On Saying "I'm a Writer"

Off-Campus Writers' Workshop, March 2010

Recommended reading: Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (1979; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

We shook hands, and she asked “What do *you* do?”

It takes skill—years of practice--to be that offensive that concisely. I paused, marveling. She was a stout little woman, probably in her late fifties, her pale-blue silk suit beautifully tailored, her blonde hair expertly colored and coiffed. Her eyes were pale blue as well, and set rather too closely together. I’d been told she was the wife of a highly-ranked corporate officer in a global corporation that’s a household name. In her own right, she was a fearsome presence . . . in international bridge-playing tournaments.

“I’m a writer,” I said. I was volunteering my talents for a nonprofit I admired, and the executive director was having lunch with this woman as a potential donor. I’d been invited along to help him explain their newest initiative.

She looked me up and down quite unabashedly.

“Have you *published* anything?”

Again I paused, looking her in the eye, those closely-set blue eyes. I let the silence stiffed for a heartbeat before I answered.

“Yes,” I said. Nothing more than that.

“Anything I’ve read?”

I considered that question for a moment, looking her up and down just as she had examine me. I shrugged, minimally, the barest hint of a shrug.

“Probably not.”

At that point, our table was ready. She steamed ahead of me into the dining room. I trailed after her, concentrating on keeping a straight face.

Getting older really does has some advantages. I could never have pulled this off in my thirties.

Some people do assume that publication is the ultimate goal of any writer—that publication is the defining purpose of our lives. Why do anything this difficult, if it doesn't earn both money and attention? What does it mean to say "I'm a writer" if I don't mean that I earn money and seek celebrity by writing—and *of course* "everyone" knows my work?

What does it mean to say "I'm a writer"? That's the question I want to address today. I'm going to argue that being a writer is something essentially different from—and often at odds with—selling our work in a commodity-driven consumerist market. *Being* a writer can mean that we organize our lives around something far more important than money, something more valuable and more elusive than a desperate quest for our fifteen minutes of fame. This week and next, I'm going to argue that we need to know how to protect *being a writer*—how to protect that core creative identity—from the pressures of publication and sales.

I say that, furthermore, as someone who has published with some regularity. I expect that to continue. Nonetheless, publication is not what defines me as a writer. Saying "I'm a writer" is a claim about my core identity. And if I didn't define myself as a writer in this richer, more elusive way, then nothing I wrote would be worth reading anyhow. Even if it did find its way into print.

As many of you already know, the minute a manuscript is published the ante goes up. Suddenly it's no longer enough simply to be in print. After all, more than half a million new books were published in 2008. That's more than one new book every minute. Every minute, round the clock, for a full year. 560,626 *other* books—almost eleven thousand new titles every single week.

So once a book is published or even accepted for publication, the questions change quickly. Not "will I be published?" But will there be first serials? Second serials. Book

club deals? Are there reviews? How good are the reviews? Could the reviews have been better? Could the reviewers have been more famous? Could the reviews have been published in more prestigious outlets? Have movie rights been sold? But who is the director? Are the actors famous enough? What's the budget for this movie? And on, and on. How many people came to your last booksigning? How many books did they buy? What are today's overall sales figures, and how do they compare to yesterday's figures? What the trendline? What does the latest royalty statement say?

It's endless. It's endless because no matter how many books you sell, you might always have sold more. One more book. Then another case of books, another hundred books, another thousand, another hundred thousand, in English, in translations, in more translations.

If you buy into this infinite regress of questions, if you think the answers to these questions are what define you as a writer, then publication can be like sniffing cocaine. Publication and sales can be wildly addictive. And like any addiction, it can be destructive in ways that the innocent first-time author may not anticipate. The more you invest in the *ultimate* significance of publication and sales, the more rapidly your gifts and your creative confidence can be destroyed.

A piece in *Publisher's Weekly* a few years ago warned that a superb first novel really isn't enough. It's just not enough to prove that you are a serious novelist. You have to write a superb second novel too. Lots of people write a superb first novel, they sniffed. What does *that* prove?

It may prove that lots of talented novelists are destroyed by the experience of publication and its relentless pursuit of fame and sales. Creativity can be silenced if writers become morally and emotionally invested in being salesmen, in marketing—in the profit-driven demand to make a big splash in that tsunnami of new books released every day, every single day, one every minute around the clock.

It's crucial to remember that literary merit and intellectual merit don't matter *in the least* to the stockholders--of the corporate conglomerates--that now own the major trade-press publishing houses. They are demanding that each editor generate levels of profit that this industry has never achieved across the board. Because profits are what

matters to stockholders. On Wall Street, money is *all* that matters. Money is the one true god.

Serious writers have to be careful not to sacrifice our talents on the altar of that god. We have to resolve that publication and then sales and more sales *and more sales* are not what define us as serious writers.

What defines a person as a writer is writing, just as what defines a violinist is playing the violin. Selling is something else. Unless you are cautious, courageous, and utterly resolute, selling your work to a publisher can be a black hole that absorbs and destroys every glint of the creative energy and the creative delight that turned you into a writer in the first place.

So here's the question. Here's the difficult, subtle, paradoxical question. How do we protect and nurture our gifts? What does it take to flourish as a writer—and as a human being—in a lunatic consumerist culture like ours? In a world too full of people like that woman in the blue silk suit?

I think it is right and just, a good and holy thing, once in a while to gather ourselves together, remembering and renewing our shared commitment to being *writers*. I am a writer. Say that to yourself. Say it proudly. Say it humbly, say it with tremendous gratitude for a wonderful gift. Salesmen and marketing executives are honorable occupations, but sales and marketing do not define what it means to be a writer. Writing *and only writing* defines the writer. And what most writers I know want most in life . . . is to write. To have more time and more energy for writing, and more confidence about themselves as writers. That's a gift we can give one another. Let me explain how.

A moment of full disclosure here. What I'm going to say from here on out is based very closely on a wonderful book by Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World.* I'm not going to do justice to the complexity of this wonderful book, so I urge all of you to get a copy. The original edition, from 1979, has a different subtitle: don't be confused by that. Let me repeat: Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*. Margaret Atwood calls it

a “masterpiece.” She says that this book is “the best book I know of for talented but unacknowledged creators.” Jonathan Lethem says, “Few books are such life-changers as *The Gift*: epiphany, in sculpted prose.”

When he first wrote this book Hyde was a writer trying to figure out why he makes little or no money from his work. Now he’s a MacArthur fellow—a MacArthur “genius”—but he wan’t then. Then he was simply a writer struggling to understand the relationship between writing and earning money from what he wrote.

So he did a big study of gifts and gift-giving in folklore, in mythology, and in cultural anthropology. He uses these three sets of sources to map the inner experience of the artist in our culture.

What can we learn from myths and folktales and anthropology about what it *really* means to be a writer? What can we learn about how to be happy and healthy and productive in being such a person? What can we learn about where to look or how to find more energy for our writing?

Lots, I tell you lots. Lots to learn. But first things first. Focus, please, on this primary fact: The ability to write is a gift.

The raw skill, the primary ability, comes to us freely. It comes to us unbidden. We must have been born with the ability to write, just as some kids are born athletic, or musical, or adept with numbers. Talent like this isn’t something money can buy. You can buy a computer. You can buy a car. But you can’t buy the ability to write. And what fuels that ability is our deep, abiding pleasure in playing with words, a delight that keeps us at our keyboards day after day after day. Either you feel that delight, either you take that pleasure in playing with words, or you don’t. Most people don’t.

Of course, even if writing *is* delightful, it still takes years and years of work to hone that God-given raw talent into high-quality finished work. But the thing itself, that core gift for words, comes to us as if from outside ourselves. In mythology, from the gods. In folklore, from the elves, from fairies or mysterious strangers. However it came to us, we have a gift.

And when the gift is alive and well, ideas just "come." Characters and scenes just "show up." Arguments assemble themselves from scattered pages of research. I'll talk more about that process next week. But for now, this: when the writing is going particularly well, writers always say that it feels more like listening than like composing. Words seem almost to flow from our fingertips. We have gotten into the "flow."

"Inspiration," its called, traditionally—like a breath coming into our souls from beyond us. "I taste a liquor never brewed," Emily Dickinson wrote. Strong spirits on our tongue. It's—thrilling. First drafts are apt to be ugly as sin, of course, but that doesn't stop us. We start revising. We revise and revise and revise—because revising is a deeply satisfying process. We polish and we polish and bit by bit the gold comes through.

Non-writers don't feel this way about writing. Revising is not for them a delight. They'd rather have a root canal. They never get into the flow of playing with words. Ordinary people never get into that flow where words just come. My son the engineer talks about solving complicated mathematical problems in this "flow" sort of way, where the figures almost dance on the page, as if rearranging themselves to reveal the pattern he was seeking. He loves it. He glows when he talks about his work.

I have *never* felt that way about mathematics. Even balancing my bank statement is a laborious step-by-step process in which I make indefensibly stupid mistakes that it takes me an hour to find and fix. At the end of the whole process I feel stupid and frustrated about all the time I've wasted. I hate it.

He talks about beautiful numbers, but I've never seen one. A *beautiful* number? A beautiful sentence maybe. We stare at one another across the kitchen table. He has his gift, I have mine.

Hyde argues that using our gifts appropriately, engaging them fully, revives the soul. It puts that glow on our faces. Using our gifts puts us directly in touch with the elusive, perhaps transcendent source of all gifts and all giftedness, all vitality and meaning, everything about life that is joyous and beautiful and fully *humane*. I submit that lots of people have nothing much in their lives that's anywhere near as much fun as writing is

for writers. I worry that most people just go to work, to a job that's mostly fairly dull routine, and then come home to watch television. Do some chores maybe. Go to bed. Then get up and go to work the next day and start the whole cycle all over again. Having the gifts that we have blesses our entire life beyond what we can truly imagine. We don't realize what a blessing it is to be gifted like this, because we simply can't imagine what life would be like without talents like ours.

We have to respect the mystery that our gift entail, Hyde warns. We have to pay serious attention to the uncanny, paradoxical origin of our talents. We can't reduce our gifts to marketable skills, as if our giftedness really "belonged" to us. Our gifts don't "belong" to us. They belong to the gods, the fairies, the elves, they belong to that mysterious stranger. When words just "come" to us, they come from "Somewhere Else," a dimension "outside" ordinary consciousness. We have to respect that fact, Hyde argues. We have to take it very seriously as a primary fact about the creative life, perhaps the primary fact. Our gifts do not belong to us. They do not belong to the narrow self-seeking ego with all of its obsessive control needs.

Myths and folk tales warn about this repeatedly. Gold left by the elves turns to straw when the recipient tries to count it. A maid peers into a magical barrel of ale that never runs dry; she finds nothing inside but cobwebs, and the barrel never produces another drop. Trying to scrutinize or control or even predict the way in which words will flow from our fingers can stop the flow.

The same thing is true for dancers. That's why dancers are told not to stare at their feet. Musicians are told not to stare at their fingers. Painters are told to look at the canvas, not at their hands. They are told to trust their hands and their eyes. Painters are told to silence the bossy ego and its desire to micromanage each brush stroke inch by inch. In each of these arts, students are told, "Trust yourself." Over and over that same message: trust yourself, trust your gift, go where your gifts take you.

Surely the same is true for writers. We have to trust our gift too. We have to center our souls and listen for that inner voice. Trust is crucial. That trusting openness is vital. So is the humble willingness to be lead forward *by the gift*—which is to say, not by the chapter-outline or the book proposal.

I confess this worries me. I worry that nonfiction book proposals written before the manuscript is finished are exactly this effort to scrutinize and control and predict *in order to sell*. At least that's been my experience. I've learned the hard way that the premature book proposal is dangerous. I had a project destroyed that way, and I've never been able to put them back together again. Shifting to *what will sell*, turning away from the richer question *What do I need to say?* was for me a real disaster. I've never been able to find my way back to that richer question, that question based on a deep trust in my own gifts. As a result, I've become as superstitious as most novelists are about the dangers of even *talking* about my work prematurely.

But that doesn't mean I do without outlines. I always have outlines. I always have stapled pages of notes, binders full of notes, files full of research. Of course. None of us can do without all of that. Musicians and dancers and painters have their background work and planning to do as well.

Nonetheless, our best work comes when we launch out beyond all that rational planning and just *write*. When the flow begins, we go with the flow rather than the outline. In fact, the whole point of planning and outlining is the hope of freeing ourselves to find the right kind of small empty space into which the gift will come, the right kind of silence in which we can hear our own most authentic, most articulate inner voice. Deep in our souls there is a voice that writes with an elegance we <u>don't</u> control, with an elegance that embodies our gift at its most gifted level.

Listen to how Hyde describes this: "An essential portion of any artist's labor is not creation so much as invocation. Part of the work cannot be made, it must be received, and we cannot have this gift except, perhaps, by supplication" (p. 186). Gifts are drawn to our confidence in our gifts, our confidence in our talents, our confidence in the spiritual abundance of what we have been given and our own ability to work with it.

Hyde argues that two things follow from the fact that our talents are a gift. First, our gifts will never be exhausted or worn out by using them. Because our gifts are anchored in the sacred, in the transcendent, in the *beyond* however you name it, they can't be used up. They are not finite or limited. Giving away a poem or a story or an essay—publishing it in some obscure outlet, or some online magazine that can't even pay in

copies, even making your own copies and giving them away to our friends—none of that will deplete the source from which new poems or stories will come. On the contrary. On the contrary.

What will destroy your gift, Hyde warns—his folktales and myths warn-- is hanging onto it until you find some way to *profit* from it. In myths and folktales, the gifted person who refuses to share commonly dies. The death of the selfish person symbolizes the death of the gift itself.

What will destroy your gift is workshopping that one poem or story or novel manuscript all over the country for years, hoping desperately to get it published. *Desperation is destructive.* Clinging to a work is destructive. But trusting ourselves, trusting our gifts, and then sharing freely--that's invigorating.

Y'know, Emily Dickinson made her own hand-copied, hand-stitched books: volume after volume of her polished work. They were discovered in her desk drawer after she died. Hyde would say that's how she kept writing, that's how she kept the well of her own inspiration flowing. She declared work done; she sent gift copies of a few poems to the few people who understood and valued what she was doing. The rest stayed in her drawer. But she kept going: new poems, and more new poems, hundreds and hundreds of them.

We can take her example to heart. We can make our own collections of finished work. Share them, maybe, if we are friends with people who will value and honor the gift that we offer them.

Y'know, I have a three-inch binder of poetry going back decades. Some are finished, some are drafts, all jumbled in there together. I've published a few poems over the years, but I'm really not interested in publishing more. What would it do for me as a poet to put together a few little volumes of poetry just for my own purposes? Just for a few friends, maybe? For some imagined great-granchild?

I'm very tempted to try. I hope I've tempted you to try. Hyde insists that such generosity and clarity of soul will renew the deep well from which our best work comes.

And unlike Emily Dickinson, we have Kinko's. If you want to spend a little more money, you can do a proper print-on-demand self-publishing, and I think for novelists that makes a lot of sense. Novels are big: too many pages for Kinko's binding. Nonfiction books are also too large. But poetry? Short stories? Plays? Small collections of essays? What if I put together a collection of all the lectures I've given at Off Campus over the years?

Why not do something like this? Think of how much fun it might be, what a sense of accomplishment you'd have. Hyde is persuasive on this point: sharing brings our gifts to life even more vibrantly. All of his research is remarkably persuasive: *sharing* is what gifts are all about. Not profits. Our gifts come to us freely, we give them away freely, and that's how the gift itself grows.

I realize how strange this sounds to modern ears: modern economics is built on the principle of *scarcity*. Economic orthodoxy insists that the only things that are valuable are things that are *scarce*. But *our* gifts are abundant and free, and the more we give them away the more freely abundant they become within us. "Gifts that remain gifts," Hyde explains, "can support an affluence of *satisfaction*" (p. 29, italics mine).

Book tours, by contrast, have always left me feeling frazzled and raw and unbearably anxious. Publicists calling every day to report sales figures and ask how interviews went and *worry*. Ick! There's nothing *satisfying* there in the least, except to the worst, the shallowest level of egotism, that inner toddler who wants to be the center of all attention all of the time. Worse yet, all that attention-craving egotism is taken as normal in a world driven by sales and by money and by celebrity-seeking. I was months getting over it, re-establishing my own inner equilibrium.

But week after week I've seen what Hyde calls the "affluence of satisfaction." I've seen it in the Amherst- method writing groups I lead. I'm sure many of you have seen this in your own writing groups. When we discover that other writers respect and admire and enjoy a piece that we have written, when the group works together to understand the vitality of our piece more clearly, then everyone goes home feeling great. Everyone is energized.

And from that energy, everyone grows. Everyone starts writing better. Furthermore, everyone starts reading with richer, more subtle critical judgment, and there's nothing more important to the polishing of our craft than big gains in our ability to read with critical skill. Real literary criticism is a vital skill set for serious writers.

As I argued here a couple of years ago, it takes far greater intellectual literary skill to see what's right about a piece than it does to find fault. Finding fault is simple, and too many writing workshops focus very destructively on fault-finding. Finding gifts, recognizing gifts, calls upon your own gifts at a very high level. Our gift grow when we give them away by reading generously and attentively and with deep professional skill *for someone else*. Freely. For the fun of having that kind of community with a small group of kindred spirits.

There's a second thing that follows from recognizing that our ability to write is a gift, an elusive gift, a gift somehow from the "beyond." It follows, Hyde argues, that our essential gifts can't be bought, and they can't be sold.

I can illustrate his point by shifting focus for a moment to the gifts that musicians have. Consider this: you can buy a ticket to a concert, but you are not buying the giftedness of the performer. You are not even buying the giftedness of the performance. You are buying a seat, and that's all you are buying. Because that's all that can be sold.

But that's why audiences rise to their feet in thunderous applause at the end of a stunning performance. That glorious, transcendent gratitude is proof we have encountered a gift. Even if we buy the performer's CD as we leave, we don't own the musical gift. We have a widget whereby we can re-experience the gift at another time. The gift dwells in the musician, who can only share it with us. And we can only receive it. We don't own it either. What makes a gift a *gift* is that it can only be given away. It can only be *shared*. And so we applaud, accepting and honoring the gift, offering our gift in return, our gift of honor and appreciation and delight. Everybody beams!

Nobody smiles like that standing in the checkout line at WalMart. Not even in the checkout line at Barnes and Noble in December. That's the difference between receiving gifts and buying products. Products can be purchased. Gifts cannot.

And so—what defines me as a writer, what defines you as a writer, is our gift for writing—not the products bearing our names, products offered for sale now and then at [Barnes and Noble]. Whether or not some editor in New York buys one of your manuscripts, then, your gifts are your gifts. Sales figures cannot validate what cannot be sold. Freely sharing is what marks the gifted person as vitally gifted. Sharing. Not sales.

This bring me to a very subtle, very paradoxical point, something Hyde explains very carefully across the whole length of his book. Please listen carefully. Every cultural artifact, every creative gift, is carried by some particular material vehicle: a canvas with paint on it, a CD, a page with words printed on it. A gift has an vehicle of some sort, a vehicle generated by the gifted person. The gift takes some material shape. For us, it's a manuscript, whether manufactured in New Jersey or printed at Kinkos.

These vehicles, these shells or frameworks, are sometimes bought and sold, just as the seats in a concert hall are bought and sold. And that's fine. That's appropriate. An economic market in cultural artifacts provides one way of discovering the gifts of absolute strangers. That's how I found Hyde's book.

There's nothing wrong with the fact that we have this commercial market in cultural artifacts. Our culture is healthier and wiser for having such a thing. So if you can get your work into the commercial market,by all means do so. Our culture desperately needs the arts. We are choking to death on greed and partisanship and pathological individualism. We need the arts more now than ever.

But don't over-invest in any aspect of the publication process. Above all, don't confusing nurturing an developing your gifts with the selling of a manuscript. Confusing the two is terribly dangerous.

Properly nurturing our gifts is crucial, but it's increasingly difficult. It's increasingly difficult because the gift exchange which supports and nurtures the gifts of artists has been swamped by the commercial market of buying and selling. The artist today, the writer today, has to survive despite a lunatic consumerist culture in which money is commonly regarded as the measure of all meaning and all value in our lives. We face

tremendous, often unconscious cultural pressure to believe that no endeavor makes any sense at all unless it makes money—ideally, enough money to make us famous.

Working without pay on your writing, working without pay for the years it takes to turn raw talent into finished work, then making a few gift copies at Kinko's—all of that is utterly incomprehensible in a consumerist culture. But it's the nurture than our gifts desperately need.

Freely sharing our work outside of commercial channels—as happens more and more easily these days—that's wildly anathema to economic orthodoxy.

So the question before us today is whether we have the courage to be incomprehensible heretics in a consumerist culture in which money is the One True God. Are we threatened by that woman in her blue silk suit? Or can we take a breath and find it in our hearts to feel pity for anyone with a soul that small?

It seems to me that we have a big choice to make here. We can let ourselves be depressed by the prospect of more than half a million new books each year and who knows how many competing websites and television shows and movies and what-not, all competing for attention. We can feel dwarfed and helpless in the face of that overwhelming competition.

Or we can look squarely at all of it, and logically conclude from the numbers that this really does set us free. It sets us free fully to receive *and to share* our biggest gift in this life, which the gifted delight we feel sitting at the keyboard. Maybe we will eventually be published, (and maybe not,) and if we are published maybe our work will sell hundreds of thousands of copies (and maybe not); but really now, ***that's*** not the point of being a writer. That's not the reason we are writers.

Writing is the reason to be a writer.

Let me leave you with that thought until next week.