

Making Meaning of Our World and Our Lives: The Importance of Reading and Writing

Some might argue that I came to this business of reading and writing out of laziness. There is a story in my family about a letter I wrote when I was seven or eight years old. It was intended for two favorite aunts. The letter, which was immediately reported back to my mother, now lives only in legend, though I do have the illusion that I remember writing it. It was a pleasantly warm Saturday. I was sitting on a stool in the shed where our farm machinery and tools were kept, writing pad balanced on my knees. My father was repairing a piece of equipment at the workbench nearby my perch. According to the story passed down, my letter began this way: "Dear Aunt Alice and Lou, I have to write this letter to you from the machine shed, because Nancy and Phyllis are cleaning, and if I stay in the house they will make me work."

Years later, I lived for a year with Phyllis, one of those housecleaning sisters, while doing research for my PhD dissertation. I registered with a temp agency that year and worked when I needed money, otherwise spending my days in the University of Minnesota library or the basement office that my sister and her family so generously made available to me. My days away from my temp agency assignments were consumed with books and words and writing. One day one of Phyllis' neighbors stopped by for coffee late in the day. She was an industrious woman with six children. Over coffee she asked me about my day. I said it had been much like many others, that I had mainly been reading and taking notes and digesting what I had been reading. She said she couldn't imagine having nothing better to do.

I don't think she meant this unkindly, but the implication was inescapable: I was frittering away my time. Reading. Writing. Running from the real work going on in the house.

In the years since, I have had occasion to think quite a lot about this matter of time spent reading and writing and why I find these activities to be so emphatically not idle pastimes but, to the contrary, critical to our wellbeing. They demonstrate the highest use of that most fundamental and distinctly human tool, language. When we read, we enjoy the benefits of someone else's efforts to connect with us. When we write, we give shape to thoughts and viewpoints previously hidden from public view. So why is this important, this process of communicating through words on a page or a screen?

First, reading forces us to slow down, to pause, to step back, to reflect. Today we need this more than ever because everything around us constantly urges us to accelerate. Many years ago, in a board meeting of the organization for which I work, a discussion took place regarding the recent purchase of a fax machine for our office. One of our board members, while approving the move, declared that she herself refused to have a fax machine because she felt it was only one more device contributing to a false sense of urgency. Now such a notion seems so archaic as to be charming, which is an indication of how much further down that path we have continued to travel. Everything, it seems, contrives to shorten our attention span and urge us to respond instantaneously.

Reading, on the other hand, asks us to linger, and it is in that lingering that we give ourselves the opportunity to find and create meaning. Author and poet Paul West, in an essay written for the New York Times "Writers on Writing" column, describes his memories of visiting his father's family home, where he would usually find his father's siblings "lying around reading books, oblivious of the workaday world but kept going by the beef sandwiches his mother plied them with all day." His father, a military man, was disdainful of his "shiftless" family, but West himself came to see this scene as a strong influence on his own vocation. "From my father's siblings," he says, "I gleaned the seeds of the contemplative life, the craving for a dream that shut the rest of the world

out, the importance of the waterfall of images in my own head....It took me a long time, until my second novel, many years after my boyhood visits to Church Row, to realize that the indolence, the dream, the unconnectedness that seemed my heritage from my father's family, was the foundry where the novelist's work gets done, at least started."

What's at stake is more than just the entertainment and delight so often generated by fiction. Rather, what is at stake goes to the very core of our perception of reality. One certain result of the failure to read and reflect is that we become vulnerable to all those who are so eager to shape meaning for us. And we are surrounded every day by forces and people who strive to do just that. No matter how neutral or dispassionate the reports are purported to be that we hear on the evening news or the morning radio, or read in the newspapers or on the internet, someone has created a reality and attached a meaning to it that they intend that we shall share before they have done with us.

When we read, with care and intention, we actively resist this insistence on hurrying, on rushing to judgment. We claim our right to digest the opinions being thrust upon us. In addition, the more we read, the more aware we are, the more prepared to recognize efforts to shape our opinions. The more we read, the more we develop the skill to become active participants in this engagement with the author, the more we make our own meaning as we absorb the words provided by another. Whatever our purpose, there is no question of the value of this examination, which forces us to carve out space in a crowded existence and to close out the riot of sound in which we live in order to listen carefully to one writer's voice.

University of London philosophy professor A.C. Grayling, a frequent contributor to the New York Times Book Review, suggests that the benefits of reading are huge, but only if we have prepared ourselves in the ways I have just described. In an essay entitled "On Reading," Grayling says,

“Reading does not automatically make people wiser or better. When it has that effect it is because readers have done the work themselves, quarrying the materials from their response to the printed page. But apart from practical experience of life, which is everyone’s chief tutor, scarcely anything compares with books as the mine where that quarrying can begin. To read is to enter other points of view; it is to be an invisible observer of circumstances which might never be realised in one’s own life; it is to meet people and situations exceeding in kind and number the possibilities open to individual experience. As a result, reading not only promotes self-understanding, it equips one with insights into needs, interests and desires that one might never share but which motivate others, in this way enabling one to understand, and tolerate, and even to sympathise with, other people’s concerns.”

These are large claims for the value of reading, and it is important to note that Grayling gives due credit to the “practical experience of life.” But it is a rare person whose life experience is so rich and varied that it can encompass all there is to be learned from the wealth of great or even average literature at our disposal. In a comfortable chair of our own choosing, with the likes of Charles Dickens, Naguib Mahfouz, Eva Hoffman, Ha Jin, and Barbara Kingsolver as our companions, we can gain nearly first-hand experience of life as a homeless boy living in the sooty streets of 19th-century London, a restless young woman stealing glances at the colorful alleys of Cairo from behind the curtained window of her walled compound, a Polish immigrant girl struggling to master an alien language and culture, a lonely military doctor in Mao’s China, and the daughter of missionaries in the turbulent and threatening world of the Congo. Coming to know these remote worlds and their complex inhabitants, from the vantage point of Grayling’s invisible observer, is an enlarging experience. It opens spaces in our minds and hearts where we can stow away, for later contemplation, the unexpected and initially confusing experiences we encounter in the course of our own ordinary everyday lives. It helps us

nurture, as Grayling asserts, a capacity for sympathizing with viewpoints and behaviors different from our own.

With this expanded web of experience comes a deeper capacity for connectedness. We not only establish a link to the writer whose words we are reading, and the characters whose lives the author reveals to us, but we establish a link to others who read and respond to these same words. Italo Calvino describes this mysterious process in his book *If on a winter's night a traveler* when he says, "You have with you the book you were reading in the café, which you are eager to continue, so that you can then hand it to her, to communicate again with her through the channel dug by others' words, which, as they are uttered by an alien voice, by the voice of that silent nobody made of ink and typographical spacing, can become yours and hers, a language, a code between the two of you, a means to exchange signals and recognize each other."

This notion of "the channel dug by others' words" through which we can communicate is the basis, of course, for all reading and discussion groups, from book clubs to facilitated examinations of texts. We find that we can talk more freely and fully about things that matter to us when we have as our reference point those channels dug by others' words, the phrase well-crafted to capture an elusive thought that we hope to share with another.

Several years ago the Federation conducted a program for state humanities councils called the Art of Association, designed to help the organizations, and especially the volunteer board members of these organizations, to think about their role as civic leaders in their states, and to address questions underlying the work of contributing to the civic and cultural lives of their communities. The group was asked, for each session, to read and discuss a text, guided by a facilitator.

Initially this idea produced a considerable level of skepticism and even anxiety among board members. “We have a long agenda to get through at this meeting. Do we really have time to discuss something unrelated to the business at hand?” And yet, by the end of the project, there was nearly universal appreciation for the process and what it had done for the boards. Nearly everyone felt it had allowed them, as board members, to come to know each other in new and productive ways, simply through the act of exchanging views around a piece of writing. It helped them look at their collective work more deeply and it improved their decision-making process. “The discussions are a unifying experience,” said one board member, “because these are individuals coming to a common text and responding to one another through the text.” In this way, such reading experiences become, as Professor Grayling asserts, “the basis for civil community and the brotherhood of man.”

This phenomenon is reported by participants in the many, many reading and discussion groups that state humanities councils sponsor throughout the country. There is surprising power in the simple act of bringing together people who have all read the same book and guiding them through a conversation of the ideas contained there. And unexpected things almost always happen.

Right here in the Sioux City area, Humanities Iowa funded a One Book One Siouland project in which area residents read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Some of you may have participated. According to project director Kim Steffen, Executive Director of the Orpheum Theatre Preservation Project, the program brought people together to discuss themes that proved to be as important now as they were then—prejudice; economic, religious and gender bias; intolerance; rites of passage; parenting; stereotypes. Steffen reported one particular story, involving a young African-American girl and her grandmother, that she thought exemplified the benefits the community enjoyed through this process. “The young girl,” says Steffen, “made a statement at one of the Barnes

and Nobel discussion groups that she never really understood why her grandmother ‘let’ people treat her that way. After reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she now understands that it was not a choice that her grandmother made, but rather her grandmother’s reality. The young girl feels that she better understands her grandmother now.”

If this act of reading, deliberate and engaged reading, as Calvino and Grayling indicate, has a profound influence on our perception of reality and our connection with one another, then so too can the act of writing. If reading helps us to find and interpret meaning in what others are saying, writing helps us give shape to the world. How empowering. How daunting.

For a dozen years, earlier in my life in Washington, DC, I taught writing to adults at a community-based literacy center. These were DC residents with jobs and families, many of whom had worked for years for people who had no idea they couldn’t read. They succeeded through astonishing feats of memory and elaborate fictions about lost glasses or eye problems. They carried out productive and responsible lives, in many cases, but they existed outside the world of the written word.

They were assigned to my writing class at a point when their reading skills were sufficient to support the writing effort, and they all came into the class in a state of cold fear. While I fully appreciated the huge distance that existed between their situation and mine, I just as fully recognized and empathized with the fear, which I was convinced was not so different from what I felt when confronted with a difficult assignment and a blank page. The dilemma is the same at whatever level we are functioning. We are faced with the task of making ourselves understood through the written word, the challenge of making meaning.

The results in this writing class were slow and sporadic. The breakthrough of one week was often followed by weeks of slogging through subject/verb agreement confusion and tedious spelling rules. But week by week the awareness grew of the potential power of this new ability. They became more daring in their expression. They began to reveal their individuality. They began to define themselves and their world through their writing. Asked to write about a happy memory, the burly truck driver Ralph wrote an essay that began with this exuberant sentence, "I remember when I was the best dancer in Danville, Virginia." Near the end of one term I asked the class to write about something they had learned about writing and about themselves. The first sentence of the essay from quiet, gentlemanly Henry read, "I have learned that things I feel on the inside can be brought to the outside."

At the most basic level, this is what we are doing every time we write—bringing to the outside what we see, think, and feel on the inside. Sometimes we do this not for an audience, necessarily, but simply so that we can indeed pull to the outside the formless and even chaotic stew of half-formed ideas and feelings that we carry around inside, so that we can examine and shape them, give them meaning.

Joan Didion talks movingly about this in her essay "On Keeping a Notebook." She has compulsively written things down, she says, since she was a child, and one of her achievements in this essay is to examine, with her readers, not only why she has done this but also what this notebook is, who it is for, and what its purpose is. Not a record of the facts of her life, she quickly assures us, for she has no taste for straight facts, as is confirmed by her family members, who constantly correct her factual versions of family stories.

"Very likely they are right," she says, "for not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened,

but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters. The cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the day's pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The days' events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again, a home movie run all too often, the father bearing gifts, the child weeping, an exercise in family love and guilt. Or that is what it was to me. Similarly, perhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont, perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind, and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we pretended to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow."

Joan Didion is an accomplished writer. But all of us are capable of achieving some measure of this miracle. When I was nearing the end of my graduate school course of study, I spent a glum Christmas holiday with my parents at the family farm, realizing with growing dismay that a seriously overcrowded teaching market was diminishing to near hopelessness the possibility of settling into the career I thought I was pursuing. I didn't talk with anyone about this during those holiday weeks, but the cheer of the season and the easy familiarity of the family surroundings perhaps brought the uncertainty of my own situation into sharper focus. At this same time my father was approaching a milestone of his own, retiring after 40 years of dairy farming.

Three weeks after I returned to school, I received a letter from my father, written on a Sunday evening the weekend of the farm equipment sale that marked his official retirement. With little preliminary, he wrote,

“There have been several times in my life that there has been a turn in life’s road and I couldn’t tell what was ahead. It can give you an empty feeling and can happen without warning. When I was 17 years old, working on a farm west of Knierem and would be a senior when high school started in September, in the middle of August we finished threshing at a place about 4 miles from the place I was working. I was driving the team hitched to the hay rack that we hauled bundles in. The sun was about to go down, and I was hit with the most desolate feeling of uncertainty about my future. That was 50 years ago last summer, and I can remember it as if it was yesterday. The same thing happened in the fall of 1935 when we were living on the Howard place and I came over here to do some plowing. We had bought this place and would be on our own independently for the first time. I can see around the bend in the road this time and have avoided the empty all-gone feeling so far. I did have a feeling that you were going through some of these things when you left for Kansas this time. Would it help if you knew that I thought, from experience, that everything will fall in place for you too?”

Unlike Joan Didion, he remembered the facts--or perhaps he didn’t. Maybe the sun wasn’t about to set, after all. Maybe it was slightly later or earlier than mid-August, but after 50 years, the feeling was perfectly defined, perfectly conveyed by those details, precisely true or not. And his ability to make meaning of those long-ago events and convey it to me at a crucial time made all the difference.

There is considerable work involved in this. Even just getting the words and sentences right is a challenge that can seem at various times trivial, monumental, tedious, and endlessly frustrating. Yet it is terribly important, as William Zinsser makes clear in his marvelous book entitled *On Writing Well*. “Writing is hard work,” he says. “A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the

third time. Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair. If you find the writing is hard, it's because it is hard. It's one of the hardest things that people do."

Maria Arana, editor of a collection entitled *The Writing Life*, describes her own experience, after years as an editor and critic, of facing the blank page. "For all the experience I had had with writers, first at publishing houses and then at *Book World*," she says,

"I could not appreciate the full contours of a writing life until I had gone into my study, closed the door, sat down and tried to write a book myself....It was during this preparatory period that the essays in this series assumed particular importance to me. I recalled the similar insecurities of so many writers represented here and the strategies that enabled them to write. There was Wendy Wasserman's counsel: Go to a far, secluded place; live in pajamas. Edmund Morris' advice: Find a good pen, get physical with words. Cynthia Ozick's warning: Reading and writing are like 'getting born or dying, you are obliged to do it alone.' So there I sat—in a room, as far away as I could get—in my pajamas, with a pen in hand. The editor's hat was gone, the critic's sneer in a drawer; I was ready to be the fool."

In my job I am compelled to undertake dozens of writing tasks a week—email messages to the members of my staff, memos to my board, summaries of meetings or conference calls. In every case, without fail and no matter how minor the communication, I am constantly asking myself, explicitly or subconsciously, what does it mean? What is the meaning I wish or need to convey? Every Friday I write what I call the Federation Update to all the members of our organization as well as others who choose to subscribe to our organizational listserv. I divide the message into categories--News from the Hill, news from the Federation, news from the NEH, news from the humanities

community. Depending on the events of the week, these communications are relatively brief or fairly long, but they are a weekly ritual, for which I clear the decks as much as possible—"can't do lunch that day, have to write the Update."

I am asked from time to time if I don't get tired of doing this every single week. Isn't there a sort of tyranny to having to report on all those Federation surveys and reports, all those congressional hearings, all those NEH national council meetings? Well, yes, but on the other hand, there is a certain satisfaction in being forced at least once a week to step back, look at what we have been doing, what Congress has been doing, and ask myself, "What does this mean? What does it mean to the state humanities councils?"

And here lies the secret that probably all writers feel uneasy about but also subconsciously count on: To a large degree--at least until someone troubles him or herself to contradict me--it means what I say it means. I try to be conscientious and honest in my analysis of these events, but I know that it is impossible for me to present an interpretation that is not colored, at least in some small part, by my own bias, that is not skewed by my own limited knowledge.

This is why I keep reading, and it is also why, I confess, I approach every single writing task with apprehension and a sense of inadequacy. When I began to think about organizing the words I intended to say to you today, I approached the task and retreated, multiple times. I found excuses and interruptions. I vacuumed the floor. I determined that my bathroom sink was in a state that could not be tolerated another moment. I took walks to collect my thoughts. I rearranged my desk and even my bookshelves. I scrubbed the kitchen counter. I did all those things that all those years ago I ran to the machine shed to hide from. And I asked myself when it was that those things became the escape, and writing became hard. And I concluded that it was at

some unmarked moment or series of moments when I came to realize that writing matters, that it is our very best tool for making meaning.