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WHEN THE REWARDS CAN BE SO GREAT

ESSAYS ON WRITING & THE WRITING LIFE

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SCOTT KORB

The Courage to Sound like Ourselves

*There are zillions of ideas out there—they stream by like neutrons.
What makes somebody pluck forth one thing—a thing you’re going to be
spending as much as three years with? If I went down a list of all the
pieces I ever had in The New Yorker, upward of ninety percent would
relate to things I did when I was a kid.*

—John McPhee

This craft essay has its roots in the exchange of a writing packet with a low-residency MFA student a couple of semesters ago. What I'm about to elaborate on—in trying to explore the relationship among character, self-respect, and voice—came together at first while I responded to some reading commentaries. And it came together there because I'd been teaching Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in a graduate writing workshop back home in New York and because I'd recently read a new essay by Zadie Smith on the topic that this particular Pacific University student had been mainly concerned with: the environment and the coming apocalypse.

Now it may come as a surprise, but it should not, that I learn a lot from the teaching I do. I can't possibly be alone in this. We writers who teach get to test our ideas in real time, which means bringing together days of reading and writing and other outside conversations for an audience that will just as often respond with a groan as a scribble in a notebook and the smile of new comprehension. What's more, we writers who teach get paid for this. But anyway—back to the coming apocalypse.

It struck me in reading these commentaries that the writer, in highlighting where certain books about climate change and the environment, loosely defined, let him down or put him off, was sometimes emphasizing problems of technique—too much direct transcription, too much speculation about what a subject might be thinking—where he seemed really to be having trouble with an author's voice. So I said:

This all leads me to say something that may be perfectly obvious, but that, in these commentaries, you don't seem to notice: We can master all kinds of nonfiction writer techniques, but in the end, we're responsible for developing a voice that readers (*though not all readers*) will find compelling. By pointing out how one writer appeals to you while another one doesn't, you highlight for me the basic requirement of what we do (as narrative nonfiction writers). And if we write

enough, and we develop and come to possess what Joan Didion would describe as “self-respect,” we almost can’t help doing it—we create a voice. We sound like ourselves on the page because we come to have the courage of character to sound like ourselves.

In this instance during the semester, Joan Didion probably seemed to come out of nowhere. I included in my notes to him a link to the full essay, “On Self-Respect,” originally published in *Vogue* in 1961. Still, she was on my mind, and so she appeared in my commentary. I was testing out an idea in real time.

A fuller account of what Didion says about the relationship between self-respect and character reveals a little more:

Like Jordan Baker, people with self-respect have the courage of their mistakes. They know the price of things. . . . In brief, people with self-respect exhibit a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; they display what was once called *character*, a quality which, although approved in the abstract, sometimes loses ground to other more instantly negotiable virtues. . . . Nonetheless, character—the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life—is the source from which self-respect springs. (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 145)

I don’t think I can put any better what Didion says here. But I do think I can talk about it in terms that have more specifically to do with writing, as I started to do with the notes I’ve just mentioned. Dealing with student writers over the past decade, I’ve encountered a good number who seem to have a difficult time believing that what they have to say—especially about their own lives—is of much worth. This way of thinking has at least two things wrong with it. I’m going to talk about those two things.

First, for those who find their own lives of little value in terms of writing, I’m not sure they have a full enough perspective on what our lives actually are. It’s true that not all of us will be adventurers

or make life-saving discoveries. Some of us may never even meet an adventurer or someone who's made a life-saving discovery. Others of us will have to seek these people out if we want to write about them. Some of us may never leave the country. Some people never leave their hometowns. And where we live, I've found, we often trace the same paths, drive the same roads, walk the same streets, shop the same shops, take the same elevators, traipse the same beachfronts. And yet many of those people lead lives that compel them to write. Mine does. Perhaps yours does too.

Which leads me to say this: The essential piece of writing isn't what we do—except—and this is a big except—insofar as writing itself is *something that we do*. The essential piece of writing—and so the always valuable piece of the writer's life—is what we think. Let me repeat that: The essential piece of writing—and so the *always valuable* piece of the writer's life—is what we think. How we come to believe something.

And the profound challenge of putting pen to paper is, in Flannery O'Connor's words, making that belief believable.

Consider the opening of Zadie Smith's recent essay "Man vs. Corpse" (this is not the one about the coming apocalypse):

One September night, running home from dinner to meet a babysitter, I took off my heels and hopped barefoot—it was raining—up Crosby Street, and so home. *Hepatitis*, I thought. Hep-a-ti-tis. I reached my building bedraggled, looking like death. The doorman—who'd complimented me on my way out—blushed and looked down at his smart phone. In the lobby, on a side table, sat a forlorn little hardbacked book. *The World's Masterpieces: Italian Painting*. Published in 1939, not quite thirty pages long, with cheap marbled endpapers and a fond inscription in German: *Meinem lieben Schuler*. . . . Someone gave this book to someone else in Mount Carmel (the Israeli mountains? the school in the Bronx?) on March 2, 1946.

The handwriting suggested old age. Whoever wrote this inscription was dead now.

Here's an essay that begins on the streets of New York, where people supposedly "do things"—but these are the worn streets of this woman's life, the streets she walks to relieve the babysitter. What does Zadie Smith do with her life? On this day she goes to dinner, drinks vodka, comes home bedraggled, pays a babysitter, and sends the sitter home. Sounds like a good evening. And it sounds a lot like a lot of our lives. A lot like mine.

But what does Zadie Smith do with this life? Here's where the lesson comes, I think. Here's the great value of any of our lives as writers. She thinks about her life. And her thoughts bend toward taking stock, taking responsibility for it in a very specific way. Coming home, she half-worries about contracting hepatitis. She tells us she looks like death, which is a thought, not a description. The book she finds was inscribed by someone that she knows—another thought—is now dead. More thoughts come. Because before long, realizing that for months, like the doorman, she'd been spending most of her nights scrolling through email on her own smartphone, she decides to take it home with her in the elevator. "Email or Italian masterpieces?" the book seems to ask. The essay answers: "As I squinted through a scrim of vodka, a stately historical process passed me by."

The book accuses her. (Another thought.) And it contains more than any scroll of email. (This she already believes.) And facing the accusation, she admits her mistakes—she'd rather be thumbing her iPhone, like she'd been doing for months, and presumably paying the price. Then, through that "vodka scrim," she flips through the book armed, I think, with a kind of moral toughness we might call character.

One of the pieces she encounters is *Man Carrying Corpse on His Shoulders* by Luca Signorelli. "Man is naked," she writes,

with a hand on his left hip, and an ideal back in which every muscle is delineated. His buttocks are vigorous, monumental,

like Michelangelo's *David*. . . . He walks forcefully, leading with his left foot, and over his shoulders hangs a corpse—male or female, it's not clear. . . . He is carrying this corpse off somewhere, away from the viewer; they are about to march clean out the frame. I stared at this drawing, attempting a thought experiment, failing. Then I picked up a pen and wrote, in the margins of the page, most of what you have read up to this point. A simple experiment—more of a challenge, really. I tried to identify with the corpse.

For Zadie Smith, the thought experiment alone fails. Thinking is not enough. She needs to do something. And so, what's important for us to consider—especially those who don't think our lives are worth much to us as writers—is that the other thing she says she does is to pick up a pen and write. She hands her thoughts over to her voice, and the result is a fabulous essay, as much about aesthetics as it is about politics and technologies' claims on us. And in this essay, she concludes, making some reference to her own night out: "Still, a life filled with practically nothing, if you are fully present in and mindful of it, can be a beautiful struggle." By the end of her day, and the end of her writing, she believes this. And I, for one, find this belief believable.

I said before that any way of thinking that leads us—writers or not—to undervalue our lives has at least a couple things wrong with it. And Zadie Smith underscores the first reason I think this is true for writers. Each of our lives can be a beautiful struggle if we put our minds and then our writing voices to making them so.

Another reason I think we're wrong to undervalue our own lives is that, as writers, it's a basic fact that subjects ostensibly outside our own everyday experiences have to pass through our minds in order to get to the page. Now, if you take the first point—that thinking is as much a part of your life, and just as beautiful and difficult, as anything else—then even if you're writing about adventurers or live-savers, climate scientists or Walt Whitman, you must come to

respect your own mind's ability to reckon with the world outside yourself. Maybe this is obvious, but when you write about Walt Whitman and democracy, *you* are writing about Walt Whitman and Democracy. This is your life.

Or, on the matters of Whitman and democracy, just for instance, let's consider the lives of Marilynne Robinson and Francine Prose. In the preface to her essay collection *When I Was a Child I Read Books*—a title that reminds us that another thing we DO with a life, of course, is read—Marilynne Robinson directs our attention to Whitman through the lens, in her words, of a lifetime spent studying American history and literature. She is a Christian, too, and she writes as one. “Whitman,” she writes,

was a Quaker and he wrote as one: “I say the real and permanent grandeur of these States must be their religion, / Otherwise there is just no real and permanent grandeur; / (nor character not life worthy the name without religion. . .).” This is from *Leaves of Grass*, and so is this: “All parts away for the progress of souls, / All religion, all solid things, arts, governments, all that was or is / apparent upon this globe or any globe, / falls into niches or corners / before the procession of souls along / the grand roads of the universe.” The vision of the soul, all souls, realizing itself in the course of transforming everything that has constrained it and them, finds expression in the writers of the period, prominent among them Emerson, Melville, and Dickinson, and in later writers such as William James and Wallace Stevens. For all of them creeds fall away and consciousness has the character of revelation. (xiii-xiv)

No one else can write like this. And no one else can write like you. For Robinson, just a dip into Whitman contains multitudes: all of Emerson, Melville, Dickinson, James, Stevens, come to mind—as probably does the work of Robinson herself. Poems and essays and novels and stories. And what they all think—what their consciousnesses all contained and produced: those poems and essays and novels

and stories—has for Robinson the quality of divine truth. And in this preface, she's gathered up all these consciousnesses to argue about the "corrosive influence" of the "economics of the moment, and of the last several decades" (xv). Her voice is as political as it is religious.

So that is what happens when Marilynne Robinson thinks about a moment from *Leaves of Grass*. What happens when Francine Prose does? In 2011, she wrote of an experience reading Whitman for a website called *Occupy Writers*:

As far as I can understand it myself, here's why I burst into tears at the Occupy Wall Street camp. I was moved, first of all, by what everyone notices first: the variety of people involved, the range of ages, races, classes, colors, cultures. In other words, the 99 percent. . . . In Zuccotti Park I felt a kind of lightening of a weight, a lessening of the awful isolation and powerlessness of knowing we're being lied to and robbed on a daily basis and that everyone knows it and keeps quiet and endures it; the terror of thinking that my own grandchildren will suffer for whatever has been paralyzing us until just now. I kept feeling these intense surges of emotion—until I saw a placard with a quote from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I am large, I contain multitudes." And that was when I just lost it and stood there and wept. (401-402)

Here, Prose's experience of Occupy Wall Street is contained in a snippet from Whitman. She's confronted with a crowd and a line of poetry says it all. While much of what she experienced is something some of us can identify with—that dread, the fear of falling off a cliff (not a real cliff, mind you, but that mental one of our own imagining), the isolation and powerlessness of being robbed, the terror of a coming apocalypse—this is Occupy Wall Street as seen and felt by Francine Prose.

We identify with her only insofar as she can voice, even after admitting she might not completely understand, why she broke down and cried. And there's a clear moment of recognition that

Prose, like Zadie Smith with her hypnotic scroll of email, hasn't always accepted responsibility for her own life. We know we're being lied to, robbed, and our grandchildren will suffer as a result of our paralysis. Until now, she says, and she weeps—perhaps because she understands the price of things. That's what Didion would call moral nerve. That's character.

Prose's opening, I think, is special and instructive in terms of understanding the unique relationship—it's truly unique—between our thinking and our voice, between our lives and our writing. Again, she starts: "As far as I can understand it myself, here's why I burst into tears at the Occupy Wall Street camp."

This could be a formula for the opening of just about anything we might want to write. What Prose makes explicit—"here's why"—we typically leave unsaid. But it's always there:

- For Marilynne Robinson: As far as I can understand it myself, here's why I turn to Whitman for revelations about democracy.
- For Cheryl Strayed: As far as I can understand it myself, here's why I set out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail.
- For Rebecca Skloot: As far as I can understand it myself, here's why we must know what happened when George Otto Gey cultured the cells of Henrietta Lacks to create the first known human immortal cell line.
- For Zora Neale Hurston: As far as I can understand it myself, here's why I traveled the South and experienced a hoodoo initiation.
- For Leslie Jamison: As far as I can understand it myself, here's why "intellect swells around hurt" (73).
- For Joan Didion: As far as I can understand it myself, here's why "Life changes fast" (*The Year of Magical Thinking*, 3).

In that self-respect essay, Didion explains, I think, what's going on

when someone really sets herself to do this: to go far, *really far*, to understand for oneself why we feel and think what we do. Why do we believe what we believe? This is what writing affords—and requires of—us. Didion writes:

Although to be driven back upon oneself is an uneasy affair at best, rather like trying to cross a border with borrowed credentials, it seems to me now the one condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect. (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 143)

And as with any uneasy affair, our own journey to real self-respect—the self-respect that will lead to your voice and the good writing that depends on it—takes courage. As much as I’ve tried to emphasize the essential value of your own mind, you always have to face the world. And Didion makes clear that what drives you back on yourself are typically things outside of your control—accusations, if you will, sometimes in the form of an iPhone.

In Didion’s case, in “On Self-Respect,” what drove her back upon herself was simply being rejected from Phi Beta Kappa; this made her lose “the conviction that lights would always turn green” for her (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 142-143); in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, it was the death of her husband. With *Strayed*, it was the death of her mother, among other things. Leslie Jamison faced violence, a broken nose after being punched while traveling in Nicaragua, and returning home, the sense “that no matter how [she] talked about the incident [she] would be somehow ‘making too big a deal’ of it” (Sparks). “This shame,” she has said, “runs through the whole collection [*The Empathy Exams*]” (Sparks). And of course, Zadie Smith confronts her iPhone and a drawing of a corpse.

We all have iPhones or art books. We’ve all lost someone important to us or we will. We’ve all been rejected by Phi Beta Kappa or another club we’d like to belong to. We’ve all been punched or we’ve felt like we have. We’ve all been accused. In fact, and here comes the

apocalypse again, let me accuse you all now. Maybe this will give you something to write about.

Here, again, is the inimitable voice—and we shouldn't try—of Zadie Smith, and the end of the essay, "Elegy for a Country's Seasons," that started all of this.

Sing an elegy for the washed away! For the cycles of life, for the saltwater marshes, the houses, the humans—whole islands of humans. Going, going, gone! . . .

Oh, what have we done! It's a biblical question, and we do not seem able to pull ourselves out of its familiar—essentially religious—cycle of shame, denial, and self-flagellation. This is why (I shall tell my granddaughter) the apocalyptic scenarios did not help—the terrible truth is that we had a profound, historical attraction to apocalypse. In the end, the only thing that could create the necessary traction in our minds was the intimate loss of the things we loved. Like when the seasons changed in our beloved little island, or when the lights went out on the fifteenth floor, or the day I went into an Italian garden in early July, with its owner, a woman in her eighties, and upon seeing the scorched yellow earth and withered roses, and hearing what only the really old people will confess—in all my years I've never seen anything like it—I found my mind finally beginning to turn from the elegiac *what have we done* to the practical *what can we do?*

Seriously—what can we do?

Well, lots, I hope. By the end of her own elegy, Smith suggests we stop elegizing so much. How's that for having the courage of your mistakes? But for our purposes, let's get back to those reading commentaries. Or reading and generally listening to more voices.

What has helped Zadie Smith—and we see this in all the writers I've referred to, but perhaps most obviously in what we've seen from Robinson and Prose and Didion—is a deep and thorough commitment to reading. There may be better ways for us to deal practically

with the climate disaster we've created, or, just for instance, what the legal scholar Michelle Alexander calls the "New Jim Crow" of this nation's mass incarceration. Or in whatever other large and small ways the world accuses you. But we writers know that even our most practical activities—recycling, bodies-on-the-street protests, getting a babysitter, carrying away and burying our dead—are shaped by our own minds and the thinking and writing of generations of writers before us. But only those writers we've read. Only those voices we've encountered before.

The apocalypse Smith writes about, and Robinson's revelations too, mean a lot more if you know the Book of Revelation or the prophecies of Isaiah, Whitman, or Dickinson. Smith's essay is better, too—and you enjoy it more, play more a part—if, when she says "Maybe we will get used to this new England" (her homeland of biblical floods in April), both Billy Bragg and the book of Genesis flash in your mind. For her, the phrase "Dickensian delusion"—contained in the same paragraph!—calls to mind all the Dickens she's read in her life.

So yes, Didion's better—or you're more prepared for Didion—if Jordan Baker already lives in your mind. You're better prepared for Leslie Jamison if you've listened to Björk, seen *Carrie*, considered the paintings and read the diary of Frida Kahlo, and if you've read Marilynne Robinson and Joan Didion.

What can we do? Lots, I hope. Maybe vote. Or protest. Make love. Drink vodka. Pay your babysitters well. *But read—be sure to read.* Lots. And write about it. And remember, if you're reading well, all of what you read will accuse you of something. All of it will drive you back on yourself. And if you believe, as I do, that self-respect comes from actually reckoning, in your mind, with the world's accusations—an iPhone, a corpse, adultery, Whitman, our prisons, a punch in the face—and if you have both the courage of your mistakes and the courage of your convictions, you'll develop your voice, you'll sound like yourself, and you'll write better.

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