for all that exists, even the sunsets we are trying to describe, or the flow of shadows down the street. As writers we have a sense of inherent connection to everything that is, a sense of connection that is at the far opposite extreme from loneliness or alienation. Keats, for instance, Keats mused in one of his brilliant letters to his brother that the writer has no proper ego of his own. The writer notices something—a sparrow pecking at gravel on the driveway--and then identifies with that sparrow so intensely that the writer's human ego seems to disappear altogether.

As readers, we expect to be swept into a work so entirely that our egos disappear for a while too. We admit that! We read to escape, we say. To escape what? To escape ourselves, in part. To escape the noisy, anxious, cranky demands of our own self-centered egotism and all its tedious problems and demands. And where does that escape route originate? It originates in the passionate depth of the writer's compassion for material, whatever that material is, fiction or nonfiction or poetry. *And no one in the "spirituality" community talks about or seems to recognize any of this.*

Writers also develop compassion as we come to feel sympathy for our characters, even the mean and nasty ones. Have you ever stopped reading a novel or a story because you don't care about the characters? That's a failure of compassion by the writer. And we take it as a failure of the writer's art. That's how central compassion is to literature.

Writers develop compassion when we accept and name the suffering in our own lives as "good material." That's a standard joke among writers, but stop for a minute to consider what it demands—what it demands morally and spiritually. It demands re-framing. It demands understanding multiple points of view without privileging our own. It demands that we let go of helpless, toxic anger. We can feel that anger wash away, we can feel our chests lighten, when some writer pal comments, "well, hey, it's good material anyhow," and we find it in our hearts to agree: yes, yes indeed, terrific material.

Releasing the burden of anger, the burden of frustration, the burden of seeing life narrowly—these too are major goals of any spiritual practice.

Writers develop compassion through our concern for audience. We pay scrupulous, selfless attention to what readers experience and what readers need. The teaching of writing is about 90% teaching writers to understand and to care about the experience of readers, to become other-centered and not naively egotistical in their use of words and in their strategies of meaning. People spend thousands and thousands of dollars to hear what how other ordinary people respond to their work. It's called the writers' workshop, and it's a multi-million dollar business. Does no one else see that as essentially a spiritual practice of compassion-building? *I care what you think about my work. I care what you think. I care . . . about you, about your experience, about engaging you, entertaining you, making you curious.* As you drive home today, look at other drivers: do you feel that they care that much about you?

Such deference to the other, such compassion for the other, is and demands a growth beyond self-centered narcissism. I have read many books by brilliant people, by brilliant people who have turned all that amazing talent into the humble search for effective ways of explaining complicated material to ordinary nonspecialists like me. The ordinary English major, trying to read neuroscience, trying to understand Hindu philosophy, trying to get straight what chaos theory is. *Becoming a writer* is a spiritual discipline grounded in compassion.

2. Writing also demands from us and elicits within us a certain graceful confidence or equanimity, a freedom from anxiety.

We both teach and develop a freedom from anxiety when we repeat over and over and over again—to ourselves and to newcomers—that first drafts are dreadful. Dreadfulness is their nature. It's okay, we say repeatedly, that first drafts are awful. Do not worry, and do not be afraid.

We also develop confidence and serenity from the practice of revising. Writers endlessly insist that writing is revising. Re-vision. We see our mistakes, our failures, our flaws, and we react not with anxiety but rather with creativity. Ahah, I see a change I can make here. Ahah, I see another way of doing this. Ahah, this sentence works, so pitch the

whole page and keep these ten words and keep going. Yay! Getting there. We see this even in cartoons of writers. We are always seated at a desk, or at a computer, with a sea of loose pages at our feet. What is that sea of loose pages? It's drafts we have thrown away. *That's just being a writer!* you might say. And yes, that's exactly my point. It is just being a writer. But look at it.

Revision means seeing again, seeing differently, letting go of the past and letting go of anger over the past so as to find a new way forward. That's big stuff, however you learn to do it.

Other traditions call that forgiveness; we call it revision. And we understand that vision and revision is the very rhythm of life, like inhaling and exhaling. Inhaling I write; exhaling I revise. Writers delight somehow in this sustained, intentional practice of writing and revising as a single process. That's how forgiveness is supposed to function in our lives: as the seamless revision of everything we get wrong the first time.

3. The spiritual practice of being a writer both demands and teaches commitment. We show up at the page, day after day, no matter what. This page here, not "better blueberries in the beyond." Writers are steadfast in this commitment, often for years on end. People often ask me how long it took me to write one of my books, and when I shrug and say, oh, five years or so, they are astounded. It never occurred to me that there was anything astounding about five years. As writers take such steadfast commitment for granted, but in fact the capacity for steadfastness is a highly prized spiritual art. It's quite central to the monastic tradition, for instance, because monks vowed to stay at this particular monastery until they died. That was their version of "show up at the page." Like monks who live out their lives in one place, we see a text to its completion, to its most highly polished state, as an end in itself—and not because the world will ever know or care about what each and every revision entailed.

Julia Cameron says that the writer's obligation is quantity; quality, she says, is God's responsibility. I worry about such claims. Young students might take her literally. Turning quality over to God can turn into an excuse not to revise. Turning quality over to God can free a writer from the life-long need to study the craftsmanship of other writers. But to some extent, to some extent, yes, Julia Cameron has a point. Our first obligation

is quantity. We cannot revise until there is a body of work to be revised. We must be willing to write that horrible first draft, to persist in writing badly, to get waylaid and to go off on rants and to pile on extraneous material, page after page after page of it. There is only one path to the second draft. And that is the first draft. When all else fails, when all my efforts to outline come to naught, I just start writing. I show up at the page and stay there until eventually I figure out what I am trying to do. That takes time. But it's good time. I'm writing. I could be doing dishes . . .

4. Finally, being a writer demands that we do our duty, even as it teaches us what our duty is and how it is that we are to do our duty. We must tell the truth. Language can be a powerful force for good, and it can be a powerful force for evil. It is both our duty and our specific defining virtue to use words *well*, to be *good* writers in whatever we undertake. As writers, in being writers, we are doing what we are called to do, and being what we are called to become.

This entire process helps to liberate us from narcissism. When our work is criticized, justly or unjustly, we counsel each other, “remember, this is not about you.” It's not about me, we tell ourselves, we tell one another, and everyone agrees. In fact it is our duty, and we talk about this every day, to get ourselves out of the way of “the work.” “The work” is what matters, and we encourage one another in deep sacrifices to the work—sacrifices of time and energy, sacrifices of opportunity to each more money doing something else, sacrifices of self-centered egotism in the service of the common good. The common good: life understood. Life articulated. Life trimmed of all distracting, extraneous details and laid out on the page. Let those who can read take up and read.

To summarize, then: compassion, confidence, commitment, and duty. Compassion for everything and everyone around us. Confidence from the process of revising. Commitment to showing up at the page. And duty to the truth.

These four practices offer us something that is worth more than any publishing contract ever written. Such practices open us up to the good life, the meaningful life, the life worth living. The real secret of the good life, the true key to human happiness, is to have such a passionate commitment to something—anything—that we do for its own sake.



So when someone asks you what you do, remember that they are just trying to get a conversation started. They don't really care where your income comes from. If you can't bring yourself to say "I'm a writer" & leave it at that, then try this. Say "I do all sorts of things—or—I have a day job as [whatever]. But what matters to me is my writing."

Remember, always remember, that your comfort with language, your facility with words, your delighted engagement with this whole complicated process, all of that puts you at the heart of a deeply sacred power. And the writing process itself can help you to attain a grace and a wisdom and a serenity that far surpass what commercial success alone can provide. We are very lucky people. We are blessed to be writers, to have named ourselves as writers with sufficient clarity that we can come together on a day like today to think about these things.

There is one last thing that the sages—ancient and modern, neuroscientists and humanist—that these folks always say. The key to happiness, they say, is not to seek happiness. It is to seek what we realize is worthwhile, devoting ourselves to that. Happiness then happens to us, as much as other circumstances permit.

I rest my case.