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The Act of Focusing

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That the writing of poems is valuable, important work, sometimes valuable important play, I have come to accept as a given. The long history and pre-history of the song, the story, the poem support me in this belief, prime my desire, and give me confidence. But where does a poem begin? Partly with desire. I want to write a poem, to borrow the words of Eudora Welty, "of beauty and passion, some fresh approximation of human truth." Of course desire and confidence wax and wane. I've been at it for about twenty-five years, and it still seems that after I've written a poem I forget how to write poems. But I remember the usual process—the feeling of struggle to overcome inertia, the doubts, the cross-outs, the dead ends, and then the relief, as if a gag or blindfold has been removed, turning to excitement when an image or phrase or line or sentence begins to ring, and some rhythm sets in to lead me on. I want to get to the good part, but I've learned to value the struggle. Sometimes the whole process is so subtle and enigmatic that what seemed to be the good part at the time turns out to be illusory, and some random thought or notation that seemed like a dead end begins later to ring and connect. Where does the poem begin? Which poem?

Welty, currently my favorite writer on the subject of writing, said in an essay written in 1955, "All writers speak from, and speak to, emotions eternally the same in all of us: love, pity, terror do not show favorites or leave any of us out. The tracking

down of a story (or poem) might do well to start not in the subjective country but in the world itself. What in this world leads back most directly, makes the clearest connections to these emotions? What is the pull on the line? For some outside signal has startled or moved the story- (or poem)-writing mind to complicity: some certain irresistible, alarming (pleasurable or disturbing), magnetic person, place or thing."

I've found that a good place to begin is in the country of the noun, or in the land out of which nouns are born. I have a basic mistrust of abstraction, theory, philosophy, even my own, especially concerning writing. I realize these are tools of thinking that can be used well, as well as abused. Here's a quote from Whitman I copied into a notebook: "Perhaps indeed the efforts of the true poets, founders, religions, literatures, all ages, have been, and ever will be, in our time and times to come, essentially the same—to bring people back from their sickly abstractions, to the costless average, divine, original concrete."

The first word of that quote, 'Perhaps', is important because it shows an awareness of the potential of any passionate idea to blind as well as light up the world. Still, I am an advocate of passion and obsession to overcome inertia. I believe in revision too, but as wise writers have noticed, we can't revise what isn't written. Revision may or may not improve your work. It usually improves mine. It may be secondary or primary labor. It may be just questioning, testing, editing, but it may bring you closer to your experience and draw you deeper into your work where there is a potential for real discoveries to be made. Of course, the discoveries you make may not be the ones you wanted.

A friend of mine once called me a "hopeless optimist," and I don't think it was a compliment. So before I get carried away, let

me plug in a warning here. "Poetry, like the grizzly bear, is good for its own magnificent selfness and is not a utilitarian cog to improve someone's lifestyle. Poetry may very well help you get behind. Your legs might grow downward into the ground in certain locations. You will also turn inside out without warning." Jim Harrison said that, and he should know.

A writer should have a few simple rules to follow, such as: give in and honor the impulse; be specific and clear, even when you feel confused; write with images; make every word count; make good sentences; and pay attention at some point to sound and rhythm, which is the mystery of the heartbeat in language. Or, a writer should have an elaborate and complex system of rules and techniques he or she invariably challenges or forgets in the process of actually writing. In other words, you have to find what works for you.

I can talk endlessly about craft and technique—ask my students. I've learned how to do this in order to make a living, and, of course, the subject is interesting to me. But when I actually sit down to write I forget all that stuff. I want to think about other things. Actually I don't want to think at all. I want to work. I want to be absorbed in a dream state. I want to be carried beyond thinking to where there are no fences between the word and the thing, to where feeling is seeing and seeing is feeling. Goodbye, *adios*, I'm gone. But if I'm lucky, I'll return with something I can show you, something you might find interesting, or even useful. I write in order to work my way back into that intense state, that feeling of being alive, resourceful, responsive to experience, to the world. Ideally in that state nothing is too small for my reverence, and nothing is big or bad enough to intimidate me.

I remember a passage from Harriet Doerr's novel, *Stones for*

Ibarra: "It occurred to her this evening in Ibarra, with rain at the window and Richard four months dead, that nothing ever happened on either numbered or unnumbered roads that could be classified as unimportant. All of it, observed by dark, observed by day, was extraordinary." Such a feeling can seem overwhelming, but that's better than being numb. One can learn to make something out of experience and imagination.

But you have to start somewhere. Why is it sometimes hard to give in and honor the impulse to write? After all, the TV says, "Just Do It." Well, sometimes we feel unworthy, and we stop ourselves before we begin. Of course the demands of daily life offer us all sorts of real and imagined barriers and distractions. As I was writing that last sentence my three-year-old son came bursting into my study and slammed a big dirt clod down on my desk. "Daddy, look what I found!" The dirt fell away to reveal a little toy Jeep he unearthed in the garden. And that's not all. There was a small wooden chicken and a black plastic wheel, and a big smile that had the satisfaction of discovery and accomplishment written all over it. If I had said, as I often do, "Outta here you little runt, I'm busy," I would be denying the very spirit I'm trying to write about. So I try to include the obstacles in the process. I can always cut them out later.

Stanley Kunitz said, "In order to make any sort of affirmation, you must begin by affirming the value of your own existence." My own existence is not an isolated phenomenon. It's a web of connections and responsibilities. Starting with a big abstract idea or powerful feeling, we can be overwhelmed with conflicting voices before we begin to hear our own. An old Zen saying: "On the path to enlightenment, the first step is to lose the way." Sometimes we don't recognize our own voices because we have defined

the notion of voice too narrowly. Artists are supposed to be original, yet when we listen to ourselves we sound like parrots.

If we try to force the issue of originality, we fool no one, except maybe ourselves for a while. Forget all that, and start somewhere with something. Craft has no meaning without something to work on. Art begins with focus, bringing the still and open gaze into alignment with a point, a person, place or thing. Welty says, "Focus then means awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight—they are like the attributes of love. The act of focusing, itself, has beauty and meaning; it is the act that, continued in, turns into meditation, into poetry. Indeed, as soon as the least of us stands still, that is the moment something extraordinary is seen to be going on in the world."

Some years ago I became fascinated with prehistoric ruins in the southwest, and I have been writing or trying to write out of that fascination. I had lived in the desert outside Tucson as a child. My mother was newly married to, and still in love with, a man named Stanley Woodman, who at the time was making adobe blocks for houses. I remember it as a happy time. I helped in the adobe making, or played solitary games in the desert around the work site. In the evening after dinner our family ritual was to ride out the gravel road on our balloon-tire Schwinns to see the sunset. We would ride to the end of the road, park our bikes, and walk together into the desert. Our sole purpose was to take some time to notice the world around us. I learned the names of things: saguaro, paloverde, ocotillo, cholla. I watched the ground I walked on so I wouldn't step on a rattlesnake or disturb a gila monster. I learned to distinguish the calls of the big white-wing dove and the little inca dove. I learned that the ubiquitous chattering we always heard was the cactus wren, and that it pre-

ferred to make its nest in the spiniest chollas. The sunsets were often dramatic, not at all the fixed cliches of postcards, but the big and powerful light of the sun that earlier in the day would have been life-threatening without plenty of water and shade, now softening, changing moment to moment, diffusing the clouds and the land and our faces with surprising light and color never to be exactly repeated.

That happy time passed. The adobe business failed. The marriage fell apart. Stanley went off to Mexico and disappeared. He was a big guy with a gap between his teeth. He looked sort of like Arnold Schwartzenegger. I loved him and forgave him long ago. The rest of us spent the next several years on the outskirts of L.A. I fought, ditched, and yes-sirred my way through the public schools. I could have used more poetry. My joy and solace was the beach and ocean, which had a strange affinity with the desert. The world inside was a mess, like looking inland to the smog-choked city, but looking down at the sand and the small things washed in by the waves—shells, globs of tar, which I thought were a natural phenomenon—or out over the waves at that clear line where the sky touched the water gave me a sense of stability and goodness.

I want to say my fascination with prehistoric ruins began with the discovery of a potsherd, but I think the potsherd only brought into focus some deep feelings and connections with the land and its relationships that began in childhood. Poems like Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper" serve as a kind of link for me between the ocean, the desert, the southwest ruins, and poetry. When I sit down to write the world is often a mist or a smog. Then gradually, sometimes, as I become absorbed in something other than myself, the world is minute and vast and clear, for a while. If

poetry is like the grizzly bear, then the poet, or this poet anyway, is like the sandpiper.

In part, my pleasure in Bishop's poem is that I can identify with the sandpiper and with the poet who observes and sees so clearly and in such detail the "dragging grains" of sand, and hears and evokes so carefully the sound of the place: "The beach hisses like fat." But the deeper pleasure has to do not with identification, but with the poem's power to evoke, in such a quiet, unpretentious way, a particular place and a set of living relationships from the minute to the vast, so that as I read I feel I'm being put in touch with an essential on-going mystery of daily life. The poem doesn't really tell me anything I didn't already know about obsession, but for a moment it turns me into a sandpiper, something I am not, and transports me into the mind of Elizabeth Bishop, someone I am not, and draws me into intimate contact with this place. I have been transported, refreshed, and left to puzzle my way along, but maybe a bit more intensely.

My friend, poet Larry Levis, wrote an essay a few years ago called, "Some Notes on the Gazer Within," in which he says, "To write poems that come back out again, into society, to write poems that matter to me, I must become, paradoxically at the moment of writing, as other as poet as any animal is in a poem. Then true craft, which is largely the ear's training, can occur. Before this, my ear can hear nothing—or it plays back whatever rag of a tune it caught that day since its true desire and purpose is to thwart the world and hear nonsense, which it will in the end. Unless this absorption into the other occurs, I am condemned to be immured within the daily ego, the ego that lives in the suburbs."

It's probably not fair to quote him out of context. I can hear

someone thinking, "What's wrong with the suburbs?" I think what he means is that any place we live without imagination, and imagination's power to focus and transform, can become a deadening trap. Levis goes on to say: "Gazing within, and trying to assess what all this represents, I find I've been speaking all along, about nature, about the attempt of the imagination to inhabit nature and by that act preserve itself for as long as it possibly can against 'the pressure of reality.' And by 'nature' I mean any wilderness, inner or outer. The moment of writing is not an escape, however; it is only an insistence, through imagination, upon human ecstacy, and a reminder that such ecstacy remains as much a birthright in this world as misery remains a condition of it."

I returned to Arizona to go to graduate school. It was a homecoming, and good for my work. I got into the habit of taking long walks in the desert to regain a sense of focus after a day awash and adrift in ideas at the university. Jim Harrison mentions this beneficial effect of walking: "When I walk several hours the earth becomes sufficient to my imagination, and the lesser self is lost or dissipates in the intricacies, both the beauty and the horror, of the natural world."

After graduate school I got a fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown at the end of Cape Cod. For two years I spent hours every day walking the beaches and shores. By focusing on the sand like the sandpiper, absorbed in the intricacies of the natural world, I began also to find fragments of the historical past—broken pieces of ceramic pipes used by the whalers, parts of tiny porcelain dolls lost in the sand by children of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Once you see a tiny porcelain hand reaching up out of the sand, it's hard not to look for them.

The acts of walking, focusing and writing became strongly associated for me. After the fellowship ran out I had to find a way to make a living.

Again I returned to Arizona, for what I thought was a job, but what turned out to be an essential part of my education. For two and a half years I lived and worked in rural communities and Indian reservations in Arizona. I was a poet-on-the-road, under contract with the state arts commission and the BIA. During that time I became more aware of a different way of looking at the world. The traditional Native American wisdom that the land and all things are endowed with spirit, and that rather than possess the land, the land possesses us, helped me to understand my own deepest feelings. I also saw poverty, disease, despair—another third world country within this country. I saw modern ruins and I visited pre-historic ruins. I went as a guest to the Kachina ceremonies at Hopi, where the descendants of the builders of those prehistoric ruins work to keep their traditions, language and dignity intact against incredible odds.

I left again for a series of temporary teaching jobs: Virginia, Missouri, Alabama, Kentucky. I was feeling a powerful homesickness for the west when I got the chance to teach for a year at Northern Arizona University. Marnie and I found a house to rent on a little ranch out in the "pj's," the pinon-juniper country east of Flagstaff. My writing had slowed way down, and I think now it was partly homesickness and partly because I had quit walking. I started walking again, and my fascination for ruins revived with the discovery of a potsherd, a broken piece of pottery with someone's fingerprints pressed into the coils in a pattern of repetition around a thousand years ago. When I picked it up and looked at it closely, I felt an instant connection and complicity

with that person who left those fingerprints. Time stopped or did a radical swirl. I felt an odd mixture of elation and humility, the pleasure of a small discovery and a heightened sense of my own impermanence, what I think of now as a sense of validation, a moment in which I took a small but deeper step into basic human endeavor. Had I seen that potsherd through the glass of a museum case with a classification and date typed neatly beneath it, my sense of connection to it would not have been the same.

Once I had found that potsherd, my walks in the pinon-juniper country and cinder hills took on a new meaning and a new focus. My writing got going again. I began to look more closely and carefully at everything. A slight glint among the cinders and dirt at my feet might turn out to be an arrow point, beautifully crafted by some ancient inhabitant of this land. Or it might turn out to be a bit of broken glass from a wine bottle. Either way it sparked my curiosity and drew me into connection and complicity with lives other than my own.

Now what does all this have to do with craft? Well, as I understand the word, craft means skill and power. But there is something at once deeply personal and purely impersonal in the way craft functions in relation to language. The word heals and restores. The word wounds and disillusions. I think each of us develops a set of habits, procedures and practices, consciously or unconsciously, that derives from our deepest feelings about ourselves and our relations. If we think of craft as partly a set of inherited procedures that can be learned, and partly an approach to work that we each develop as we go, then the whole subject makes more sense. Craft has meaning only in relation to what it serves. I've found it helpful to think of craft as respect: respect for the self, the medium, the subject, the audience. For poets, that last

part may be the hardest, trickiest notion of all. Who is my reader?

Dick Hugo said, "Look over your shoulder while you're writing and you'll see there is no reader." True. But when I think of a reader I sometimes think of a potential friend, maybe even an enemy, who is at least as smart as I am. Sometimes I think of the person who made the pot and incorporated a pattern of fingerprints into the design of a lovely and useful thing, and after the pot was broken and discarded and no longer apparently useful, how that potsherd lay out there in the dirt through hundreds of years of weather. Who is the audience? God? I don't know, I can only guess, but I'm part of it, just as the fingerprints of the potter are part of the pot, and the potsherd. The act of focusing leads to connection, and connection makes everything possible.

Writing a poem is a way of paying attention to experience, a way of concentrating and organizing experience. It can be "a momentary stay against confusion," as Frost said, or it can be a step toward what Rilke called "a deep confidence and the feel of a big time."

In a prose poem entitled, "A Reply to Matthew Arnold on my Fifth Day in Fano," James Wright focuses on a small thing and presents an alternative to the stance embodied in the following epigraph from Arnold: "In harmony with Nature? Restless fool...Nature and man can never be fast friends...." James Wright replies:

> ...Briefly in harmony with nature before I die, I welcome the old curse: a restless fool and fast friend to Fano, I have brought this wild chive flower down from a hill pasture. I offer it to the Adriatic. I am not about to claim that the sea does not care. It has its own way of receiving seeds, and today the sea may as

> well have a flowering one, with a poppy to float above it, and
> the Venetian navy underneath. Goodbye to the living place,
> and all I ask it to do is stay alive.

I love that poem for its humility and good humor, for its clarity of thought and expression, for the respect it shows "to the living place," and for the simple yet profound statement, "I am not about to claim that the sea does not care." It seems to me it took courage and imagination to write that poem, and not just because James Wright was dying of cancer when he wrote it, but because it embodies both a refusal to participate in deadening abstraction and a quiet but cleat statement and enactment of hope. Offering the sea a wild chive flower before he dies and asking the living place to stay alive is a modest private ritual, a small symbolic act.

Writing a poem so that others may participate imaginatively makes it a political act as well. I think Auden was wrong when he said poetry makes nothing happen. Poetry can allow us to participate in experiences and insights which can change our relationships to each other and the world of which we are a part, and poetry can turn us inside out.