

For me the first fact about writing is that it takes place in solitude. My sense of solitude has to be nearly complete. For this reason during my career I have worked at night. I usually start at midnight or after and work until my friend wakes up or about 6:30am. (Since I have been sick the last three years, my schedule has been different but that difference is an anomaly in a thirty-year period.) It has been my observation that this solitude is the hardest part of writing for women, who are trained to be thinking of others and never to be alone. In learning to write, I had to develop a sense that writing was more important than anything else—no person or conflict or tragedy except dying and death could get in the way. I had to break in myself all the habits associated with taking care of or feeling responsible for others. In the early years working at night solved the big problem of being interrupted by people of any sort, friends or repair people or the million-and-one incursions made on a woman at home during a normal day. I had to stand against a tide that said I was a woman at home and therefore responsible for the apartment or house. I had thought that once I published a book, there would be no question of the importance of what I was doing. To this day I have to fight for the solitary quiet I require in order to write. Friends know that I am up all night and call on the phone. There are radio shows I feel I must do and frequent trips out of town. I find diversions a form of weakness, a refusal to be inside one's own process. Interruptions break my concentration. There is a kind of isolation that is synonymous with writing, the period of writing being an experience of extreme privacy, austere, spartan, one alone with one's feeling of being driven, also feelings of necessity and desire. One wants the company of words, not people.

The kind of consciousness involved in writing is not ordinary consciousness nor is it simply a combination of imagination, experience, and intellect. Somehow one's brain becomes bigger and one can feel it extending beyond the walls of one's room into an area past the boundaries of the normal. This is not just what one metaphorically calls the subconscious, because it is bigger; it is bigger than one's own life. When writers say that characters take on a will of their own or that a nonfiction text came to them in a fit of inspiration, they are being lazy in refusing to try to explain what happens inside of them. Writers don't know exactly how they create, because their brains operate on transformed principles when they write. It sounds elitist and anti-democratic to posit a special way of knowing and yet writers have always been regarded as having a shamanistic dimension, a way of reaching past themselves into something truer than they can know as individuals. When writers are revered it is usually because of this shamanistic element; the writer has managed to tell a truth, whatever the genre, bigger than she or he. When that truth is a new truth, the writer is in trouble. When the new truth is an enduring one, the writer has a future past death, especially if the new truth is expressed in new prose.

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust speculates on why audiences walked out on Beethoven when his works were first played. Was he ahead of his time? Did people not know how to listen and for that reason perceived the music as noise? Proust postulates that an artist's work teaches people how to hear or see the new truth in what seems at least to be a new form or an inept or chaotic use of an old form. He postulates that this takes time and that this time accounts for the phenomenon of contemporaneously rejected work achieving a kind of eternal eminence, deeply loved, deeply appreciated for its both formal and expressive dimensions. The bad news for the artist is that one must depend on death and time.

There is a correlation between new truths and money: new truths don't earn any. The writer who is original is in a life-and-death struggle with the market, the literary establishment, and the more general public. There is nothing romantic about poverty or the struggle to keep writing. The market pretty much pummels writers to artistic death. The familiar truth—or more egregiously the familiar lie—is worth money: people will buy the books that express what they already know or think they know. In the United States the happy ending is both *de rigueur* and seemingly inevitable; without the happy ending any book is doomed to marginalization or obscurity. There has to be

a spirit of optimism, an appreciation of things as they are. In Amerika the sad books, the angry books, the brilliantly radical books are rejected by a public that wants to know how to be loved or thin, which is the same thing. The day-to-day living in penury, or having one's work stigmatized, drives numbers of writers into the academy where, in my opinion, writers do not belong. Other writers are pushed into commercially viable work. Others stop writing. This may be the Malthusian ethic at work in the realm of the creative but one wants people to have what they need to do what they want, excepting the snuff film made with artistic brilliance. I call the common process of destroying writers with talent "free market" or "laissez faire" censorship. Money takes the place of a state police force. And for most people the fact that men and women are equal will always be a new truth. This is a deep new truth, not a slight one; and it needs to be embodied in social policy, the economy, and the wider culture. Against all odds women assert a metaphysical equality—an equality of being—but back down in the face of changing the material practice of inequality. We think we don't have the right, but we have it if we take it. It is the taking of it that is impolite, anti-feminine, and widely resented.

Any book, including those created by writers with the most art-for-art's-sake ethic—consider Flaubert, for instance, someone who insisted on the purely formal as the essence of creation—has a politics to it, though not necessarily a sectarian politics. Any overt political opinion is likely to remove a book from the category of art in people's perceptions. When we were fighting the Soviets this was not true of Solzhenitsyn; but who reads his current work now and how can one even find it if there are no readers for it? My values honor the political. I recently heard Nadine Gordimer read from her most recent work, *The Pick-up*, and thought that since she had lost her life's cause, which was anti-apartheid activism, her own writing is diminished. I have a sense that the influence of the nineteenth-century Russians, especially Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, has ebbed. In a country feasting on self-help books neither Dostoevsky nor Tolstoy need apply and literature itself, its history and breadth, is lost.

I write as an explicitly political dissident. I try to convey the experience of being a woman, especially a sexually abused woman. In everything I do I feel a necessity and a responsibility: a necessity to analyze and convey the condition of tortured or injured or exploited women; a responsibility to convey the emotions and deprivations caused by sexual abuse. I especially feel a responsibility to the abused women I know. I care deeply about the roles of empathy and imagination embodied in the prose I write; and I care about the aesthetic dimension of words as such. Yet I write with a cold heart. This is one way of saying that I take no prisoners; and that I disdain sentimentality. I take what I know in the writer's condition of heightened consciousness and I find the words for it. Deeply influenced by music, I note the way Bach conveys ideas or the way country music tells stories or the way the blues convey sadness, grief, and rebellion. I model my writing on the music I listen to and I always listen to music when I work. I believe that prose should have the qualities of the best radical poetry. My early models were Lorca, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Shelley, Dostoevsky, the Beats, especially Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan, and James Baldwin. I grew up in a pre-feminist era; it was hard to find a serious book by a woman, though I feasted on Margaret Mitchell and the Nancy Drew books. As feminism began to transform society, including publishing, I delighted in George Eliot, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Jean Rhys; but by then I was an adult so their influence on me as a writer was more subtle and had to do with sustaining my own ambition to write. The current obscurity of much feminist writing created over the last thirty years has a great deal to do with men's fairly systematic refusal to read it and to cite it, except in ridicule and opposition. Writing lives when other writers use it, when it influences the way they write. Better the dead Hemingway than a living woman writer.

This leads inevitably to a consideration of what it means to have a public life as a writer. Writers need a particular kind of shelter from the brewing storms concerning one's work. One needs to walk into the work room alone, without the braying of critics of any stripe. One needs a sense of the sacredness of the place, its uniqueness and primacy in one's life. One needs not just the physical reality of being alone but a mental sense of both receptivity and entitlement: receptivity to the deeper consciousness writing itself creates and the entitlement to take this time, this place for what drives one, the tangling with language. Yet publishing is a public event, or it should be, depending on

what publishers are up to in a given season.

The process of publishing can be a tormenting one. There are bad editors, which is most of them; bad publicity people, which is most of them; and bad faith, the requirement that the book sell itself. Once out in the world one must become accustomed to the bad reading of most reviewers and conflict with readers and other writers, though writers in person tend to be civil to each other as each recognizes the difficulty of the undertaking. I think about the shockingly awful contemporaneous reviews of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, after which Hardy said he would never write another novel; and he did not. It is no accident that these two books are his masterpieces.

It is almost as hard to come to terms with adulation. To read from the book into the character of the writer is a mistake, one that the honest writer deconstructs. Few writers are as good as their books. Yet those who idolize a given writer will both romanticize and objectify the writer as a hero writing in the face of privation or insult or disparagement or apathy. There are good selfish reasons for refusing the consolations of idol worship: it interferes with one's subjective sense of privacy; it weakens the resolve to be alone in order to do one's work; it creates distortion in the way one sees one's work. In other words, it can make the writer soft and sentimental and too influenced by a carnivorous desire to be adored. One must close the door and shut out one's friends as well as one's enemies.

My own sojourn in the world of public discourse has taught me an almost monastic discipline; writing comes first and with it endurance. Endurance is probably the hardest goal, the ability to keep working regardless of economic circumstances or the hostilities of the public or the antagonism of the publishing industry itself. Yet most writers, certainly including myself, need readers in order to endure. Readers mean money; but one also needs a sense of dialogue with the culture, even if the culture screams back "Shut up." One needs time to see the influence of one's work. One needs patience. One needs resolve. And one needs arrogance, the unchanging belief that one's work matters, that the world is better off with it than without it. If the world's response to one's work is contempt, then one had better form a healthy sense of contempt for the ways of the world. If the world's response is anger, one is entitled to be angry back. In either case one need acknowledge the feeling of efficacy, of having made dent in the self-satisfied public. Those who tell one that they needed one's work in order to live must be noticed, listened to, out of a humbling respect and because they are inevitably those who are deprived or hurt by some social outrage: white supremacy, woman hating, or homophobia, for instance. Sometimes a book can save a life. The notion that the individual reader is not responsible for the injuries done to her has authority in print; when the pain, discipline, and commitment of the writer meet the pain, generosity, and imagination of the reader, the published work itself can be redemptive.

There is still an astonishing double standard for the woman writer. She can write romances and self-help books, but high literature or visionary nonfiction remain out of bounds except for the token. Her tone of voice must be refined or faux-elegant or self-deprecating. The book has to kowtow to male power without in any way replicating it or biting off a chunk. The demands of style—rejecting the radical or original—are twinned with the demands of content—no bitterness, no suffering, no anger, which would get rid of ninety-some percent of the male writing that matters. Themes are still limited: sex and love but no rock 'n' roll. Publishers enforce manners for the female writer and the majority-female audience of consumers simply cannot improve themselves enough to pass on the next self-help book. There is a lot of responsibility here to be laid at the feet of female readers, who cannot bear the thought of being sprung from the intellectual ghetto of second-class readership; but even more responsibility hangs on the writer who condescends to write for this audience.

Of course, what one writes and how one writes depends on the writer's experience, her temperament or sensibility, and what she has read. Reading is an integral part of writing: not just the love of the prose but the love of the book as such. Reading teaches what is possible; it inculcates creative ambition and finds a sympathetic strain in the writer that the writer can incorporate into her own work. My friends tell me that they like reading what they call "the minor writers," because one can see easily how they composed or put their work together whereas the great

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writers are mysteries; the formal aspects of their work seem almost magical and one can barely find a seam. I find inspiration in the acknowledged great writers, both male and female, because I think they teach one to go beyond one's self-acknowledged limitations, to have big ambitions, and to have an unmitigated respect for the beauty of craft. They also teach one an attitude, implicit in all their prose, fiction or nonfiction: I am here and this is what I write. The writing has to seem inevitable, even if it is, in contemporary terms, a failure and a disgrace.

While temperament and sensibility determine a great deal about how a writer will write—the process, the method, the form of the work itself—there are unbridgeable gaps in experience. As the Irish poet Rita Anne Higgins wrote: “Some people have been poor/ And some people have not.” The conditions of early childhood poverty or homelessness or sexual abuse can create a schism between reader and writer in both directions: the woman reading in the hope of finding her own experiences in the creative work; the writer writing from a position that the middle classes abhor or find distant or strange, much as if a book were written in a foreign language. Women readers and writers who make their way into the middle classes most often do not want anything that reminds them of their perilous ascent. Women still feel ashamed about having been raped or battered or prostituted and keep covering up the crimes, which means they have little interest in reading or writing about them. The consequences of being a non-bourgeois or anti-bourgeois writer are grave; one gives up a large part of a potential readership. The books that do well on themes of sexual abuse are the ones couched in a particularly and peculiarly Amerikan optimism: woman triumphs over rape. They also tend to be personal true stories that do not say anything or much about the larger society. They blame one rapist and not the rape culture that produced rape as a plausible way to express anger at women. There is no indictment of the pro-rape culture in which we live. Americans seem to like criticisms and denunciations of the government, the media, and corporations; but nothing that enters the realm of the intimate—and poverty, sexual abuse, and homelessness even in the third person are intimate, distasteful, and scarring. The sense of there being a women's movement into which the individual who is hostile to a pro-rape culture can disappear and still feel powerful has changed: everyone now has to stand up for herself, an overwhelming responsibility in a country that continues to blame the victim. The ideological axiom of not wanting to be labeled a victim helps to stop women who have been victimized from coming forward and organizing politically, the only cure for victim status: it turns victims into fighters for justice.

Finally, writing is a way of life. It requires commitment, passion, and discipline. It is not an easy way of life but it is an important way of life: even those of us who do not have big sales or make enough money have an influence, slow and simmering, on the larger world. I've been told by writer friends that some writers like writing and some writers like publishing. I like writing; I like it more than love, including enduring love. Anything less and one should become something else. I have not emphasized the joy and pleasure of writing nor the freedom it brings; but why else would one do it?