



Mark Waldman's

## Six Figure Book Camp

### **Telling Stories with Your Senses: Lessons from Annie Dillard and the Duke University Writer's Workshop**

Dear Students,

I want you to study these two excerpts because they capture the essence of the *nonfiction* writer's craft. The first essay not only offers a very powerful exercise that you need to master if you want to write a popular book, but you can see that within the writing itself, the academic author has captured all the elements of good prose: rhythm, clarity, evocative emotion, and clear descriptions of his intention. And he uses an opening story to set the tone (in your book, the story can be yours or someone else's) and then he passes on information that the reader needs.

Then, because many of you are interested in writing memoirs, I want you to study Annie Dillard's chapter from one of the most famous books on writing ever published. She's a fiction writer, but memoir is also a form of fiction. Thus every paragraph must tell a story, unfolding from beginning to end. For me, one of the most important lessons she passes on is that the passages you feel most enamored of in your own writing are most likely the ones that I, or another editor, are likely to discard. But when you recognize Dillard's wisdom, you will be thrilled with throwing those parts away (or post them on Facebook or as a blog!) so that the real story beneath your words shines through.

Yours in the Spirit of Writing,  
Mark

### **Starting Down the Path**

Copyright by Georgann Eubanks  
Director, Duke University Writers' Workshop

"When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path, you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins.

The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. You attend. In your humility, you lay down the words carefully, watching all the angles...."

-Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (Harper & Row, 1989.)

At the last Mountain Lake Colloquium, we performed an experiment. A room full of academics, teachers of would-be music teachers, took turns sniffing at a bottle of Calamine lotion, a jar of white grade school paste, a tin of shoe polish, a bottle of vanilla extract, a pouch of tobacco. They were then asked to write about what these fragrances caused them to recall from their earliest days. The results were surprising, evocative, tearful, intense.

In a second exercise they wrote about their personal experiences as young music students just getting started in the field. These scholars were asked to remember the habits and quirks of a particularly significant early music instructor, beginning their writing exercise with the words, “My music teacher always...”. The writing was to be sensory, not analytical. We were seeking scenes not summary; images not ideas.

As Annie Dillard suggests above, this kind of writing about experience – either from memory or imagination (or both) – is less a probing for patterns and meaning and more organic. It is a journey, the retracing of memory and experience through concrete detail. It does not derive from empirical research, survey or experiment. It is writing that does not declaim or even attempt to explain. It is simply storytelling -- long on action and short on analysis. It captures the voices and intonation of its principal characters without citation or footnote. It is shaped by a natural narrative arc, not by an examination of previous findings, the explanation of research methodology, and then the summary of findings. It is writing that does not submit well to abstraction or poster session.

In fact, what this kind of writing might mean is something the author usually figures out after she has written and rewritten it, shaped and crafted it into a full blown narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

You do not write such a story in a single sitting, but you do start from something as visceral as a smell or someone as impressive as that first music teacher. You refine the first draft and subsequent drafts based on making the story sharper, clearer and more visceral. In so doing, you make the meaning sharper, but you do not ever directly state what you are coming to understand the story is about; you merely tell the story and leave room for the reader to make meaning of the assembled words, just as you did, following the path you have cleared through the woods with your words. You also know that the reader may not ultimately arrive at the same place as you did. They may also see other things along the path you’ve blazed because they bring along with them their own backpack of tools and experience.

As Flannery O’Connor wrote: “A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word of the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what the story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story.”

Substitute the word “song” or “painting” for the word “story” in O’Connor’s quotation, and you see that whether by words or brush strokes or notes, the rendering of experience in sensory form is the most primal form of human currency, exchanged daily. We make sense of the world through stories and pictures and sounds. We preserve our history and imagine our future most palpably through dramatic narratives.

**Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life***  
Excerpt from Chapter One

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself

deep in new territory: Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

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The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. You attend. In your humility, you lay down the words carefully, watching all the angles. Now the earlier writing looks soft and careless. Process is nothing; erase your cracks. The path is not the work. I hope your tracks have grown over; I hope birds ate the crumbs; I hope you will toss it all and not look back.

The line of words is a hammer: You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere. After giving many years' attention to these things, you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck.

Courage utterly opposes the bold hope that this is such fine stuff the work needs it, or the world. Courage, exhausted, stands on bakereality: this writing weakens the work. You must demolish the work and start, over. You can save some of the sentences, like bricks. It will be a miracle if you can save some of the paragraphs, no matter how excellent in themselves or hard-won. You can waste a year worrying about it; or you can get it over with now. (Are you a woman, or a mouse?)

The part you must jettison is not only the best written part; it is also, oddly, that part which was to have been the very point. It is the original key passage, the passage on which the rest was to hang; and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin....

It is the beginning of a work that the writer throws away.

A painting covers its tracks. Painters work from the ground up. The latest version of a painting overlays earlier versions, and obliterates them. Writers, on the other hand, work from left to right. The discardable chapters are on the left. The latest version of a literary work begins somewhere, in the work's middle, and hardens toward the end. The earlier version remains lumpishly on the left; the work's beginning greets the reader with the wrong hand.