

## *Don't Mind the Handwriting*



*Richard Ambacher*

John Ciardi often said he did it because he couldn't kick cats.

Ernest Hemingway often spoke of wanting to write one true sentence.

Rita Mae Brown says she doesn't know why she does it but never imagined doing anything else.

The reasons for being a creative writer or exercising one's imagination vary. But from a psychological point of view, the act of writing is similar for all. It imposes great demands upon writers to reach for essential truths. And when what has been written falls short, writers will often tear up their manuscripts in frustration. It's almost as if a religious censor had camped on their shoulders during the creative act and threatened eternal damnation if they didn't tell the truth about the humanity they discovered about people while writing.

When I was young, I once asked a writer with thirty years of writing experience if the act of writing got any easier the more you did it.

He thought for a moment, then replied with a sigh, "No, but I cross out faster."

Why was he crossing out? Initially, we think of crossing out as a matter of editing, a kind of technical change. However, when we go past garden variety correction for spelling and grammar errors, what are we crossing out in the act of creativity? T. S. Eliot hinted at it when in the middle of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* he states: “ ‘That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant at all.’ ”

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How do you sculpt a horse? The apocryphal answer attributed to Michelangelo and every sculptor since is, “Take a block of wood (granite, marble, clay) and chisel away everything that isn’t a horse.” The answer suggests an eidetic imagery cauterized within the artist’s brain as a kind of template from which the sculpture is modeled.

The creative writer works in an opposite manner. The paper (now perhaps a metaphor for a video screen) starts blank. The writer’s task is to fill the page with words that will bring the reader to the same mental image the writer started with. Or if not that precise mental image, then one that creates the same kind of feeling and emotional context. Writers speak of the moment of discovery they hope their readers will make while reading their works. Writers, during their moments of creativity, frequently encounter that same kind of discovery. The act of discovering keeps the process of writing alive for both writer and reader.

Most of the discoveries writers make deal with aspects of being human or, more precisely, defining what it is that comprises humanity for them and their characters. One of the most moving stories I’ve read was written by Michael Stephens. It is about a bag lady who lives a kind of zombie existence for no apparent reason. As the author peels the onion that is a person’s character, his story shows how the death of the woman’s only son in the boxing ring sent her into the free fall that turned her into a bag lady. He was boxing to earn enough money to improve the quality of her life.

Stephens told me he wrote the story to find out why she was a bag lady in the first place. He felt compelled to know. Reading the story, we feel the same compulsion.

It seems the discovery of the humanity of each of us lies behind the act of creative writing. Whenever I've written well, I can point to a moment when my characters did something surprising to me, something I hadn't anticipated or planned. In breaking free from my control, the humanity of my characters asserted itself. From then on, my crossing out was focused only on the essential question of whether or not the characters were being true to their own humanity. Good writers do not censor at this point; they're too imbued with the discovery of human perspective to care what it reveals about themselves. Authors may delay their revelation until they have it right, but they rarely destroy their characters. It's only a dying Eugene O'Neill—who knows he will never get it right because he's running out of time—who will destroy manuscripts.

The stories about O'Neill's last days of writing are hauntingly similar. He would enter his office early each day, spend the morning writing, and emerge, his eyes filled with tears, around half past noon each day. What truths he was creating were obviously disturbing, but their insistence to be heard struck him in a particularly compelling way. *Long Day's Journey into Night* has proven equally compelling for audiences ever since. Other plays in O'Neill's planned sequence about the history of that Irish immigrant family he didn't get right and destroyed.

After a disastrous opening of one of Tennessee Williams' plays, he threatened to quit writing forever. "Forever" lasted a week because he too found compulsive reasons for returning to his typewriter to explore humanity. His explorations produced *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hat Tin Roof*, and other great plays. Fortunately, the failure of *A Battle of Angels* didn't end his writing career.

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When I was in third grade, I told my family I was going to write a novel about the German battleship *Bismarck* that had just been sunk off the coast of Argentina. When I showed them the first pages of this masterpiece, several family critics were encouraging. My grandmother, however, was disdainful about the quality of my handwriting and told me I would have to use better handwriting if I ever hoped to get published. Even then I looked at her askance. Didn't she understand that handwriting has nothing to do with it? Thirty years later, I wrote a poem about her dying in which I discovered that she still didn't understand what it takes to be a writer, but that her understanding wasn't really essential.

On the other hand, I don't want to suggest that creative writers are so special that they are to be revered simply because they write. If anything, writers would be more likely to say theirs is a compulsion they find unable to shake. If they don't write, they feel guilty. If they don't write well and honestly, they feel as if they've betrayed a trust. But nowhere will you discover a precise moment when a person is initiated into the role of writer. I don't even know when it happened for me. I know it was before I wrote a novella in lieu of a book report my sophomore year in high school. But even then, I felt somewhat guilty if I didn't work at writing on a daily basis.

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Perhaps the greatest purgatory for a writer is to be blocked. Writer's block can lead to dire consequences, such as depression and even suicide; on a daily basis it eats at the writer, creating a tremendous sense of loss. A recent article in *The New York Times Book Review* suggested that Hemingway's suicide was preordained when he was unable to complete successfully what was posthumously published as *The Garden of Eden*. In it, the young writer is unable to write that second sentence of the day. Hemingway's description of writer's block reads with frightening clarity because, Frederick Busch says, it tolls Hemingway's own death as a writer.

And if one's death as a writer occurs, can life itself last very much longer? For Hemingway, the answer became no. He wrote one further work, *The Old Man and the Sea*, a story about coming to grips with death and old age, and realized that's all there was.

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What makes writers different from non-writers is that writers are more curious. When a hawk circles a field, we can get many messages from the circling. We can ignore some of them. We can focus on some. And writers will go from there to a protracted attempt to discover why they would notice that hawk in the first place. Or the screech of a taped voice on an answering machine can lead to other speculations beyond the message of the moment. From such speculations can come a short story, a novel, a play or a poem. Things have a way of working out in an unpredictable way.

In the act of writing, writers often reach a self-hypnotic state in which the reality they are creating looms more real than anything experienced before. The people and situations are more vivid, and the so-called real world recedes past the boundary of awareness. In this state, combinations of visions synthesize into new visions, new realities. At the end of the writing period, hours have passed without notice. But the meta-reality of the writing lingers.

The sensations of taste and touch and smell, the experience of sound and sight, the welling up of the psychological whole combine to produce an awareness writers are able to write about. They cross out when the writing falls short of the truth of that transcendence. They struggle until they get it right in the writing. They stop the struggle and the writing when the transcendence or the correct words continually elude them.

Ultimately, like compulsive gamblers who frequent the crooked game, writers know they're hooked on the need for action. Whether rigged against them or not, writing remains

the only game in town. If they can't get the action, they'd rather not settle for something else.

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Writers aim at targets. I hit the following targets during some of my writing sessions. They weren't always the ones I was shooting at, but that's another story.

*A New Pair of Glasses*

The old woman, her legs quivering involuntarily,  
Sat, lost in the recesses of her chair.  
Her frail body had withered under the onslaught  
Of eroding time. Now there was only skin  
Stretched taut across her jutting bones  
Without the cushion of flesh.

She smiled. A series of creases criss-crossed  
Her gaunt face from the effort.  
Her lone tooth wobbled as she talked,  
Drifting between past and present  
As if there were no difference  
Between the two. Perhaps for her  
There wasn't. She faced only the wait  
For the ultimate blending of the two.

She was tied to a chair so she wouldn't fall again.  
She had fallen once (or was it twice?), victim to a stroke.  
But she had survived, if living tied to a chair  
Or to a bed can be a reasonable facsimile  
Of independence and mobility.

"Time," she said, "time is the hardest part.  
It goes so slowly." The shadows had lengthened  
Outside the synthetic sameness  
Of her air-conditioned hospital room,  
But she was unaware of the muted hints of night.

"If I could only read..." she mused. "But the print is bum. It blurs.

I guess I need a new pair of glasses."

For eighty-five years she had been needing things...  
For the rest of her life  
She would continue to know want.

"A new pair of glasses..." She smiled across  
The fading mist of a pleasant memory....  
"Oh, we used to have such good times...  
Such good times when we were together."  
Her grandson, embarrassed by his inadequacy  
To bridge the widening gap between generations,  
Nodded his agreement, trying desperately  
To recall one of those good times,  
Grasping for one memory that held an emotion  
That would elevate their relationship above  
Perfunctory duty. His mind was as vacant as hers.

"Have you ever married?" "Oh, yes."  
"I had forgotten. Have I ever met your wife?" "Yes, many  
times."

She smiled again, embarrassed by her age  
And all the failures that it presented  
As she adjusted her hospital gown  
Across her flabby legs.

"It's hard to be modest here."  
He nodded to her, trying to reassure her  
That modesty was not expected, but failed  
To convey the essence of his message.

The nurse came and lifted her back to bed,  
Tying her down to the rails at the side.

"Is there anything you need?" he asked.

“No. Only a new pair of glasses.  
If I could have a new pair of glasses,  
I could read. It’d help to pass the time. But the print is  
bum.”

Later that night, during the nether time  
When night blends into dawn,  
She died, convinced a new pair of glasses  
Was the only thing she had to be concerned about.

*Hawk Sestina*

The hawk, sighting death and decay, circled  
Stealthily, high above the vacant field,  
As if tethered. Beneath its ominous  
Shadow animals paused in place,  
Contemplating their potential for life  
Beyond that afternoon of hungry hawk.

The dead deer no longer cared what hawk  
Or others did to his carcass circled  
By dying blood, the last effort of his life.  
The carrion appeal had brought the field  
To life. New scavengers raced to that place,  
Balancing the sky’s sense of ominous.

We confuse foreboding and ominous,  
Anticipating evil from the hawk  
Whose instinct brings him soaring to this place.  
The hawk envisioned nothing, but circled  
A delicious meal lying in the field,  
Just knowing this cycle sustains its life.

We humans often mistake the body for life.  
We proscribe death and read an ominous  
Message in this desecration. The field  
Accepts its passive role, hosting the hawk

And the maggot equally. The circled  
Body knows nothing of this act or place.

In time we will revisit this same place  
And assign it no special part in life,  
Only recalling the hawk that circled  
The dead deer, forgetting the ominous  
Feeling it engendered today. The hawk  
Will fly freely and find another field.

But can we freely explore our new field,  
Ignoring the debasement that takes place  
In our lives? Will we imitate the hawk  
And accept the natural part of life?  
Or will we see shadows of ominous  
Proportions and find our lives are circled?

When in the field will we recoil from life  
And try to place the blame on ominous  
Thoughts of hawk eating the deer it circled?