

Keynote speech given at the New England Young Writers Conference, Bread Loaf, Ripton, VT, May 2008

It's a pleasure and an honor to be addressing you today. I'm glad that you've made it here to this mountain that is on the way to nowhere yet is a center of the scattered universe of writers. Where you are, aside from the hills and quaint wooden buildings, is with your tribe—other people who care about writing as much as you do. You can in that sense exhale in a way you might not exhale in calculus class.

I attended a public high school back there in the twentieth century that never once asked for a piece of creative writing in its English classes. I diagramed sentences and more sentences. Sometimes I have dreams of sentence diagrams, beautiful parallelograms with phrases like “transitive clause” and “gerund fragment” hovering over the earth. People stare up at them and murmur appreciatively. The joys of pointless grammar—“Do numbers one through twenty”—were my lot but not creative writing.

That was, however, no big deal. As I recall it, the adult world didn't try very hard to give me anything I needed or wanted. It was up to me to take it, which I did. I started writing in high school and never looked back. When I do look back, I can see that high school was a mixture of pleasant and hellish. Hanging out with friends was pleasant as we did the usual adolescent things—drive around and look for something to do while telling ourselves we were the coolest guys driving around looking for something to do. Dealing with my home life—my mother dying of cancer, my father remote, my sister upset, my grandmother not-so-quietly paranoid—the typical happy American family—was hellish. I had no one to talk to about what I was going through, so I wrote. I wrote, first of all, to confirm that I was alive and that my feelings were valid. I wrote to go elsewhere in my head. I wrote to connect with something larger than I was. I wrote to send messages to myself. I wrote because instinctively I loved language and literature. I wrote because there seemed to be some hope in writing—a reaching toward the world—that I couldn't locate in my day to day life. I couldn't articulate that hope but I knew it mattered.

Despite all these complex motives that go into writing and that vary from person to person, people insist on boiling my writing down to some simple gist as in one I hear all the time, “Are your poems sad because I don't want to hear any sad poems” These people are supposedly adults but they instinctively flinch before any writing that might pry open the door of a less than have-a-good-day, don't-tell-me-what-I-don't-want-to-know attitude. I confess to you that my entire life as a writer has been a struggle with these people. They, so to speak, call the shots in that the daily ways of society are about being cheerful, functional and efficient, even when babbling about nothing on a cell phone. My enterprise, on the other hand, has been to think twice, feel twice, to—as a writer friend of mine likes to put it—go deeper, wilder, further. Joy may lurk in those places—there is a great deal of it in writing a really good sentence, much less a whole paragraph or stanza of such sentences—but sadness may too. Hard things—to say nothing of the catastrophes that have marked the news in the past week or so—happen. Watching my mother

die inch by inch was hard yet if I didn't face up to it, what was I doing? I didn't want to live by pretending. I wanted to live by living.

Yet I live—and many of you live already—at a different angle to life because we are writers. We believe in the force and primacy of language. We believe in the value of articulation, of language that goes somewhere beyond, “Like I went to Breadloaf like and it was like okay like. What's like for dinner? Like meatloaf? Like again?” As our belief in language sags and flutters in the winds of mass technology, political gibberish and double-speak that would seem to relieve us of the need to communicate much less revel in language, the traits that go with being a writer seem worthy of imparting. A world that refers to a “mercenary” as a “contractor” needs all the help it can get. I want to list a few of those writerly traits today. This won't be long because I'm a poet and anything over a page or two looks like *War and Peace* or *The Iliad* to me.

The foremost of these traits is that writers, particularly those who stay with the endeavor for decades in the face of let us say less than universal acclaim, tend to be what I call “h and o,” which is to say “haunted and obsessed.” That sounds like fun doesn't it? You go downstairs for breakfast and your mom says, “How are you doing?” You reply while reaching for the box of corn flakes, “Oh the usual, Mom, haunted and obsessed. I hung out last night with Sylvia Plath and Jack Kerouac. Pass the milk, please.” And yet that is the writer's state. The words don't write themselves. The great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz believed that writers were mediums. He believed that the words came from who knew where and that he was transcribing them. It sounds mystical because it is.

In any case—mystical or otherwise—the writer is haunted in the sense that none of us have to be here on earth. We happen to be here and we tend to take for that granted. Yet many an egg, indeed most eggs, never sees the light of day. Nor did the planet have to be here, that evolution that took billions of years to get to this life-sustaining point. Again, we take life and the earth's duration for granted and that serves us well enough in our daily lives as we move into more important areas such as where we are going to go to college or whether there is any ice cream in the freezer. Writing, however, is always a reminder that we should not take anything for granted—that the whole fact of our being here is very contingent and, as we well know, not forever. This condition is conducive to writing because writing is rooted in awe that anything exists. There is always a sort of primary, Genesis-like creativity that goes with writing. Every one of those nouns you use was not fashioned solely by you. They refer to all manner of existences—vegetable, mineral, fleshly, spiritual, emotional, intellectual. You summon them up but you do not control them. They have their own lives, much as language exists in its own right. You do, however, as a writer, create something with those seemingly simple sounds—girl, night, snow, table—and that creating—the voice that gave you *King Lear* or *Oedipus Rex* or *The Sound and the Fury* or *The Stranger*—came from the haunted side of the street.

Obsession—the other half of the dynamic duo—is usually viewed negatively. If you say someone is obsessed it usually means that he or she is some sort of loser who literally lives in the basement, exists on pickles and cupcakes and stays up till two in the morning listening to Frank

Zappa records. To me that description is not negative. In fact I love that person because that person is going where his or her feelings lead him or her. A writer who is on the fifth draft of a novel or the twentieth draft of a poem or short story is obsessed in the sense that he or she is on what I call an emotional errand and won't stop until that errand is completed. The dog wants to be fed, the bills want to be paid, the kids want to get to their Little League game and the writer keeps writing. In this sense, the writing chooses the writer as much as the writer chooses the writing. This can be unsettling, because part of us wants to know beforehand, but it should be unsettling. One writes because one doesn't know. If one knew beforehand, then there would be no point in the writing. Whenever one picks up a pen or sits at a keyboard (or that antique known as a typewriter), the desire to move through seeming impossibility into possibility presents itself. It's a heady, exciting and scary moment.

It's no surprise then that a crucial trait of being a writer is fearlessness—not in the sense of climbing water towers when you are blind drunk, which is foolishness not fearlessness—but in the sense of following your nose and letting it take you where it takes you. It goes without saying that a writer must be honest, again not in the sense of spilling every secret inside you—your stealing a quarter from your mother's purse in the third grade is not earthshaking—but in the sense of owning who you are and standing up for that. You know that many people—peers, family, teachers among others—want you to be a certain way—get this grade and go to that school. A certain of the time you may oblige them but there are other times, especially when a person is engaged with the innermost workings of imagination and emotion when you shouldn't oblige anyone but yourself. Honesty resides in listening to what the inner voice is telling you and not censoring yourself. This means more than feeling free to write obscenities. It means connecting with what you only partially grasp and pulling it into the light of consciousness. It means trusting imagination. It means going beyond and through what should be into what is. In a world in which people are paid to spin every utterance so that it seems more and less than it is, a writer is someone who is un-spinning words, who is unashamed of the complexity of truth, who is not interested in dumbing down for the benefit of the sound bite.

The writer Dwight MacDonalD once characterized the United States as a “herd of individuals.” It's an apt phrase. We give lip service to individuality while we buy one mass product after another as if shopping somehow distinguished us as human beings. Writing creatively, however, is a true act of individuality for it lodges deeply in the sensibility of the individual person. All those subjective predilections we have as human beings—scrambled or over easy, winter or summer, Mozart or Mariah Carey (there's a choice)—are magnified for writers and for good reason. Writers are passionate about their tastes because those tastes inform their own writing and hence who they are. The poet Joseph Brodsky used to talk about the intense literary discussions in the then Soviet Union in the 1950s that centered around issues such as whether one preferred Hemingway or Faulkner. Friendships ended if a Hemingway could not see eye to eye with a Faulkner. This was in a society in which materially very little was available to people so they went inward with a passion. Perhaps such tiffs seem ridiculous. After all, who cares and can't we like both of them? Of course, we can but the issue for writers is always the acknowledgment of how deep feeling runs and how important it is that the writer owns that

feeling. Having no preferences is tantamount to indifference. No true writer is indifferent. Indifference is for the world of those standardized responses that tests love so much and that mean so little. SAT stands for Standardized Attentiveness Trick. Those tests will never discover a writer because writing is about sensibility, a place where there are no right answers. There are only your answers and they matter.

Accordingly when a writer enters a library or a bookstore his or her antennae are up and active. You are as a writer not only what you write but what you read. Typically you cannot read enough—not in terms of quantity but in terms of what will feed you as a writer. I think of James Baldwin that crucial American writer who educated himself in the New York City Public Library and who emerged from that reading with as deep and fearless a sensibility as a writer could have. He did not go to college or to a special high school. He had no advantages. There was no Young Writers Conference for him. He had his own love of language, however, and that stoked his reading. One thinks of the young man reading Charles Dickens and living in the not-so-quiet hell of his home in Harlem. It wasn't escapism on Baldwin's part, however. I would argue it was the opposite. By reading about Victorian London he was entering a world as fully realized as the world around him that strutted and shouted and moaned every day on the streets of New York. By reading Dickens he became James Baldwin, a writer who despite his apparent disadvantages had no fear of entering into the darkest corners of the soul and emerging with the truth. Reading made him a writer.

As crucial as the reading is for a writer, one can go even further. I have been not only reading poems more or less daily for decades but also I have been writing down poems by hand for decades. I do this in order to make the words in a sense my own, to get the words into my blood stream. By writing the words down one slows the writing down so that one re-experiences how the poem was written—word by word and comma by comma. One enters the writing from the inside, from how it was generated by the author. One dwells for a time inside the piece of writing rather than peering at it from the outside. Though the story may be apocryphal, I have heard that the gonzo journalist and shrewd lunatic Hunter S. Thompson, author of among other works the almost immortal *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (though I am a Johnny Depp fan, the book, as is often the case, is superior to the movie), when he was learning his craft wrote out the entirety of *The Great Gatsby* word by word. That is a way to learn what a sentence is and how a novel is made. We learn, after all, by doing and writing down what moves us is a form of doing. After all, once upon a time monks sat and copied out manuscripts so that they would not be lost. Writers can write down others' work so that the work will not be lost for the writer's own education and insight. Musicians—probably some of you—learn by listening and then playing what they've heard. Writers learn by getting the words into them and gradually making them their own.

Perhaps this trait is the most important of all—the words are held in common yet the writer must somehow make them his own. The wonderful Beat poet Gregory Corso used to make up words—for instance, “autumnographer,” “indoomable,” and “deathonic”—are coinages of Corso's. What great words! Imagine putting down for your vocation on a standardized form, “autumnographer.” And Lewis Carroll, as you all know, made up numerous words in

“Jabberwocky.” This inventive avenue is scintillating and I urge you to try it but it’s the ones that already are in the dictionary that really take work. Consider those words that are battered daily until they barely exist. “How was the picnic.” Answer: “It was nice.” “Nice?” What are we to do with “Nice?” Or “Fine” or “Strange” or “Weird” or “Beautiful” or how many other words that have lost their texture and their pungency. Writers are evaluators of all the words and as part of that evaluation are ever on the lookout for the ones that are on life support and need somehow to brought back to their original force. It’s hard. I can’t say I’ve done anything stellar with “nice” beyond an occasional sarcasm. But the word is there—festering in my word hoard—and who knows, maybe tomorrow it will emerge with something like precision in a piece of writing. This caring about words is a self-imposed labor but in its way it’s as real as the most real manual labor. I have cut down a lot of trees over the years and the work that goes into choosing the right adjective is as every bit as substantial as the labor of the chainsaw. It’s much quieter but it’s just as intense.

No one sees that work—it’s personal, between the writer and the page—and that’s where I want to end. If you crave recognition, if you crave being a public figure, you may not be cut out for this game. Lying in bed and wondering about the difference between “little” and “small” is not going to get you on the front page of anything. You may have some superlative imaginative hoodoo that takes you into the first ranks of the recognized but then tomorrow comes around and you are replaced by a race horse or a celebrity going into rehab. As far as the media are concerned writers are another event and events all wind up in the oblivion of yesterday. Yet writing isn’t yesterday. Good writing is always current and writers believe that and live in that belief. That’s why it’s good to be among writers at a place such as this one. That’s why it’s good to believe in writers as people who are not better than other people but who are people who are trying to make the words their own, who are trying to bring together the enormous forces of language and life as a human being lives it. It’s an arduous task but an exciting one, too. I don’t think any of the people who are teaching you this weekend would have it any other way. You are fortunate to be here with them. Thank you.