

Bloom, Lynn Z. *The Lexington Reader: Canons & Contexts*. Boston: Bedford
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But of course that is exactly it: not that I should ever use the line, but that I should remember the woman who said it and the afternoon I heard it. We were on her terrace by the sea, and we were finishing the wine left from lunch, trying to get what sun there was, a California winter sun. The woman whose husband was born the night the *Titanic* went down wanted to rent her house, wanted to go back to her children in Paris. I remember wishing that I could afford the house, which cost \$1,000 a month. "Someday you will," she said lazily. "Someday it all comes." There in the sun on her terrace it seemed easy to believe in someday, but later I had a low-grade afternoon hangover and ran over a black snake on the way to the supermarket and was flooded with inexplicable fear when I heard the checkout clerk exclaiming to the man ahead of me why she was finally divorcing her husband. "He left me no choice," she said over and over as she punched the register. "He has a little seven-month-old baby by her, he left me no choice." I would like to believe that my dread then was for the human condition, but of course it was for me, because I wanted a baby and did not then have one and because I wanted to own the house that cost \$1,000 a month to rent and because I had a hangover.

It all comes back. Perhaps it is difficult to see the value in having one's self back in that kind of mood, but I do see it; I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were. I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be; one of them, a seventeen-year-old, presents little threat, although it would be of some interest to me to know again what it feels like to sit on a river levee drinking vodka-and-orange-juice and listening to Les Paul and Mary Ford and their echoes sing "How High the Moon" on the car radio. (You see I still have the scenes, but I no longer perceive myself among those present, no longer could even improvise the dialogue.) The other one, a twenty-three-year-old, bothers me more. She was always a good deal of trouble, and I suspect she will reappear when I least want to see her, skirts too long, shy to the point of aggravation, always the injured party, full of recriminations and little hurts and stories I do not want to hear again, at once saddening me and angering me with her vulnerability and ignorance, an apparition all the more insistent for being so long banished.

It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about. And we are all on our own when it comes to keeping those lines open to ourselves: your notebook will never help me, nor mine you. "So what's new in the whiskey business?" What could that possibly mean to you? To me it means a blonde in a Pucci bathing suit sitting with a couple of fat men by the pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Another man approaches, and they all regard one another in silence for a while. "So what's new in the whiskey business?" one of the fat men finally says by way of welcome, and the

blonde stands up, arches one foot and dips it in the pool, looking at the while at the cabana where Baby Pignatari is talking on the telephone. That is all there is to that, except that several years later I saw the blonde coming out of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York with her California complexion and a voluminous mink coat. In the harsh wind that day she looked old and irrevocably tired to me, and even the skins in the mink coat were not worked the way they were doing them that year, not the way she would have wanted them done, and there is the point of the story. For a while after that I did not like to look in the mirror, and my eyes would skim the newspapers and pick out only the deaths, the cancer victims, the premature coronaries, the suicides, and I stopped riding the Lexington Avenue IRT because I noticed for the first time that all the strangers I had seen for years—the man with the seeing-eye dog, the spinster who read the classified pages every day, the fat girl who always got off with me at Grand Central—looked older than they once had.

It all comes back. Even that recipe for sauerkraut: even that brings it back. I was on Fire Island when I first made that sauerkraut, and it was raining, and we drank a lot of bourbon and ate the sauerkraut and went to bed at ten, and I listened to the rain and the Atlantic and felt safe. I made the sauerkraut again last night and it did not make me feel any safer, but that is, as they say, another story.

CONTEXTS FOR JOAN DIDION'S
"ON KEEPING A NOTEBOOK":
A WRITER'S PURPOSES

JOAN DIDION

Why I Write

Ten years after publishing "On Keeping a Notebook," Joan Didion again explains her purposes in "Why I Write," which appeared in the New York Times Book Review (1976). Although her own essay collections exclude this piece, college writing teachers have made it a staple of the essay canon. Didion admits that she "stole the title" from George Orwell, who wrote for political purposes (see Chapter 5). Although Didion explicitly rejected writing for political purposes in a 1977 interview with Sara Davidson (p. 41), later in her career she turned her full attention toward political writing, in such collections as *After Henry* (1992) and *Political Fictions* (2001).

In "Why I Write," Didion identifies her purposes as aesthetic and spiritual. Avoiding abstract ideas, she tries to make each individual word, and the arrangement of words in sentences, represent precisely each "physical fact" in "the pictures in

Why have the night lights in the bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years? 5

What is going on in these pictures in my mind?

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges. There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions. People on hallucinogens describe the same perception of objects. I'm not a schizophrenic, nor do I take hallucinogens, but certain images do shimmer for me. Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.

Just as I meant "shimmer" literally I mean "grammar" literally. Grammar is a piano I play by ear, since I seem to have been out of school the year the rules were mentioned. All I know about grammar is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. *Nota bene*: It tells you.

You don't tell it . . .

TOM WOLFE

The New Journalism

To use writing as a way to "remember how it was to be me" — the purpose Didion identifies in "On Keeping a Notebook" — inspired a whole generation of reporters: the New Journalists of the 1960s. Didion, Truman Capote (In Cold Blood, 1966), George Plimpton (Paper Lion, 1966), Hunter Thompson (Hell's Angels, 1967), Norman Mailer (Armies of the Night, 1968), and others did away with traditional "objective," "voiceless" reportage and instead immersed themselves in events and in the language

From Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, ed. Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (New York: Harper, 1973).

[her] mind." She is "a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper." From Didion's message and style, writers can learn the value of weighing closely similar words to find just the right one and of trying out different sentence patterns to find just the right emphasis.

Of course I stole the title for this talk from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: *Why I Write*. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I
I
I

In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctions, with ellipses and evasions — with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating — but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

I stole the title not only because the words sounded right but because they seemed to sum up, in a no-nonsense way, all I have to tell you. Like many writers I have only this one "subject," this one "area": the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. I may have other interests: I am "interested," for example, in marine biology, but I don't flatter myself that you would come out to hear me talk about it. I am not a scholar. I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word "intellectual" I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts. During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.

In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered, by everyone I knew then and for that matter have known since, the peripheral. I would try to contemplate the Hegelian dialectic and would find myself concentrating instead on a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor. I would try to read linguistic theory and would find myself wondering instead if the lights were on in the bevatron up the hill. When I say that I was wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron you might immediately suspect, if you deal in ideas at all, that I was registering the bevatron as a political symbol, thinking in shorthand about the military-industrial complex and its role in the university community, but you would be wrong. I was only wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron, and how they looked. A physical fact.

man Wuk's *Don't Stop the Carnival*, which he happened to be carrying in his backpack. He ripped out the page and gave it to me.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Fadiman divides readers who love books into "courtly lovers" and "carnal lovers." In what sense are these labels metaphorical? In what sense can they be explained literally?
2. Fadiman identifies herself as a carnal lover of books, and she clearly has greater sympathy with the way other carnal lovers treat their books than with the way courtly lovers treat theirs. What seems to be her implied criticism of courtly lovers of books?
3. What, for Fadiman, are the benefits of annotating books? What are your feelings about writing in books—"transforming monologues into dialogues," in Fadiman's words? (See also "What Are You Marking—and Why?", p. 7.)
4. What assumptions does Fadiman seem to make about her audience? What makes you think so? As a reader, do you feel as if you are a part of her intended audience? Why or why not?
5. In "Into the Electronic Millennium" (p. 995), Sven Birkerts expresses alarm that the printed word of books may be replaced by electronic text and images. After reading the Fadiman and Birkerts essays, write an essay in which you consider what you believe will be the fate of books in the electronic age.

STEPHEN KING

Write or Die

One of the most popular and prolific authors of our time, Stephen King (also known as Richard Bachman and John Swithen) began writing because he loved reading: the range of authors whom he cites as models includes H. P. Lovecraft, Ernest Hemingway, Elmore Leonard, Joyce Carol Oates, Graham Greene, and T. S. Eliot. Born in 1947, King began submitting stories to magazines and collecting rejection slips when he was twelve. He published his first story at age nineteen. Growing up in rural Maine, he helped his mother support the family with a number of tough jobs, including janitor, mill hand, and laundry laborer. Yet if King shows a penchant for gritty characters and situations, this can't be attributed entirely to his background—he reveals in them, and so does his audience. After graduating from the University of Maine (B.A., 1970), King taught high school English while working on his extremely popular first novel, *Carrie* (1974). A rush of best-sellers followed: *Salem's Lot* (1975), *The Shining* (1977), *The Stand* (1978), *The Dead Zone* (1979), *Firestarter* (1980),

and *Cujo* (1981). The string of novels, stories, and screenplays has continued—*Dreamcatcher* (2001) being a recent example. When his novella "The Body" (from the collection *Different Seasons*, 1982) was turned into the coming-of-age film *Stand by Me*, King's talent for poignant human drama attracted admirers outside fans of horror, fantasy, and science fiction.

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft (2000) is King's account of his inspirations, obstacles, and methods. Part autobiography, part writing manual, the book took shape while he was recovering from being hit by a car. King tells how his mother believed in his talent and how his wife, Tabitha King, pulled the story that became *Carrie* out of the trash and helped him develop it. "Write or Die," an excerpt from *On Writing*, discusses two other key influences—a guidance counselor at the end of his rope with the young King, and a ruthlessly honest newspaper editor.

Hardly a week after being sprung from detention hall, I was once more invited to step down to the principal's office. I went with a sinking heart, wondering what new shit I'd stepped in.

It wasn't Mr. Higgins who wanted to see me, at least; this time the school guidance counselor had issued the summons. There had been discussions about me, he said, and how to turn my "restless pen" into more constructive channels. He had enquired of John Gould, editor of Lisbon's weekly newspaper, and had discovered Gould had an opening for a sports reporter. While the school couldn't insist that I take this job, everyone in the front office felt it would be a good idea. *Do it or die*, the G.C.'s eyes suggested. Maybe that was just paranoia, but even now, almost forty years later, I don't think so.

I groaned inside. I was shut of *Dave's Rag*, almost shut of *The Drum*, and now here was the Lisbon *Weekly Enterprise*. Instead of being haunted by waters, like Norman Maclean in *A River Runs through It*, I was as a teenager haunted by newspapers. Still, what could I do? I rechecked the look in the guidance counselor's eyes and said I would be delighted to interview for the job.

Gould—not the well-known New England humorist or the novelist who wrote *The Greenleaf Fires* but a relation of both, I think—greeted me warily but with some interest. We would try each other out, he said, if that suited me.

Now that I was away from the administrative offices of Lisbon High, I felt able to muster a little honesty. I told Mr. Gould that I didn't know much about sports. Gould said, "These are games people understand when they're watching them drunk in bars. You'll learn if you try."

He gave me a huge roll of yellow paper on which to type my copy—I think I still have it somewhere—and promised me a wage of half a cent a word. It was the first time someone had promised me wages for writing.

The first two pieces I turned in had to do with a basketball game in which an LHS player broke the school scoring record. One was a straight piece of reporting. The other was a sidebar about Robert Ransom's record-breaking performance. I brought both to Gould the day after the game so he'd have them for Fri-

day, which was when the paper came out. He read the game piece, made two minor corrections, and spiked it. Then he started in on the feature piece with a large black pen.

I took my fair share of English Lit classes in my two remaining years at Lisbon, and my fair share of composition, fiction, and poetry classes in college, but John Gould taught me more than any of them, and in no more than ten minutes. I wish I still had the piece—it deserves to be framed, editorial corrections and all—but I can remember pretty well how it went and how it looked after Gould had combed through it with that black pen of his. Here's an example:

Last night, in the ~~well-loved~~ gymnasium of Lisbon High School, partisans and Jay Hills fans alike were stunned by an athletic performance unequalled in school history. Bob Ransom, ~~keyes~~ "Butler" Bob for tottling ~~Size and accuracy~~ scored thirty-seven points. Yes, you heard me right. ~~Thus~~ He did it with grace, speed....and with an odd courtesy as well, committing only two personal fouls in his ~~knightslike~~ quest for a record ¹⁹⁵³ ~~players~~ which has eluded Lisbon ~~thintade~~ since ~~the years of Korea~~...

Gould stopped at "the years of Korea" and looked up at me. "What year was the last record made?" he asked.

Luckily, I had my notes. "1953," I said. Gould grunted and went back to 10 looked up and saw something on my copy in the manner indicated above, he horror. It wasn't; it was pure revelation. Why, I wondered, didn't English teachers ever do this? It was like the Visible Man Old Raw Diehl had on his desk in the biology room.

"I only took out the bad parts, you know," Gould said. "Most of it's pretty good."

"I know," I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good—okay anyway, serviceable—and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. "I won't do it again."

He laughed. "If that's true, you'll never have to work for a living. You can do this instead. Do I have to explain any of these marks?"

"No," I said.

"When you write a story, you're telling yourself the story," he said. "When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are *not* the story."

Gould said something else that was interesting on the day I turned in my first two pieces: write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then it goes out. Once you know what the story is and get it right—as right as you can, anyway—it belongs to anyone who wants to read it. Or criticize it. If you're very lucky (this is my

idea, not John Gould's, but I believe he would have subscribed to the notion), more will want to do the former than the latter. . . .

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Why do you suppose King initially regarded writing for a newspaper as a punishment rather than an opportunity?
2. What did John Gould specifically teach King about good writing? How does King's reproduction of Gould's editing illustrate this advice?
3. What is the distinction between writing "with the door closed" and rewriting "with the door open" (paragraph 16)? Why are both important?
4. Compare King's advice about writing and rewriting with that of Donald M. Murray, George Orwell, Jane Kenyon, and Wendy Bishop in the Dialogue section, "Giving Good Advice: How to Write," at the end of this chapter.

ELIE WIESEL

Why I Write: Making No Become Yes

Elie Wiesel devotes his life to serving as the world's conscience of the Holocaust. He was born in 1929 in Sighet, Hungary, "which no longer exists except in the memory of those it expelled." During World War II, he survived harrowing experiences in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Members of his family were killed there, among the six million Jews systematically exterminated in Europe. As a teenager, he was liberated from Buchenwald in 1945 and sent to Paris, where he studied philosophy before immigrating to New York in 1956. Wiesel has devoted his life to writing some forty books of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama on the Holocaust theme, including *Night* (1961), *The Accident* (1962), *The Trial of God* (1978), and *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (1995). As one critic writes, in Wiesel's writing, "the Holocaust looms as the shadow, the central but unspoken mystery in the life of his protagonists. Even pre-Holocaust events are seen as warnings of impending doom." Wiesel's literary and humanitarian efforts have been acknowledged with a host of awards worldwide, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He was named a commander of the French Legion of Honor, and Humanitarian of the Century by the Council of Jewish Organizations.

On receiving the Congressional Gold Medal (1984), Wiesel explained his philosophy of writing: "I have learned that suffering confers no privileges: it depends on what one does with it. That is why survivors have tried to teach their contemporaries how to build on ruins; how to invent hope in a world that offers none; how to pro-

claim faith to a generation that has seen it shamed and mutilated." He elaborates on this theme in "Why I Write: Making No Become Yes," an essay originally published in the New York Times Book Review (April 14, 1986).

Why do I write?

Perhaps in order not to go mad. Or, on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness. Like Samuel Beckett, the survivor expresses himself "en désespoir de cause" — out of desperation.

Speaking of the solitude of the survivor, the great Yiddish and Hebrew poet and thinker Aaron Zeitlin addresses those — his father, his brother, his friends — who have died and left him: "You have abandoned me," he says to them. "You are together, without me. I am here. Alone. And I make words."

So do I, just like him. I also say words, write words, reluctantly.

There are easier occupations, far more pleasant ones. But for the survivor, writing is not a profession, but an occupation, a duty. Camus calls it "an honor." As he puts it: "I entered literature through worship." Other writers have said they did so through anger, through love. Speaking for myself, I would say — through silence.

It was by seeking, by probing silence that I began to discover the perils and power of the word. I never intended to be a philosopher, or a theologian. The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it. This is what Jewish tradition teaches us. But how to do this? "When Israel is in exile, so is the word," says the Zohar. The word has deserted the meaning it was intended to convey — impossible to make them coincide. The displacement, the shift, is irrevocable.

This was never more true than right after the upheaval. We all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent, intelligible words, our experience of madness on an absolute scale. The walk through flaming night, the silence before and after the selection, the monotonous praying of the condemned, the Kaddish of the dying, the fear and hunger of the sick, the shame and suffering, the haunted eyes, the demented stares. I thought that I would never be able to speak of them. All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing.

Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? The language of night was not human, it was primitive, almost animal — hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sound of beating. A brute strikes out wildly, a body falls. An officer raises his arm and a whole community walks toward a common grave. A soldier shrugs his shoulders, and a thousand families are torn apart, to be reunited only by death. This was the concentration camp language. It negated all other language and took its place. Rather than a link, it became a wall. Could it be surmounted? Could the reader be brought to

the other side? I knew the answer was negative, and yet I knew that "no" had to become "yes." It was the last wish of the dead.

The fear of forgetting remains the main obsession of all those who have passed through the universe of the damned. The enemy counted on people's incredulity and forgetfulness. How could one foil this plot? And if memory grew hollow, empty of substance, what would happen to all we had accumulated along the way? Remember, said the father to his son, and the son to his friend. Gather the names, the faces, the tears. We had all taken an oath: "If, by some miracle, I emerge alive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of those whose shadow will fall on mine forever and ever."

That is why I write certain things rather than others — to remain faithful.

Of course, there are times of doubt for the survivor, times when one gives in to weakness, or longs for comfort. I hear a voice within me telling me to stop mourning the past. I too want to sing of love and of its magic. I too want to celebrate the sun, and the dawn that heralds the sun. I would like to shout, and shout loudly: "Listen, listen well! I too am capable of victory, do you hear? I too am open to laughter and joy! I want to stride, head high, my face unguarded, without having to point to the ashes over there on the horizon, without having to tamper with facts to hide their tragic ugliness. For a man born blind, God himself is blind, but look, I see, I am not blind." One feels like shouting this, but the shout changes to a murmur. One must make a choice: one must remain faithful. A big word, I know. Nevertheless, I use it, it suits me. Having written the things I have written, I feel I can afford no longer to play with words. If I say that the writer in me wants to remain loyal, it is because it is true. This sentiment moves all survivors; they owe nothing to anyone, but everything to the dead.

I owe them my roots and my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself. And since I am incapable of communicating their cry by shouting, I simply look at them. I see them and I write.

While writing, I question them as I question myself. I believe I have said it before, elsewhere. I write to understand as much as to be understood. Will I succeed one day? Wherever one starts, one reaches darkness. God? He remains the God of darkness. Man? The source of darkness. The killers' derision, their victims' tears, the onlookers' indifference, their complicity and complacency — the divine role in all that I do not understand. A million children massacred — I shall never understand.

Jewish children — they haunt my writings. I see them again and again. I shall always see them. Hounded, humiliated, bent like the old men who surround them as though to protect them, unable to do so. They are thirsty, the children, and there is no one to give them water. They are hungry, but there is no one to give them a crust of bread. They are afraid, and there is no one to reassure them.

They walk in the middle of the road, like vagabonds. They are on the way to the station, and they will never return. In sealed cars, without air or food, they

travel toward another world. They guess where they are going, they know it, and they keep silent. Tense, thoughtful, they listen to the wind, the call of death in the distance.

All these children, these old people, I see them. I never stop seeing them. I belong to them.

But they, to whom do they belong?

People tend to think that a murderer weakens when facing a child. The child reawakens the killer's lost humanity. The killer can no longer kill the child before him, the child inside him.

But with us it happened differently. Our Jewish children had no effect upon the killers. Nor upon the world. Nor upon God.

I think of them, I think of their childhood. Their childhood is a small Jewish town, and this town is no more. They frighten me; they reflect an image of myself, one that I pursue and run from at the same time—the image of a Jewish adolescent who knew no fear, except the fear of God, whose faith was whole, comforting, and not marked by anxiety.

No, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either. "You will not understand, you will never understand," were the words heard everywhere during the reign of night. I can only echo them. You, who never lived under a sky of blood, will never know what it was like. Even if you read all the books ever written, even if you listen to all the testimonies ever given, you will remain on this side of the wall, you will view the agony and death of a people from afar, through the screen of a memory that is not your own.

An admission of impotence and guilt? I do not know. All I know is that Treblinka and Auschwitz cannot be told. And yet I have tried. God knows I have tried.

Have I attempted too much or not enough? Among some twenty-five volumes, only three or four penetrate the phantasmagoric realm of the dead. In my other books, through my other books, I have tried to follow other roads. For it is dangerous to linger among the dead, they hold on to you and you run the risk of speaking only to them. And so I have forced myself to turn away from them and study other periods, explore other destinies and teach other tales—the Bible and the Talmud, Hasidism and its fervor, the shtetl and its songs, Jerusalem and its echoes, the Russian Jews and their anguish, their awakening, their courage. At times, it has seemed to me that I was speaking of other things with the sole purpose of keeping the essential—the personal experience—unspeakable. At times I have wondered: And what if I was wrong? Perhaps I should not have heeded my own advice and stayed in my own world with the dead.

But then, I have not forgotten the dead. They have their rightful place even in the works about the Hasidic capitals Ruzhany and Korets, and Jerusalem. Even in my biblical and Midrashic tales, I pursue their presence, mute and motionless. The presence of the dead then beckons in such tangible ways that it affects even the most removed characters. Thus they appear on Mount Moriah, where Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, a burnt offering to their common God. They appear on Mount Nebo, where Moses enters solitude and death. They appear in

Hasidic and Talmudic legends in which victims forever need defending against forces that would crush them. Technically, so to speak, they are of course elsewhere, in time and space, but on a deeper, truer plane, the dead are part of every story, of every scene.

"But what is the connection?" you will ask. Believe me, there is one. After Auschwitz everything brings us back to Auschwitz. When I speak of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, when I invoke Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai and Rabbi Akiba, it is the better to understand them in the light of Auschwitz. As for the Maggid of Mezeritch and his disciples, it is in order to encounter the followers of their followers that I reconstruct their spellbound, spellbinding universe. I like to imagine them alive, exuberant, celebrating life and hope. Their happiness is as necessary to me as it was once to themselves.

And yet—how did they manage to keep their faith intact? How did they manage to sing as they went to meet the Angel of Death? I know Hasidim who never vacillated—I respect their strength. I know others who chose rebellion, protest, rage—I respect their courage. For there comes a time when only those who do not believe in God will not cry out to him in wrath and anguish.

Do not judge either group. Even the heroes perished as martyrs, even the martyrs died as heroes. Who would dare oppose knives to prayers? The faith of some matters as much as the strength of others. It is not ours to judge, it is only ours to tell the tale.

But where is one to begin? Whom is one to include? One meets a Hasid in all my novels. And a child. And an old man. And a beggar. And a madman. They are all part of my inner landscape. The reason why? Pursued and persecuted by the killers, I offer them shelter. The enemy wanted to create a society purged of their presence, and I have brought some of them back. The world denied them, repudiated them, so I let them live at least within the feverish dreams of my characters.

It is for them that I write, and yet the survivor may experience remorse. He has tried to bear witness; it was all in vain.

After the liberation, we had illusions. We were convinced that a new world would be built upon the ruins of Europe. A new civilization would see the light. No more wars, no more hate, no more intolerance, no fanaticism. And all this because the witnesses would speak. And speak they did, to no avail.

They will continue, for they cannot do otherwise. When man, in his grief, falls silent, Goethe says, then God gives him the strength to sing his sorrows. From that moment on, he may no longer choose not to sing, whether his song is heard or not. What matters is to struggle against silence with words, or through another form of silence. What matters is to gather a smile here and there, a tear here and there, a word here and there, and thus justify the faith placed in you, a long time ago, by so many victims.

Why do I write? To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Wiesel says, "The only role I sought [as a writer] was that of witness" (paragraph 6). What does he mean by "witness"? Could Gloria Naylor ("The Love of Books," p. 69) or any—or all—of the other writers in this book be considered "witnesses" to their beliefs and values? Explain your answer with references to the writers' works.
2. What does Wiesel mean by "[n]ot to transmit an experience is to betray it" (paragraph 6)? Why is it important to twenty-first-century readers that the experience of the Holocaust, which occurred over fifty years ago, be kept fresh in memory? What does Wiesel expect his readers to do with this knowledge?
3. Pick a cultural, social, or political issue that you feel profoundly invested in, and then write an essay in which you play the role of "witness," explaining why you think this issue should be kept alive and treated seriously. If possible, think of classmates or other people you know who aren't particularly invested in this issue, and write your essay to them, seeking to change their minds and perhaps move them to action. Discuss the subject with them first, in order to determine the points to emphasize in your argument.
4. What is the most appropriate language and tone to use in your essay? Is Wiesel's literary style in "Why I Write" suitable for your subject as well as his?
5. Write your own essay on "Why I Write" or "Why I Don't Write," using references to other writers in this chapter and to your own life, as appropriate.
6. In "On Keeping a Notebook" (p. 31), Joan Didion asserts that "[t]he impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one" (paragraph 4). A compulsion is a type of aberrant behavior. Do you think Wiesel is a compulsive writer? Is Didion? Comb through Didion's and Wiesel's essays, and then write about Didion's notion of the compulsive writer. How can you tell where dedication leaves off and compulsion begins? Is it worth being a compulsive writer if the results are satisfactory?

JOHN TRIMBUR

Guidelines for Collaborating in Groups

"Working on collaborative writing projects differs in important respects from working with others on individual writing projects. In the case of your own writing projects, the final result belongs to you. You are accountable for it and you get the bulk of the credit, even though the writing reflects the input of others. Collaborative writing, on the other hand, aims for a collective outcome produced jointly by a team of people with shared responsibility for the results." Thus John Trimbur, in The Call to Write (1999), explains a mode of composition widely in use in many fields and organizational contexts. Collaborative writing is only one area of Trimbur's expertise,

which centers on the cultural and political factors that affect writing and the teaching of writing, areas that he investigates in The Politics of Writing Instruction (1993), Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing (co-edited with Diana George, 2000), and Popular Literacy: Studies in Cultural Practices and Poetics (2001). Born in San Francisco in 1946, Trimbur grew up in Modesto, California. He earned a bachelor's in history from Stanford (1968) and a doctorate in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo (1982). His early career as a community college professor in Philadelphia and Baltimore led to positions as writing program director at Rutgers University and Rhode Island College. Currently, Trimbur is a distinguished professor of humanities and the director of the technical, scientific, and professional communication program at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts.

Any group of people working together on a project will face certain issues, and a group collaborating on a writing project is no exception. The following guidelines are meant to keep a group running smoothly and to forestall some common problems.

Recognize That Group Members Need to Get Acquainted and That Groups Take Time to Form

People entering new groups sometimes make snap judgments without getting to know the other people or giving the group time to form and develop. Initial impressions are rarely reliable indicators of how a group will be. Like individuals, groups have life histories, and one of the most awkward and difficult moments is getting started. Group members may be nervous, defensive, or overly assertive. It takes some time for people to get to know one another and to develop a sense of connectedness to the group.

Clarify Group Purposes and Individual Roles

Much of people's initial discomfort and anxiety has to do with their uncertainty about what the purpose of the group is and what their role in the group will be. Group members need to define their collective task and develop a plan to do it. This way, members will know what to expect and how the group will operate.

Recognize That Members Bring Different Styles to the Group

... Individual styles of composing can vary considerably. The same is true of individuals' styles of working in groups. For example, individuals differ in the way they approach problems. Some people like to spend a lot of time formulating problems, exploring the complexities, contradictions, and nuances of a situation. Others want to define problems quickly and then spend their time figuring out how to solve them. By the same token, people have different styles of interacting in groups. Some people like to develop their ideas by talking, while others prefer to decide what they think before speaking. So successful groups learn to incorpo-