

## Why I Write

Presented as a keynote address at the Mendocino Coast Writers Conference, July 2010

The question I want to ask is, Why do we do what we do? That is, why do we do this difficult, agonizing, often painful thing we call creative writing? Why do we invest hours and years of our lives putting words on paper? Unless we're journalists, we generally don't expect to earn a living by writing, so there are other reasons for our pursuit. I think it's useful, every now and then, to interrogate ourselves and ponder our motives. With this talk, I'm hoping to stimulate your thinking about why *you* write and to at least give you some idea of why *this* writer—and some others I'll mention—do this crazy thing.

The first thing to know about me is that I'm originally from New England, and I have a New Englander's puritanical work ethic. That is, I have to justify everything I do. For example, I have a hard time with the concept of time-off or a vacation. I *do* go away to artists colonies or other places where I write. I once went to spring training baseball to write about it. I've rafted on rivers and gone to far places to see belugas and bears in order to write about them. I would never have done any of those things for the experiences alone, for fun. I don't suggest this as model behavior; it's just the way I am and the way I like to have reasons for doing what I do and thinking about the world as I see it.

I didn't set out to be a writer, but it makes perfect sense that I became one. It gives me a reason to be. Writing has for a long time been fully incorporated into my life, even as I've worked as a salmon fisherman and involved myself in political and environmental causes. Writing gives me a way of processing my experience and creating something that might influence how other people understand the world—even, ultimately, how they might behave. I write because I believe that writing—and all art—can change the world. I believe in the power of stories—narratives of all kinds—to reach into people's minds and hearts to affect them emotionally—and then that that emotional connection can help them navigate through life more easily, thoughtfully, or meaningfully.

This might seem sort of grand—arrogant even—to think that something I or any of us create should be so important. But that's *my* need to put something into the world that I think is meaningful and justifies my efforts. There's an alternative case to be made that writing itself—not publishing at all—is sufficient work. Writing allows a writer to create a private world, to order one's thoughts, to transform experience, to—in Samuel Beckett's words—leave “a stain upon the silence.” And meaning can certainly come from beauty; if you create something beautiful, something that will gladden a heart—your heart—that can be enough. A writer can also write out a sadness, as Jean Rhys noted; she wrote, “At an early age I learned that you can write out a sadness, and then it isn't so bad. It is the only lucky thing about being a writer.”

Let me get back to this, but first I want to acknowledge my double-debt, to George Orwell and Joan Didion, both of whom wrote famous essays with the title “Why I Write,” and both of whom, in those essays and in their bodies of work, have inspired me.

Orwell is best known for his last two books, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, though he was also a prodigious journalist and essayist. His experiences as a journalist during the Spanish Civil War convinced him that manipulation of thought and emotion occurred not just in totalitarian countries but also in democracies. The critic V. S. Pritchett called him “the conscience of his generation.” Indeed, most of his writing springs from a sense of injustice and a commitment to exposing lies.

In his famous “Why I Write” essay, Orwell listed four major motives for writing that he said exist in different degrees in every writer. The first he called “sheer **egoism**.” In its most negative expression, this could be considered “navel gazing.” As I interpret it, it’s simply that the writer believes that what she or he has to say is important and that other people should hear it. The second motive is **aesthetic enthusiasm**, that pleasure we take in sounds and images and the arrangement of sentences. Third is **historical impulse**, the desire to understand things and to present them as we see them. The fourth, **political purpose**, Orwell meant in the broadest sense—the desire to “push the world in a certain direction,” to affect how other people think.

I believe these four stand up pretty well as motives for any of us, though each of us will vary in our proportions. You will probably *not* be a writer if you don’t believe you have something valuable to say, if you don’t take pleasure in your craft, if you’re not curious, and if you don’t want to “push the world,” at least to some degree.

You will notice that Orwell’s list does not include fame or fortune.

Joan Didion, who “stole” Orwell’s title for her meditation on “Why I Write,” describes writing as an aggressive, even hostile, act, a way of imposing yourself on other people—saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. Didion has famously said, in “Why I Write” and elsewhere, that she writes to find out what she’s thinking. She asks herself what she’s looking at, what she’s seeing, and what it means. She asks, in regard to both fiction and nonfiction, *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?* Didion is highly respected as an observer of American politics and culture, stretching back to the 1960s, and for her style of combining personal reflection with social commentary. Her 2005 book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, takes the reader right into the mind of someone who’s experienced emotional trauma. A collection of her earlier nonfiction, published in 2006, is called *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*—which title sums up some of her belief about why we write.

Both Orwell and Didion say in their essays that a writer’s subject matter will be determined by the age in which he or she lives. Through their art, they truly became spokespeople for their ages. They make me want to ask: What are the stories of *our* age? What am *I* most curious about? What disturbs me? What are the pictures in our minds, and what are we doing with them?

Let me get back, now, to why *I* write.

I came to writing as a reader, as many or maybe most of us do. Saul Bellow said, “A writer is a reader moved to emulation.” I read things that I loved, that were beautiful and full of ideas, and I wanted to do that same thing. I know that most of my early work was imitative and not very good, but I also knew, early on, that writing was a craft that took practice, and that if I kept doing it I would get better at it.

It was really not until I purposefully moved to Alaska, when I was twenty-one, that I started writing in a semi-serious way. I think that before that, I didn’t know what my subject matter was. In Alaska, I was curious about everything; I wanted to understand why people lived at the end of the road, why big places mattered, what darkness could do to mental health. I found myself in a country that was begging to be explored in every way, where I could look, see, try to understand, and create something that was *new*.

We all have formative books that speak to us at certain points in our lives. One of these that came to me when I was first in Alaska was Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Dillard was a precise observer of nature, but also a researcher, a philosopher, and a prose stylist. For a long time she was my ideal, and I strove for some of her vision as I explored my new territory. I spent hours sitting by a spring, listening to the water and trying to find the words to convey what I heard, and more hours watching snow fall on the branches of cottonwood trees and searching for the words to describe that. I did this, which helped me know my new home and gave me aesthetic pleasure, but I was a long way from creating narratives that anyone else would want to read.

The writing I most loved at the time was what today we call creative nonfiction. It was Annie Dillard’s meditations, essays by E. B. White, nature writing by Edward Hoagland, and the long New Yorker pieces about odd, esoteric subjects like oranges written by John McPhee. Somehow, though, despite my efforts to emulate Annie Dillard, I thought that real creative writing had to be more imaginative—had to be either fiction or poetry. I think I also didn’t want to write about myself or my experience; I was too shy and private for that, and probably too unsure of myself—doubtful that I had much of value to report in a straight-out way.

So I began to write short stories. My first stories were all set in Alaska and mostly involved young women—women who were *not me* but that I could imagine in various, mostly isolated or isolating circumstances—living in a logging camp or a remote cabin or in a tent on a beach. I was fortunate that in 1983 our state arts council held a competition for collections of short fiction. I gathered up the seven stories I’d written and submitted them—and won. The prize was the publication of my first book, which I titled *The Compass Inside Ourselves*, from a favorite quote from another writer I adored, Eudora Welty.

There is, of course, nothing like success to encourage a writer. I wasn’t all *ego* about getting a book into print, but I did feel authenticated—that writing was something I could do. I decided then that I should probably learn something about what I was doing, so that’s when I went to graduate school. The program I went to—the low-residency MFA

program at Vermont College—had two tracks, fiction and poetry, and so I studied fiction writing.

I eventually published two more books of short fiction, but, concurrently, I began writing and publishing more nonfiction, or essays. Today I work in both genres.

Why I write *fiction* has a lot to do with the fact that we each get to live only one life, but in fiction we get to try out some of the other lives we can't live ourselves—including ones we certainly wouldn't *want* to live. I like to ask "What if...?" and then follow the possibilities that suggest themselves. Or I ask, "Why would someone do that?" and write my way to an understanding.

Looking back at the time when I began writing *nonfiction*, I understand now that I took a long time to work up to a point where I felt confident enough to write with authority about my life and the places, people, and issues around me. I was wary for a very long time of assuming that I knew enough about Alaska and my place in it to have anything to say. Finally, I began to write about the place that meant the most to me—a point of land where I've spent most of my summers, fishing. I wrote an essay about an old cabin there and the people who had lived in it, another about a visit by my parents and the connections I could make between their lives and the one I had made, and another about a dead beluga whale washed up and eaten by bears. And then I realized that, after twenty years of intimacy with that place, that it was my "heart's field"—to use Eudora Welty's phrase--and that I needed to write an entire book.

That book, *Fishcamp*, is part memoir, part history, part natural history, part—it says on the back cover—"love song" to a particular shore. To place my motives in Orwell's paradigm, I had both historical impulses and political purposes. I saw the value of a story about the importance of place and of living a life grounded in place, and I tried to present that in the particulars of the place I knew and loved best.

I wrote in my preface to that book, "John Muir's famous dictum becomes more apparent each day: whenever we try to pick out any one thing, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. Wherever our places are and whatever we do in them, perhaps we might all begin to pay more attention to the little and big things that do indeed connect in profound ways to all the rest, miles and eons and cultures apart."

As writers, and no matter what genre we write in, the luckiest thing that might happen to us is to discover what we most care about, our passions and concerns, and to write from our hearts. My particular passions lie very much with Alaska, with environmental issues, with history, natural history, and cultures. I write as a way of exploring things I want to know more about and as a way of sharing—or, as Didion put it, of *imposing* (in a nice way) my understandings and interpretations, as well as my opinions.

I'll ask this again: What are the stories, and the issues, of our age? They are many, certainly. I came of age during the environmental movement, and my life in Alaska has brought me close to the land and sea. My other nonfiction books, *Green Alaska*, *Beluga*

*Days*, and *Rock Water Wild* all involve conservation issues in historical and cultural contexts. In my opinion, the biggest story of our age—right now—is the threat to life from global warming. For a long time there were only scientific and political treatments of the subject, and reportage by journalists. More recently, creative writers and other artists have taken up the challenge and are producing work that affects people on aesthetic, philosophical, and emotional levels as well as appealing to their intellects. An art show in my community, “Concerning Climate Change,” got viewers’ attention more viscerally, I believe, than Al Gore’s charts and graphs. Novelist Ian McEwan, in his recent book *Solar*, also tackles this subject—not directly, not as a book “about” climate change, but as a “background hum” to a story about a particular man living his particular life.

My own latest work, to be published in a few months, is a nonfiction book called *Early Warming: Crisis and Response in the Climate-Changed North*. Here, too, I’ve tried to write not didactically but to tell stories of real people living their lives in a time of environmental and social change. It took me several years to figure out what approach to take—what I could write that would help people think about how they live and what future we’re inviting, and that would also be different from what anyone else had written or could write. I live in a part of the world that’s experiencing and responding to sea ice loss, permafrost thaw, coastal erosion, warming salmon streams, dying forests, unusual storm events, and other consequences of global warming—and I’ve been able to talk with scientists and visit Native communities, to put in the time and effort to be knowledgeable, to place readers right into the learning experience with me. My ultimate hope is that awareness of what it takes to cope with and adapt to rapid change will help convince readers to do the things that must be done to avert the worst consequences of global warming. So, *yes*, to all of Orwells’s reasons: ego, aesthetics, historical impulse, and political purpose.

And *yes* to Margaret Atwood: “A word after a word after a word is power.”

Climate change is a tough subject, to be sure, because of the challenge to not leave viewers or readers completely depressed and despondent. But it’s the job of the artist to figure out how to harness *any* hurt or anger, to find the beauty or the hope or, at least, a route to understanding.

George Woodcock, a Canadian writer and critic and contemporary of Orwell, wrote, “A writer can and often does help prepare the climate of opinion and feeling in which a revolution occurs.”

A writer can, of course, write directly about social or political issues that concern him or her. One problem with that is that only readers who already share your feelings are likely to read what you write; you’re “preaching to the choir.” But in addition to that, for me anyway, only imaginative or creative work gives me the aesthetic satisfaction that I crave. This is the beauty of art, for readers as well. Readers have a much more pleasurable experience being drawn into a story (fiction or nonfiction) as opposed to being told things. What I learned in the process of becoming a nonfiction writer is that

you can include a lot of information and opinion as long as you wrap it in a narrative. In effect, I try to seduce readers into a story, and then teach them something once they're there. There's that political purpose again—I want to influence what people think, and perhaps how they'll act.

Usually, though, writing is not about answers. Writing for me is almost always about asking questions, interrogating myself about what I think and inviting readers into similar thought and examination. As James Baldwin once said, “The purpose of all art is to lay bare the questions that have been obscured by the answers.”

But let me speak also of fiction. I wrote a story collection, *The Man Who Swam with Beavers*, which is really a collection of modern fables—stories drawn from older wisdom and intended to “teach,” obliquely, something about how to live. I've also been working on and off for several years on a novel. Initially, I was interested in exploring a couple of themes—one is the collision of two difficult times (the 1960s and adolescence), the other the meaning of friendship. The more I work with the story, the more I find out, like Joan Didion, what I think about those themes and about other things that enter into the story and that I didn't know I was interested in exploring until characters and situations presented them to me. Much of the pleasure in this project has come from researching the period and learning things I didn't understand at the time, then recreating that cultural context in an imaginative way. Here again are all of Orwell's reasons. Ego: I have something to say, based on my experience and what I think other people should know. Aesthetics: I love putting the words together, and the scenes, and finding the images that are surprising and right. Historical: yes, I think there are things we should have learned from the 1960s—about race, class, gender, standing up to authority; I don't want us to forget that past—or what it means to be young. And political—yes again—I hope that my presentation of characters in a particular time and place will influence how others understand our world today and the reasons that people behave the way they do—in Orwell's words, “to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.”

To begin to summarize, then, writing to me is a way of *being* in the world. It's the license to go places and do things, to apprentice myself to people and subjects, to continue a life-long self-education in multiple subjects—anything I want to learn more about or interrogate in my own mind.

A writer never writes the same thing twice, and so we move through life with ever-new interests and challenges we give ourselves. Now that I've reached “a certain age,” I find I'm becoming more interested in my family history and the influences of my childhood. Those of you who write memoir or otherwise about family issues know how difficult, or cathartic, or meaningful this can be—not only to you the writer but to readers. Two of the most difficult but also satisfying essays I've written in recent years have had to do with my aging (now deceased) parents and memory loss. Here again I've found an excuse to read and learn a great deal about brain health and disease and to query myself about a whole lot of hard issues having to do with family, memory, love, mortality, and the big “meaning of life.” When the first of these was published, I hesitated to share it

with my siblings, because I thought they might not approve of my taking something so private into a public realm. When I did show it to them they responded very positively and I realized that I'd done the thinking and articulating (as well as the research) that they could not have done, and so what I wrote supported their feelings and gave them a new understanding. Responses from others have also impressed upon me how many of us share these same emotional issues, and that whatever we writers can contribute to the "story" can assist others along the path. I write—we write—because writing can be a *gift* to others.

That, then, is why I write—to learn, to find out what I think, to question, to inform, to make sense of the world and maybe "push" it. I can think of no better way to lead a full and meaningful life.

I'd like to end with one more bit of wisdom, something I like to share with young writing students but that applies to us all, whatever our ages and whatever our writing goals or motivations. Dorothea Brand put it this way in her book *Becoming a Writer*: "It is well to understand as early as possible in one's writing life that there is just one contribution which every one of us can make: we can give into the common pool of experience some comprehension of the world as it looks to each of us."