WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE

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author of Eight Million Ways to Die

LAWRENCE BLOCK

WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE

HarperCollins e-books

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READ THIS FIRST OR WE'LL SHOOT THE DOG...

Funny thing. I write a fair number of introductions to anthologies and collections, and I often begin by urging the reader to skip my prefatory remarks. "The material needs no introduction," I say, "so why are you wasting your time with this? I have no choice, I'm getting paid for this, but you can skip to the good part."

Don't you dare skip this!

I wrote *Write For Your Life* in the summer of 1985, shortly after my wife and I moved from New York City to Fort Myers Beach, Florida. For a couple of years Lynne and I had been dashing around the country to present a seminar for writers, one which addressed the inner game of writing. We could have called it that—The Inner Game of Writing—or we could have called it Developing the Writer Within, but what we called it was Write For Your Life.

(And what a stroke of genius that turned out to be. Several times we called hotels to book space for the seminars, only to be turned down by folks who thought we were saying Right For Your Life, and that we had something to do with the abortion controversy.)

The seminar was remarkably effective, but its audience was going to be limited. I wanted to make its content available to people who would never be

able to attend it. So I took two weeks off and put it in book form, thinking that the volume would serve three purposes: it would help potential attendees to decide whether to take the seminar, while giving those who did attend something to take home with them and at the same time constituting a home seminar for everybody else.

I never even considered taking *Write For Your Life* to a commercial publisher. I knew I wanted to self-publish it, for two compelling reasons. First, I didn't want to wait a year or more for finished books—I wanted them in a hurry. Secondly, I'd always had fantasies of self-publication—I think most writers do, at one time or another—and figured this book was the perfect candidate. Its potential audience was one I could most effectively reach through our seminar advertising.

The experience was a happy one. I had books in hand by the end of the year, and essentially sold out our 5,000–copy first printing over the next couple of years. I priced the book too low—the cover price was $10, and it should have been at least $15 and probably $20, given the economics of the mail-order business—and I don't know that we made money on it, since it's hard to know how to calculate the advertising costs. But I had fun, and that was the point. (It generally is.)

Within two years, Lynne and I were out of the seminar business. I know there's a way to make a profit doing seminars, but I swear we couldn't find it. By the time we finished paying for plane tickets and hotel space and advertising, we were lucky to break even—and the amount of time and energy expended was incalculable. That was okay as long as we were enjoying ourselves, but the time came when the experience of leading the seminars began to feel like performance, and I have always had a low threshold for boredom. (I have a hunch it's essential equipment for a writer.) Since we were knocking ourselves out and losing money, the decision to stop was not terribly hard to reach. Shortly thereafter we put the Fort Myers house on the market and spent two years and change driving around the country. Then we came back

to New York, and we've been here ever since.

The seminar's over and done with, the book's out of print—but *Write For Your Life* has somehow refused to die. People who took the seminar keep turning up to tell me what a powerful and lasting effect it had on them. All sorts of people want the book—and I haven't had books to sell them. My stock of 5,000 copies has long since dwindled to a single box of two dozen, and, while I sell lots of books through my newsletter and on my website, I've been reluctant to put these on the market; the book commands a very high price as a collector's item, and I wouldn't feel comfortable charging that kind of premium to someone who wants the book for its content, not its collector value.

The obvious answer would be to reprint the book, but I haven't been in a rush to do that, either, because it's out of date in certain significant ways. It talks about the seminar itself as an ongoing entity, and it's not; I've been there and done that, and the last thing I intend to do is return to the seminar dodge. It would take substantial rewriting to update the book in that respect.

Then too, the tone of the book is more Gee Whiz than I'm comfortable with sixteen years later. It would take a lot of work to tone that down, and it might very well be to the book's detriment.

For at least five years now I've been promising to get the book back in print, and I don't seem to find the time and/or inclination to fix it. So I've decided the hell with it. It strikes me as more important to get it back in print than to make it perfect, and toward that end I've done some light editing, and have written this introduction and urged you to read it in order to put the whole book in perspective. The book's insights still strike me as valid, and the exercises are still useful, and the whole thing still works.

I've made a few changes. My friend Bob Mandel wrote an introduction, which I've dropped, and I myself wrote a final chapter of acknowledgments,

in which I said very nice things about a number of people. I've dropped that, too; I wish them all well, but the material seemed irrelevant.

Write For Your Life owed a lot to various seminars we ourselves took in what used to be called the Human Potential Movement. I've edited out specific references to these teachers and seminars insofar as possible, as I've lost touch with them, don't know what's still available, and don't know that I'd be inclined to recommend any of them in their present form.

If you want the original bound book, check my website, www.lawrenceblock.com. If I decide to put my remaining copies on the market, that's where you'll find them. Similarly, if our storage locker yields up copies of the *Affirmations for Writers* tape, or if I have it re mastered and decide to market it again, I'll let the world know via the website.

There. Aren't you glad you took the time to read this? And now we don't have to shoot the dog.

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE WONDERING WHY I SUMMONED YOU ALL HERE

Hi. I'm Larry Block, and I'd like to welcome you to Write For Your Life.

I've chosen that last sentence to begin this book because I can't think of a better way to convey what the next 60,000 words are all about. The volume you are holding represents an attempt to take an intensive day-long seminar for writers and put it on paper. Since Write For Your Life is an experiential seminar, deriving much of its power from the shared energy and kinetic interaction of its participants, my aim has been to recreate that experience in book form, and it seems logical to begin by standing up in front of you, as it were, introducing myself, and inviting you to share the experience rendered herein.

But that, I'm afraid, is hindsight. I chose that opening sentence because I'm used to it. I've stood up in front of groups of people over thirty times in the past two years to introduce myself and my seminar. I have been told repeatedly that I seem remarkably calm and laid-back in front of the room. I do not always feel all that calm.

The first Write For Your Life was in Indianapolis in November of 1983. There were about sixty people in the room, and none of them had the slightest idea what they were getting into. I had been struck by the idea for the seminar in July, had outlined and developed my material, and had scheduled

a seminar in New York City for mid-November. I had previously been booked to teach fiction writing at the Central Indiana Writer's Conference in Indianapolis, with a two-and-a-half-hour presentation on Saturday and Sunday. It occurred to me that this would be a great opportunity to give my seminar an out-of-town tryout. If it worked before an Indiana audience who had been in no way prepared for what I was going to do, it would certainly work for a group of New Yorkers who had read our promotional material and specifically chosen to pay a hundred dollars each for what we were offering. And, if it dropped dead in Indianapolis, who'd know? I could just make a point of flying over the state in the future, or driving around it.

Because, you see, I had no real way of knowing that Write For Your Life would work. I knew the way writers were accustomed to being taught. They were used to lectures ("A short story has a beginning, a middle and an ending." "I think what all of us editors, and certainly those of us at *Modern Reptile & Amphibian*, are looking for is a story that breaks all our own rules and wins us over anyway." "And then John O'Hara said to me, 'Willie'—he always used to call me Willie—"). They were used to reading their work out loud and having it analyzed and criticized by their fellows. They were not ready for some clown from New York announcing that they would start off with a group meditation "to center the energy in the room." Nor were they prepared for the various interactional processes that would comprise the seminar.

That first morning in Indianapolis I felt like one of those divers in Acapulco, those kids who leap off the cliffs before the wave comes in, calculating that it'll get there the same time they do. If they're wrong about that, they'll hit the rocks instead of the water.

Come to think of it, I *always* feel like one of those Mexican kids. That first day, I felt like the first one who ever did it. It looked good on paper, and it was the sort of thing that ought to work, but how did I know the wave would come in when it was supposed to?

The wave came in right on schedule in Indianapolis. Looking back on that weekend, realizing that I presented new material to an unprepared audience with no trained assistants on hand, I can only marvel that it worked as well as it did. I was sustained throughout by the excitement of the whole thing, and by the time I boarded my flight back to New York Sunday evening I had scheduled a regular seminar in Indianapolis for the following June and found someone to be our local organizer for the area. I think I could have flown home that night without the plane. I was exhausted from the energy I'd put out over the weekend, but at the same time I was greatly energized and uplifted by the experience. I had never had that particular feeling before, and I knew I wanted more of it.

* * *

Seminar season is a crazy time. Typically, a weekend goes something like this: Friday morning, Lynne and I get up early, pack more bags than we can comfortably carry, remember on our way out the door that we've forgotten the cassette player, and race to the airport in time to fly to the seminar location. We spend what's left of Friday making last-minute on-site arrangements-checking the room, handling details with the hotel's catering manager and our own local organizer, making sure we have enough assistants lined up, writing out name tags and getting a floral centerpiece delivered. Saturday, from ten to seven, we present the seminar. Saturday night we collapse, and Sunday morning we pack up and fly home again.

Then we spend the week scheduling advertising and booking hotel space and processing book and tape orders and answering phone calls and paying bills and checking receipts and handling enrollments, and then it's Friday morning and we're off again. We get to travel a lot, but we rarely see much besides airports and hotels. We get to meet a lot of people, but we rarely have the time to get to know them.

This is not a complaint. It is preamble to a story.

The story is told of Sinclair Lewis, who at the height of his fame was engaged to present a series of lectures on writing to students at Harvard University. Lewis at the time was the ultimate literary lion, a huge popular success and a critical favorite as well. He had turned down a Pulitzer Prize and accepted a Nobel Prize, he had hit the best seller list repeatedly, and he had acquired a personal reputation for outrageous behavior that very nearly eclipsed his work. Not surprisingly, his lectures were immediately oversubscribed and the authorities chose to hold them in a main auditorium.

At the appointed hour, the great man strode onto the stage in front of a packed house. For a long moment he stood and regarded his audience. "How many of you," he demanded, "want to be writers?"

A few tentative hands went up. Lewis continued to stare at the assembly. More hands were raised, until everyone in the large room had his hand in the air.

"Then why aren't you home writing?" Lewis snarled, and stalked off the stage.

Having made his point, he subsequently stalked back on again and gave his lecture. After all, the man was getting paid for this, and he knew which side of the bread held the butter. All the same, Lewis's query echoes on down through the years. If one is to be a writer, one is to sit home and write. Why wasn't the audience home writing? For that matter, why wasn't Lewis himself home writing?

I tell this story now not to lead you to set this book aside and proceed directly to your typewriter, but to turn the question upon myself. I've just told you how I spend my time during seminar season, which typically includes not only the spring months when we have seminars scheduled but the several months preceding them when the advance work gets done. During these months, while I may put in any number of twelve- and fifteen-hour days, I do virtually no writing aside from my monthly column for *Writer's Digest*.

If I am indeed a writer, and such has been my occupation for over a quarter of a century, then why on earth am I gadding about the country welcoming people to Write For Your Life? Why am I writing form letters and ad copy when I could be writing novels?

Why aren't I home writing?

Let me assure you that this is by no means the first time the question has occurred to me. It comes up frequently, especially during the inevitable low points of seminar season, when the work involved seems to be too much, the rewards too few, and the time and energy commitments too great. Why am I doing this? Why did I start doing this in the first place?

To answer that, I'll have to tell you something about the origins of Write For Your Life.

* * *

In May of 1983, Lynne and I took an intensive weekend seminar, one of those holistic transformational experiences designed to change your life. We took it, and it did what it was designed to do, transforming and enlarging our perceptions in any number of ways.

A month later, we took an introductory one-day version of the seminar as a refresher course, and a month after that, we took the weekend version a second time. And, somewhere in the course of June or July, it struck me that there was a way to adapt some of what I had learned in the seminar to render it specifically useful for writers.

Because I was more aware than ever that the traditional methods of teaching writing did not work very well. There did not seem to be very much correlation between the studying a person undertook and the writing he or she subsequently produced. While some academic programs did have a remarkable record of turning out successful writers, I was by no means certain that the teaching at those programs had much to do with the results;

the more prestigious programs are able to select extremely promising students to begin with, and that these writers-to-be, gathered together and working together, ultimately produce good work is only to be expected.

The old bromide, that writing cannot be taught, is abundantly quoted, and it seemed to me that most writing classes served largely to prove the point. As I've remarked more than once in my WD column, there is no guaranteed success with writing. If a person wants to be a dentist, and if he prepares properly in college and gets into a reputable dental school, and if he applies himself to his studies, when he's done he'll be a dentist. He may not be the World's Greatest Dentist (*my* dentist is the World's Greatest Dentist), but he'll most likely be able to make a living at it.

Not so with writing. The same person could conceivably take every writing course and program offered, attend writing conferences every summer, read every instructional book and every issue of WD cover to cover, and never in his life write anything that anyone would read with pleasure, let alone rush to publish.

This is not to say that writing courses are valueless. Almost all of them work to the advantage of almost all of the people who take them. The course I took in college was not without value to me; the two courses I myself taught—a semester at Hofstra, a one-week seminar at Antioch—seemed to be of some benefit to my students.

But it seemed to me that I was now in a position to offer something that neither I nor anyone else had previously offered, and that Write For Your Life as I envisioned it could make a substantial difference in the writing lives of the people who took it. And that, I suppose, is the main reason I decided to go into the seminar business. I had thought of something new, and I wanted to see if it would work.

I found out that it did work, and that I got a tremendous amount of satisfaction out of it. It was exciting to come out from behind my typewriter

and work directly with people. It was surprisingly enjoyable, too, to create a business from the ground up, to schedule seminars and run direct-mail campaigns and deal with all the mundane aspects of business which for years I'd assumed I had no aptitude for, and would not enjoy.

I also went into the seminar business, let it be said, with the hope of profit. It seemed clear enough that, if we could fill all the chairs at $100 a head and keep expenses within manageable limits, we could come out ahead financially. In this respect, Write For Your Life has been successful from the beginning, if in a small way. Some seminars have lost money, however, and overall I doubt we cleared fifty cents an hour for the time we put in.

Why aren't I home writing? At a seminar a few months ago, one of our graduates, taking Write For Your Life for a second time, reminded me that she'd asked me essentially that question the first time she took the seminar. She said she'd been struck by my answer, and I had to ask her what it had been.

"You said you were grateful for all you'd gotten out of writing," she said, "and this was your way of giving something back."

I can't honestly recall having said that; it sounds altogether too high-minded to have come out of my mouth, and I wonder that I didn't choke on the words. And yet I suppose they're true enough. It is a fundamental principle of any number of spiritual disciplines that more is given to him who gives of himself, that you have to give it away in order to keep it. It would stand to reason that, in order to continue to grow as a writer, it is incumbent upon me to give something back to writing. It is not altruism that leads a farmer to spread fertilizer upon his fields. It is pure self-interest, and I am similarly acting in my own best interest when I present a seminar. (I can only hope that the farmer and I are spreading a different sort of material.)

Another reason I've remained in the seminar business is that the seminars themselves are very clearly a tool for my own growth. It has been said that one generally teaches what one has to learn, and that the teacher is often his

own worst student. I don't know how good or bad a student I've been, but I do know that every time I lead a seminar I'm taking it myself at the same time, and that I've never yet failed to learn something, to internalize WFYL's teachings on a slightly deeper level.

This is understandable, in view of the fact that I set out to create precisely the seminar that I would have liked to be able to take myself. From the beginning, I've had three absolute requirements for Write For Your Life. I decided then that it would have to be fun to lead, fun to take, and that I would have to be able to believe that it made a difference in people's lives. Once it ceased to measure up to these three yardsticks, I resolved to stop doing it.

* * *

That should give you an idea of how a nice boy like me got into a business like this. Now another question. Why am I writing this book?

In a sense, my goals with this book are the same as with the seminar. I'm just translating my material into a different medium.

In so doing, it is my intention to serve the needs of three classes of readers.

First of all, I want to provide WFYL graduates with a way they can take the seminar home with them in concrete form. For some time now graduates have been asking to have the seminar made available in book form, so that they can reinforce its impact later on.

A much larger category of reader is composed of writers who for one reason or another cannot conveniently come to one of our seminars. As I write these lines, I look forward to a spring seminar season of seventeen or eighteen seminars. If each is fully enrolled with eighty persons in attendance, our total enrollment for the year will run around 1,400 persons. That's a fair amount of people, but at the same time it's less than one half of one percent

of the regular readership of *Writer's Digest*.

We travel all over the country, but we don't get close enough to some people for them to be able to attend. (This varies with the writer; two fellows from Alaska were at our most recent Boston seminar, while one woman wrote that she couldn't possibly attend our Houston seminar because she lived on the opposite side of the city.) Some writers have schedule conflicts. Some can't afford—or think they can't afford—the tuition. This book is designed to bring such readers as much of the seminar as I can fit between its covers. (It won't have everything, because the essence of Write For Your Life is the experience which is created on the spot by all the participants, and that can't be transcribed onto the printed page. On the other hand, there is material in this book that is not included in the seminar—because of time limitations, and because I've come up with a couple of processes which work better in print than they do in the room.)

When I talked about this book, some friends told me I might be making a mistake by writing it. "You'll undercut your seminar," they told me. "If people can get it in book form for ten bucks, they won't want to pay a hundred for the same thing."

Actually, I don't think that's true at all. In fact my third purpose in writing this book lies in its enormous potential as an enrolling device for the seminar. It is very much my hope that, after having read this book, you'll want to take the seminar. And it is my certain conviction that the more accurately and completely I can commit the seminar to print, the more effective it will be toward that end.

You see, I have the great advantage of knowing that Write For Your Life works. And I know too that it works better the more people know about it. One of the reasons we offer a 50% discount to graduates who repeat the seminar is that their familiarity with the processes and the material adds strong positive energy to the whole room; almost invariably, such repeaters tell us that the seminar had greater impact the second time because they

knew what was coming and were able to lend themselves more completely to the experience.

If Write For Your Life is something you would enjoy and profit from, this book will whet your appetite, allay your anxieties, and increase your capacity to gain from the seminar. If, on the other hand, Write For Your Life is not something you would enjoy at this stage in your life and writing career, this book will help you realize as much. And that's fine, because the last thing we want to do is bring people into the room who don't want what we have to offer.

* * *

I have other reasons for writing this book. I expect it will be easy to write. A month ago I presented the last of a series of twelve seminars, so I'm ready for a siege at the typewriter, and I've certainly had enough recent experience with the material that it ought to be fresh in my mind.

I think it will be fun to do, too. A lot of interesting things have happened during the various seminars, and I expect to enjoy putting some of them onto the page. I'm sure, too, that the process of writing about the seminar will concretize a lot of its elements for me.

Part of the fun will come in publishing the book. I've never self-published in the past, but when I first conceived writing a book about the seminar I saw that it was a logical vehicle for self-publication, in that I could expect to sell a large proportion of copies through direct sales at seminars and through the mail. The opportunity to get my feet wet with relatively little risk and every prospect of profit is most attractive to me. And, after years of criticizing all my publishers for their various shortcomings, it should be interesting to see things from their point of view. (Either I'll learn a good lesson in humility or I'll discover I was right all along!)

All in all, I suppose writing this book involves the same criteria as leading

the seminar. I intend for the book to be fun to write, fun to read, and likely to make a positive difference in people's lives.

Mine included.

* * *

So, as I was saying:

Hi. I'm Larry Block, and I'd like to welcome you to Write For Your Life.

LIKE A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Let me set the stage for you.

When you hear those words of welcome, you'll be seated in a meeting room, probably at one of the better chain hotels. The chairs will be set up theater-style, and there will be about eighty of them. They'll be facing a pair of tall chairs backed by a table, and on the table you'll see a cassette player, a floral arrangement, and a microphone that I probably won't use much during the day.

It will be ten o'clock when I stand up and welcome you. You'll have shown up around 9:30 to register, paying the balance of your tuition if you haven't prepaid in full and picking up your name tag and your official Write For Your Life yellow ballpoint pen. (We used to supply spiral-bound notebooks, too, but it turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. We had to rush around buying them at the last minute, and most people brought their own anyway, so we would wind up with a suitcaseful to lug home with us. So you'll have brought your own notebook, but if you forgot it, we'll have a spare on hand for you.)

Our organizer and an assistant will be helping Lynne at the registration table. A couple more assistants will be stationed at the book table, selling books and tapes and assuring you that I will indeed happily autograph books,

but that I'll be doing that at the end of the day.

Perhaps you'll buy some of the products at this point. Very possibly, though, you'll be feeling a certain amount of hostility toward us : *They charge a hundred bucks for this and expect us to buy the books.* (Only if you want them.) *They even charge sales tax.* (We have to.) *The least they could do is give us a cup of coffee.* (Later, at the coffee break.)

You may be wondering what ever possessed you to sign up for this in the first place. You may look around the room and decide all your fellow writers are a bunch of creeps and losers. Don't worry about it. Just let yourself feel whatever you're feeling. In a couple of hours those creeps and losers will have been magically transformed into your soulmates, and you'll wonder where they've been all your life.

Meanwhile, though, go ahead and enjoy your hostility. And take a moment to give yourself credit for showing up. Of all the writers who read our promotional material and think about coming, only a small fraction sign up. And of those who do, a fairly consistent ten percent don't get in the door the morning of the seminar. Many of those who do show up tell us that they tried to invent an excuse to keep them home that morning.

You see, it's often said of seminars like Write For Your Life that they begin to work on you and for you as soon as you sign up for them. That simple act amounts to a powerful confrontation for that part of you that perceives any prospect of change as dangerous. Write For Your Life is specifically engineered to challenge and overthrow some of your negative beliefs about yourself, and a portion of your mind believes that those negative beliefs are essential to your survival as a writer and as a human being.

Another portion of your mind knows that it's safe for you to move in a positive direction, and that's the part of you that made sure you showed up this morning. So take a moment to give yourself credit for following your own best instincts and getting here.

* * *

At ten o'clock, I'll stand up and bid you welcome. Then, to give the few latecomers a chance to turn up and register, we'll all listen to the first ten minutes of my tape of affirmations for writers. (We'll listen to the tape again during the afternoon session, so I'll tell you more about it in a later chapter.)

When we first had the tape available, I had one of the assistants put it on and made my own grand entrance after it had been playing for ten minutes. Then one day someone overheard what people were muttering during the tape. They were saying things like, "Does anybody know if he's here? Is this what we get for our hundred dollars?" While this particular anxiety was soon laid to rest by my appearance a few minutes later, I figured there was no need to put people through that, and that it would keep them from getting as much as they might from the tape. So I stand up and welcome you, and then we listen to the tape.

* * *

After ten or twelve minutes I interrupt the tape, welcome you once more, and tell you a little about the seminar so you'll have a better idea of what it is and is not. But first I do something a little bit unusual. I ask everybody to take a breath.

Do that now, will you? Take a deep breath and let it all out.

Great.

Do it again, huh? Take a deep breath and, without holding, let it all out.

Thanks.

Intermittently throughout the seminar (and now and then throughout this book) I may suggest that you take a breath. I do that not out of some egomaniacal desire to control your respiration but because we've found

that the way people breathe has a lot to do with the way things flow at the seminar.

Write For Your Life is, among other things, an inspirational seminar, and it is not coincidental that respiration and inspiration have the same Latin root. When we breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, we are essentially inhaling fresh energy and exhaling depleted negative energy.

No news there. But unfortunately most of us have the whole process hooked up wrong, in that we react to stress not by breathing more but by holding our breath. When we're afraid we hold our breath. When we're anxious we hold our breath. When we want to concentrate intently we hold our breath. When we're feeling tired we forget to breathe—until our bodies remind us by causing us to yawn.

And what does this breath-holding do? Quite simply, it locks our fear or anxiety or tension into our bodies on a cellular level. I'm not sure just why our instinct works contrary to our best interest in this particular case; one theory suggests that holding our breath in times of stress is something we learned to do at birth, when we had trouble taking our first breath. Whatever the cause, the remedy is clear enough, and it lies in breathing more rather than less, and in making a special effort to breathe more when the energy—our own or that of the room in general— tends to drop or go flat.

One of the key responsibilities of WFYL's volunteer assistants is to do a lot of breathing throughout the day; it helps lighten things up for the whole room. And our good friend David Pike, who organizes for us in New York City, takes it upon himself to remind *me* to breathe.

You don't have to be in the seminar room in order to put the power of your own breath to work for you. As you read this book, take a conscious breath from time to time, especially if you feel your attention wandering. (I may remind you from time to time.)

And, when you're at your desk writing, don't forget to breathe. Try to get in the habit of taking a deep breath whenever your mind feels stuck. If

your energy level drops, take a series of ten or a dozen connected breaths. (In connected breathing, you keep the breath flowing without holding either at the top of the inhale or the bottom of the exhale; each breath begins where the other leaves off.) As a reminder, you might want to put up a sign for yourself. Write *Breathe!* on an index card and pin it up above your desk where it will catch your eye.

Isn't that a hell of a note? You come to Write For Your Life to learn how to write better, and this ding-a-ling stands up there and tells you how to breathe.

Well, first thing's first. It's possible for us to breathe perfectly fi ne without writing, after all, but if we quit breathing altogether it's bound to have a bad effect on our writing sooner or later.

* * *

Now that you're breathing (or holding your breath in stubborn defi ance), I'd like to tell you something about Write For Your Life.

I could begin by saying that Write For Your Life is an inspirational and motivational seminar designed to help you get out of your own way and get what you want as a writer. In addition, I can say that it is an experiential seminar rather than an informational one.

What does that mean? Very simply, it means that the seminar works not by transferring a body of data from me to you. There is a certain amount of information transmitted in the course of the seminar, but that's very much secondary to the main function of the WFYL training, which is to create an experience in the room which will in and of itself change the way you see yourself and your work.

There are some areas of human endeavor in which factual knowledge is a key element. A medical student has to learn the names of all the bones in the body. A law student has to ingest a great body of facts in order to

pass the bar exam. Writers in my experience generally have a vast store of knowledge, but it is not their bank of data about writing which makes them effective writers. There are any number of books available which will tell you the facts you ought to know in order to write effectively. Many of them are extremely useful. I don't condemn them— indeed, I've written a couple of them myself—but I know that there are any number of people who've read all the books (including mine) and have made no discernible progress with their writing, while there are others who have never read a single book or magazine article on writing and have been extremely successful.

Many of us have a great yearning for data. It comforts us to know that we are adding facts to our store of knowledge. During the afternoon of the seminar, there's a point where I provide a definition of an affirmation prefatory to our work with affirmations. An affirmation, I intone, is a strong positive thought which we implant in our consciousness with the aim of producing results in our lives. There must be something about the way I say this that leads almost everyone to write it down, and there's always a sense of group satisfaction in the room. People seem to be glad that I've given them something factual to write down and grab hold of.

One fellow who took WFYL in San Francisco wrote me a letter several months later to tell me that he felt he hadn't gotten anything out of the day. He explained that he hadn't learned anything new at the seminar, that he had encountered all the material before in one form or another by having read my books and columns for several years. If you are sufficiently committed to the idea that a learning experience must embody the absorption of new data, you might have a similar reaction.

Because there's no $100 secret in Write For Your Life, I'm perfectly willing to share anything I know about writing whenever I sit down to write my monthly column. I haven't been holding back some key element that's available only to people who shell out a hundred bucks.

No, it's the experience of WFYL that makes it what it is. And, because the

seminar is an experiential one, it's different every time I present it. Similarly, each seminar is a slightly different experience for every person who takes it. What you get out of it is at least partially determined by what you bring to it—and by what you're prepared to get out of it. This may sound like the old dentist's trick of making the patient responsible for the results—i.e., if you wind up losing the tooth, it's your fault for not flossing properly. That's not what I mean, because I don't believe anybody's at fault; it's more a matter of some people being ready to receive more than others at a particular time.

I can see how this works by looking at my own experience in taking seminars myself. The first several times I took a seminar on relationships, there were two sections on family patterns which I was certain didn't apply to me. I couldn't relate them to my experience, and indeed I could barely stay awake during the discussion. Then I took the training one more time, and the same sections were presented precisely as they'd been presented to me two or three times before, and suddenly they had enormous impact upon me and applied to me as if they'd been designed with me in mind. It's not hard to see what was going on. The first times, I couldn't really hear what was being said. I heard the words, but they didn't register. Then, when I was ready to take them in, some door opened somewhere in my mind and let the words in.

* * *

Another thing I'm apt to say about Write For Your Life is that it's a holistic seminar. Holistic is a sort of buzzword these days for health care procedures that incorporate nontraditional medical modalities, and it may conjure up by association a whole world of organic vegetables, natural-fiber clothing and shiatsu massage.

When I describe Write For Your Life as holistic, I mean simply that the seminar is designed to affect the whole writer, not just the part that touches

the typewriter keys. Because it is our belief that writing is very much a whole-person activity. We don't do it with just our fingertips and the conscious thinking part of our brains. We use our whole selves and all the different portions and levels of our minds, and WFYL has accordingly been structured to work upon all those parts of our selves.

The first half of Write For Your Life, the morning session, is designed largely to free up our capacity for creative self-expression and help us to write not only with the thinking analytical portion of our mind, but to draw upon other sections of the mind that involve such areas as imagination and intuition. In the afternoon section of the seminar, we'll focus more on discovering how our own personal belief systems stand in the way of our writing success, and what we can do to overcome them. We are almost invariably our own biggest obstacles to success, and the second half of the seminar teaches us how to get out of our own way.

* * *

Some of the things that WFYL is not:

It is not a marketing seminar. We do not tell you where to send your work or how to get an agent. Nor do we tell you what you should be writing.

It's not group therapy, or the EST training. It's not any of several seminar programs either, for all that some of our processes have been adapted from their techniques.

Nor is it any *other* Write For Your Life seminar. Graduates who have reviewed WFYL invariably report that it's a completely different experience the second time, even though the processes and anecdotes and jokes remain the same. It works on different levels, depending on the kind of energy operating in the room and the particular place you're coming from in your own growth and evolution.

Any questions?

Good. Everybody take a breath. And please put your notebooks on the floor under your chairs, unfold your arms and uncross your legs. Sit up comfortably in your chairs and put your feet on the floor. And, if you'll close your eyes, we'll start with a group meditation to center the energy in the room.

OPENING UP TO MEDITATION

We begin both the morning and the afternoon sections of Write For Your Life with a group meditation. It's a brief guided meditation, and I've been told I take the group through it faster than I should. David Pike in particular has been after me to slow it down.

I'll probably do so as I become increasingly confident of my ability to lead a meditation without losing people's attention or putting them to sleep. The particular form of the meditation we use is not terribly important, and I don't even know where it comes from; I picked it up from a friend named Gayle Carleton, adapting it to my purposes, and I don't know where Gayle got it from.

We use a meditation at WFYL for several reasons.

First of all, it's a way to get everybody into the same time and space. People come into the seminar room with a whole load of mental and emotional baggage that they've brought with them. They got out of different beds, ate different breakfasts, and woke up having dreamed different dreams. They took different routes to get to the room, and they came for different reasons and with different goals.

A shared meditation gives all of us a chance to drop that baggage and start the day fresh together.

A second function of the meditation lies in the fact that it allows us to turn our attention inward and listen for a moment to our own inner voices. Much of the morning's activity centers specifically upon learning to employ portions of the mind beyond that part of the conscious mind that thinks and calculates and figures things out. One of the chief difficulties in doing this lies in the fact that we are often inclined to believe that the thinking part of our mind is all there is—indeed, that it is who we are. But the mind is actually labyrinthine, with many rooms and chambers, and meditation gets us started in the process of opening the doors to some of those chambers.

People have different responses to the meditation. Almost everyone finds it enjoyable, or at least tolerable. Some people report they feel more relaxed and ready for the day for having shared in the group meditation. Every once in a while, the meditation constitutes a powerful experience for someone. A couple of times people have been moved to tears by the depth of feeling unleashed by the meditation.

A third purpose for beginning with a meditation is to introduce the idea of using meditation regularly as an aid in writing. Regular meditation, whatever form it takes, can be enormously useful for writers. It helps us open up to our inner selves, and it also works wonderfully to clear the mind of a lot of the mental gibberish—what teachers of Transcendental Meditation call the yamma-yamma-yamma of the mind.

I should admit that I am more a sporadic than a regular meditator. Periodically I resume meditating on a daily basis, and sooner or later I stop. While I'm sure meditation would be even more beneficial to me if I stuck with it day in and day out, I have found it specifically useful to my writing even in the haphazard way I tend to make use of it. Here are some ways meditation can serve writers:

* * *

AS A PRELUDE TO WRITING. A period of meditation before beginning the day's work is valuable in a couple of ways. First, it's a way of clearing intrusive thoughts from the mind before getting down to work. It's hard to do one's best writing when one's mind is buzzing with thoughts about finances, interpersonal relationships, or something Johnny Carson said last night in his monologue. Clearing those thoughts makes room for useful thoughts about the project at hand.

At the same time, the inward glance provided by meditation allows ideas for one's writing to bubble up from the subconscious mind. When you stopped writing the previous day, you automatically consigned the project to the subconscious, and it's been simmering there ever since. While you may have had some conscious thoughts about that piece of writing in the intervening hours, the real work has been carried on by the subconscious.

Now, in meditation, you're allowing those thoughts to surface. Depending upon the form of your meditation, you may want to pursue them when they come to the surface or you may want to let them go, along with other thoughts that come to mind. In my own pre-writing meditations, I tend to allow myself to think about thoughts connected with the work if they happen to come up naturally, but as soon as they start spinning their wheels and turning into yamma-yamma-yamma, I thank them for sharing and send them on their way. The important thing is not that I seize these thoughts in an iron grip the instant that they appear, but that I hook up with my subconscious mind so that I will have good access to it throughout my hours at the typewriter.

* * *

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE DAY'S WORK. Sometimes, when I'm very intensely involved with a piece of work, I can't get it out of my mind.

This was the case a few years ago, when I was writing a book called *Eight Million Ways to Die*. While I don't know that it was a difficult book to write, it was certainly a demanding one, and I found it impossible to let go of it when I was done for the day. I could get up from the typewriter, I could leave the house, but I couldn't get the book out of my mind.

There was a time when I regarded such developments favorably. They seemed to prove that the book was alive and vital for me, and that my mind was busy working with it even if my fingers were through for the day. But I've come to realize that ruminating on the book after the day's work is done is a fit occupation not for the conscious mind but for the subconscious. Having my conscious mind preoccupied with unhatched plots and unwritten scenes doesn't help the creative process. It just leaves me walking around sufficiently addled to get on the wrong subway after having dropped a few letters in the trash can and mailing the garbage.

A period of meditation can be a good way to take all that mental chattering about the ongoing project away from the conscious mind and turn it over to the great problem-solver that is the subconscious mind. Some people find physical exercise an even more effective way of achieving the same result. A run, a game of racquetball, a half hour of raising and lowering heavy metal objects, is a wonderful way to free the mind by focusing on the body.

* * *

WHEN YOU'RE STUCK. There are times for most of us when we get stuck in the course of a day's work. Maybe the ideas don't come. Maybe we can't choose between two possible courses of action. Perhaps we can't figure out a way to handle a transition, or structure a scene, or whatever.

Frequently, trying to think one's way through problems is like trying to knock down doors with one's head. It's simpler and less of a struggle to use a key, and the key is often to be found in some other chamber of the mind.

Sometimes a break for meditation can give us access to that chamber, and thus to the answer.

Some process other than traditional meditation may best serve in this capacity. I've written elsewhere how I almost invariably have a deck of cards close at hand, breaking intermittently from my work to push back the typewriter and lay out a hand of solitaire. I don't know when I started doing this, and I suspect it was originally a way I had of avoiding work, but I can see that it has become a meditative activity for me. I play solitaire not only when I'm stuck but when I simply want a break after a page or two. It's better than picking up a book because it's not particularly interesting, nor does it provide something for me to think about. And it's easier on my waistline than raiding the refrigerator every time I get stuck. (There are times when I do that, too, but I don't have the gall to call it meditation. I'm more inclined to call it gluttony.)

I don't know that I'd recommend solitaire to anyone, but I would suggest that each of us can discover a comparably useful equivalent of meditation, something that will provide a brief respite from one's work, a bit of distance, without breaking contact with the work altogether.

* * *

AT THE END OF THE DAY. A meditative quiet time before turning in for bed is very useful—as a way of letting go of the mind to sift through ideas for the following day's work during those hours spent in sleep. Some writers have been particularly successful in using their dreams as a vehicle for creative problem-solving: Robert Louis Stevenson found most of his plots and characters in his dreams, and specifically programmed himself to produce dreams which would aid his writing. (If this interests you, you might want to consult a book on the subject; I would especially recommend *Creative Dreaming* by Patricia Garfield.)

Whether or not your dreams relate directly to your work, and whether or not you recall them, your subconscious mind is always at work. It stays awake even while you're asleep, and it never forgets anything.

* * *

While I want to discuss a few methods for meditation, I want to emphasize first that I do not by any means feel competent to teach anyone how to meditate. My own experience with meditation has been both limited and sporadic, and I am the farthest thing from an expert on the subject.

My own introduction to formal meditation consisted of instruction in the technique of Transcendental Meditation in Los Angeles in 1976. TM involves concentrating on a mantra consisting of a two-syllable Sanskrit word which one repeats over and over in one's mind. (The mantra is occasionally described as a nonsense word, but I don't suppose it's nonsense if you're conversant with Sanskrit.) Like all other TM initiates, I was told not to divulge the mantra I was given, that to do so would reduce its effectiveness for me. That admonition may be rather more nonsense than the Sanskrit word itself, for all I know, and I can't swear that I'd refuse to blurt it out under torture, but the fact remains that I've cheerfully kept it a secret for nine years as of this writing and am certainly not inclined to let the cat out of the bag now. (Besides, I couldn't begin to guess how to spell it.)

Whatever magic the mantra may or may not possess, I would think it would be possible for one to devise one's own version of TM. Simply select a two-syllable word (or make up a two-syllable non-word) and repeat it over and over to yourself in your mind. The purpose of concentrating on the mantra is as an alternative to concentrating on other thoughts. Whenever thoughts do intrude, consciously favor the mantra and let the other thoughts float away.

If you're not satisfied with this, or if you'd simply prefer to try the official

version, you might want to call the TM people and take their brief course of instruction. The cost is quite modest in view of the fact that the technique is yours forever. Look up Transcendental Meditation in the white pages of your local telephone directory. If there's no listing, the New York office (220 East 23rd Street, New York NY 10010, 212/725-0022) can probably steer you to the most convenient location.

Another form of meditation consists not of pushing thoughts out of the mind but of simply paying attention to them as they come and go. One becomes an observer of one's own thoughts. And another meditative method involves taking a particular phrase or idea and meditating upon it, thinking about it and exploring all its facets and ramifications.

It is probably not hyperbole to suggest that there are as many ways of meditation as there are meditators. I suspect, too, that whatever works for you is fine. Some people find music an aid to meditation while others find it a distraction. Some people make good use of tapes specially designed to lead one into meditation. Others prefer to rely on their own mental resources.

Traditionally, the lotus posture (seated, back straight, legs folded, each foot resting upon the opposite knee) has been long used for meditation. It's far more important, though, to be comfortable in one's meditative pose than to master the trick of knotting one's legs like a pretzel. Most disciplines do advocate that the spine be straight during meditation—evidently the flow of energy is inhibited otherwise—and a seated posture of some sort, on the floor or in a chair, is preferred by most meditators. I myself prefer to meditate lying flat on my back, but many people find such horizontal postures altogether too conducive to sleep.

Another method you might like to try involves concentrating on your physical body. You begin by directing your attention to your toes and feeling them relax, visualizing them glowing with a soft white light. Then you continue this process, directing your attention in turn to your feet, ankles, lower legs, knees, and so on, finishing with your head, and finally seeing

your entire body enveloped with the white light. This technique is as much a matter of relaxation as it is a meditation, and people who have difficulty getting into other forms of meditation occasionally find it more accessible. There are any number of tapes available to lead you through this sort of white light meditation; look for them at yoga centers and new age or metaphysical bookstores.

Another common meditation consists of focusing one's attention upon the breath. You may establish a particular rhythm with your breathing, count your breaths, or simply make your breathing the central point of your awareness.

Meditation upon your five senses can be interesting. Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and start out by letting yourself be aware of all of the sounds going on within range of your hearing. Try this right now, why don't you? Just close your eyes for a moment and pay attention to everything you can hear. Try not to be distracted by your thoughts about what you hear but instead stay in the moment and concentrate on the sounds themselves. While hearing is the sense most often employed for this form of meditation, any of the other four will do. Meditating upon one's sense of taste can transform the simple act of eating an apple into a fairly profound experience.

* * *

Don't be upset if you don't get immediate tangible results from your attempts at meditation. Sometimes it takes a while to get the hang of it, and many people never obtain dramatic results. After all, meditation is essentially a quiet time spent alone with oneself, looking calmly inward. It's not going to blast you like a drug shot into a vein.

How much time you devote to meditation and how regularly you practice it is up to you. There's no hard and fast rule, nor is there any universal agreement that more is better. TM recommends two twenty-minute periods

daily, and that seems to work well for most people. If five minutes a day is as much time as you feel comfortable spending in meditation, that's fine. Whatever works for you is probably right for you.

* * *

I was going to add, as a note of reassurance, that we never lost anybody during the meditation.

Then I remembered that we did.

Well, we almost did. At our first Boston seminar, one woman got to her feet a minute or so into the meditation and headed for the door. Fortunately José Santiago, our Boston organizer, happened to have his eyes open and went out of the room after her. (We only had eighteen people in attendance that day, so we couldn't afford to lose a single one. José might not have moved as quickly if we'd had a full house!)

In the corridor, she blurted out that she was a religious person, that she didn't want her faith threatened by what we were trying to do, and that she didn't feel it was spiritually safe for her to be in the room. I don't know what José told her, but he talked to her for ten minutes and managed to get her back into the room. During the rest of the morning I kept waiting for her to take flight again, and when we broke for lunch I frankly didn't expect to see her again. But she came back from lunch, and during the afternoon she participated to a fuller extent, had a big emotional breakthrough, wrote us a wonderful letter two weeks later and showed up the following season to take the seminar a second time.

Of course the meditation didn't challenge her religious beliefs. It's much too general; I can't imagine that it could confront anyone's religious beliefs or lack thereof. What happened, I'm sure, is that the woman, like everyone in a new and unpredictable situation, was feeling a lot of fear. The fear made her want a way out, and her mind was prompt in furnishing a reason why

she didn't belong in the room and thus had to leave it. She believed her reason was a real one. Our minds, after all, are very convincing dissemblers.

That's how fear works. And that, curiously enough, is what our next WFYL process (and thus our next chapter) is all about.

FEAR IS NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF

A fear I have about this book is that I won't have enough cash available to self-publish it effectively.

A fear I have about this book is that I'm in too much of a hurry to write it.

A fear I have about this book is that what works in the seminar room won't work on the printed page.

A fear I have about this book is that I'll come off sounding like an idiot.

A fear I have about this book is that it will undercut the seminar by giving too full a picture of what we do.

A fear I have about this book is that I'll lose money on it.

A fear I have about this book is that it won't be any good.

A fear I have about this book is that it will take time away from other writing I should be doing.

What I've just done in the eight previous sentences is demonstrate an in-print version of the fear process. At the seminar, we perform this process in a one-on-one interactional mode. Everyone selects a partner, and people turn their chairs to face their partners. Then, after I demonstrate how the process works, everybody does the process with his or her partner.

(We have a lot of processes of this nature in the course of the day, with new partners for each and with the chairs moved anew at the beginning and end of each process. Once, when I was engaged to lead an abridged version of Write For Your Life at a writer's conference in the Colorado Rockies, the conference director showed me to an auditorium with fixed chairs. I had to tell her that it would be altogether impossible to lead the seminar in that room. "Moving furniture," I explained, "is the *sine qua non* of Write For Your Life.")

I began this chapter by naming my fears about writing this book, since that's what I'm doing at the moment. At the seminar, I'll demonstrate the process by stating my fears about the seminar. This will vary from one seminar to the next—I try to be spontaneous rather than deliver a canned menu of examples—but what I would say might sound something like this:

"A fear I have about this training is that I haven't got the energy for it today."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about this training is that people will think it's a lot of California crap that has nothing to do with writing."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about this training is that they'll be right."

"Thank you."

"And another fear I have about this training is that the air conditioning's

not working and in another hour the room's going to be almost as comfortable as the Black Hole Of Calcutta."

"Thank you."

Why the thank-yous? That's how the process is structured. Each pair of trainees picks an A and a B. A goes first, saying a sentence that starts out *A fear I have about this training is* and finishing with whatever comes out, and B says *Thank you*. Then A goes again, and B says thank you again, and everybody goes on in this vein until I tell them to stop. (Ah, the power of seminar leadership!) Then everybody switches, and all the Bs say *A fear I have about this training is* and all the As say *Thank you*.

And then what happens?

Then there's a second stage to the process. This time around, after we've demonstrated the process in front, all of the As will be saying *A fear I have about my writing is*. (The Bs will still be saying *Thank you*.) And, after a few minutes of that, we'll switch, and the Bs will say *A fear I have about my writing is*, and the As will get to say *Thank you*.

Sounds pretty simpleminded, doesn't it?

I'll tell you something. It's one of the most powerful verbal processes I've ever encountered, and at this point I would not dream of leading a seminar—any kind of seminar—without making use of it. But first, before I talk about what it does and how it works, I want you to do it yourself, right now.

Yes, you.

First take a breath. (Remember, it's okay to breathe while you're reading this book. And while you're doing some of these processes. In fact, it's recommended.)

Good. Now get yourself a pad or notebook and a pen or pencil. (You can, if you insist, do most of these processes at a typewriter, but I'd advise you to handwrite them instead.)

Now, in a moment, you're going to write down your own fears about your own writing. First I'll demonstrate the process with a few fears of my own,

as I might do at the front of the room:

A fear I have about my writing is that it's too slick and superficial.

A fear I have about my writing is that I don't dig deeply enough into myself.

A fear I have about my writing is that I'll never achieve as much success as I desire.

A fear I have about my writing is that I have nothing to say.

A couple of suggestions, in order to maximize the effectiveness of this process:

1. If you run out of fears, make something up—even if you're sure it's pure fabrication.

2. Don't attempt to judge the reality of your fears. If something comes to mind, don't try to figure out if it really and truly applies to you. Write it down anyway.

3. If a thought comes to mind and it's so disturbing that you don't want to permit yourself to write it down, write it down! Don't censor your thoughts. Perhaps you find yourself coming up with a thought like *A fear I have about my writing is that it will kill my parents*. Don't waste time telling yourself it doesn't make sense, it's not how you really feel. And don't get trapped by the notion that writing down the thought will make it real. The object of this process is to let go of your fears, and you let go of them by releasing them from your mind

and putting them down on the page. (Now might be a good time for you to take a breath.)

Okay. Go ahead and do the process. Let your thoughts flow as freely as possible and write them all down as quickly as they come, starting each sentence with *A fear I have about my writing is*. Don't stop to think about them. Just stay with the process. (If you want, you can imagine a gentle, warmhearted partner saying Thank you at the end of each sentence.) Don't stop before you've written down at least a dozen fears, and you may be able to write a great many more than that. And, for Heaven's sake, don't be concerned about how precisely you express yourself, or about the niceties of grammar and sentence structure. The only object here is to get your fears onto the page.

Go ahead.

Put down the book and do it!

* * *

Thank you.

There's no way for me to know what sort of results you just got from the process of listing your fears, but I do know how it works at the seminar, and I can only say that it works like a charm. The difference in the whole feel of the room after we've gone through the fear process is monumental.

I sometimes call the fear process by another name; I refer to it as the Temperature-Humidity Control process because of its propensity to turn an uncomfortable room into a comfortable one. The air feels lighter after everybody in the room has spent a few minutes speaking fears aloud. Air conditioning systems which appeared to be ineffective at the beginning of the day suddenly seem to be working better. At the same time, people who had previously experienced the room as too cool find that it became warmer

for them while it was growing cooler for others. If you could patent this and plug it into a wall socket, everybody would want one!

The improvement in the room's environment resulting from the fear process is very much of a piece with what the process does on a mental and emotional level. Everyone comes into the room with a great load of fear about the seminar and about his or her own writing. Even those of us who have taken the seminar before have fears about it.

Many of those fears are removed to a greater or lesser degree from our conscious awareness. If we are in fact aware of them, we're still probably doing a fairly good job of looking at them as little as possible and keeping them a secret from others.

We do this for a perfectly logical reason. It seems to us that acknowledging our fears will make them real, and that we will thus be giving them power over us that they do not otherwise possess.

There's only one thing wrong with that line of reasoning, and that's that it happens to be completely false. Owning and acknowledging fear is an enormously effective first step in letting go of fear and disempowering it. It is the fear we refuse to acknowledge, the fear we bury under a blanket of denial, that has power over us. And the only power it has, the only power it can possibly have, is the power we give it by refusing to look at it straight on.

You're probably familiar with Franklin D. Roosevelt's pronouncement upon fear. "We have nothing to fear," he said, "so much as fear itself." Unfortunately, we tend to honor FDR's observation by fearing fear so much that we maximize its power. And, when we succeed in blocking our conscious awareness of our fears altogether, we create monsters.

In the seminar room, unacknowledged fear takes a variety of forms. Hostility, anger, exhaustion, depression, an inability to concentrate—all of these are common symptoms of suppressed fear. At the beginning of the fear process, many of the trainees honestly don't perceive themselves as having

any fears about the day. During the process, they surprise themselves by uncovering fears like these:

That the seminar won't work for them.

That they're not good enough to benefit from it.

That they're too good to get anything out of it.

That it's a ripoff, and they've just wasted $100 on a pointless self-indulgence.

That they'll never be able to stay awake, let alone attentive, throughout the day.

That the seminar will just make them aware of everything they're doing wrong.

That everybody else in the room is an amateur and a loser.

That everybody else is a pro, and they don't belong in such accomplished company.

"Fear is the mind-killer," Frank Herbert tells us in Dune. Its capacity to cut off the flow of our writing, to keep us from taking necessary chances, to contribute in innumerable ways to our own processes of self-sabotage, is infinite. Perhaps I can best illustrate this by giving a couple of examples from my own writing career.

Most obviously, fear kept me writing trash longer than I probably should have. When I started writing professionally at what increasingly strikes me

as an impossibly early age, I had a fair amount of innate technical facility and no idea what I ought to write about. As a result, I've long felt that the apprenticeship I served—writing soft-core sex novels—was a good way for me to develop my craft while earning a living.

But I spent more years than I had to on this level, and it's clear to me now that fear kept me from extending myself and taking necessary chances. There were other factors operating as well, but the fear of trying something I might not know how to do, and at which I might indeed fail, ultimately kept me from growing as a writer as rapidly as I might have.

One of my early attempts to move out of the sex novel field and into the area of mystery and suspense illustrates the crippling effect of unacknowledged fear. Sometime in the early sixties I wrote a suspense novel about a man who kills his wife accidentally. He leaves town, surfaces in another city and creates a new identity for himself as a professional criminal, and manages to get taken up by the local mob, gradually becoming the hardened criminal he has pretended to be.

Now this was not, as I recall, a terribly good book. It evidently had some good elements to it, because the reaction my agent kept getting was along the lines of, "I'm afraid we have to pass on this book, but we'd like to see what the author writes next." In other words, editors liked the way I wrote but didn't like the particular book I had written.

One editor, however, saw possibilities in the book itself. Lee Wright at Random House invited me to come in and discuss possible revisions. I went in and we talked for half an hour or so. She threw out a variety of ideas, not because she was committed to any of them but in the hope of sparking my own imagination so that I could find the right way to improve the book.

But that's not what I heard. I managed to walk out of her office convinced that she wanted me to do things to the book that wouldn't possibly work, that she didn't understand the book and didn't really know what she wanted, and that the whole business was hopeless.

I never made any attempt to rework the book for Random House. Instead I reported my version of the conversation to my agent and had him show the book elsewhere. No one wanted it, strange as it may seem, and a few years later I spliced in some gratuitous sex scenes and sold it to one of my sex novel publishers. I suppose I got a thousand dollars for it, and it was published under a pen name and vanished without a trace.

Years later, leading a WFYL seminar, it struck me for the first time that I hadn't revised that book because I was afraid I couldn't do it. My irritation with Lee Wright, my conviction that she didn't, as they say around Gloucester Bay, know Mass from a shoal in the sound, was simply a smokescreen I had thrown up to conceal my fear from myself. And I did a good job of it; I'd remained blissfully ignorant of my fear for over twenty years. And, incidentally, I not only didn't try to revise that book for Lee, but neither did I try to write anything else I could have sent her way. I did ultimately sell a mystery to Random House, but the sale took place fourteen years after my conference with Lee.

Fourteen years!

* * *

Let me give you another example, and one that didn't take fourteen years to straighten itself out. Sometime in the late sixties I was writing a series of books on human behavior for a second-rate paperback house. I was doing a couple of books a year and getting an advance of $1500 per book.

Then one day I got a phone call from my agent. He was happy to report that he'd just made a deal with a much better paperback publisher. The new house had an idea for a book, one very much of a piece with the books I'd been doing. They were offering a contract and would pay an advance against royalties of $3000, precisely double what I'd been happy to get for books of this type.

As you may expect, I was delighted. I signed the contract, banked (and, I suppose, spent) the half of the advance payable upon signature, and then a funny thing happened.

More precisely, nothing happened.

I kept failing to get to work on the book. I think I may have sat down at the typewriter a couple of times, with no positive results. Most of the time, though, I just avoided the project altogether.

I had my reasons. I had plenty of reasons, and they were great ones. There were days when it was just too nice to work. There were other days when the weather was lousy and it was consequently too depressing to do anything, and certainly too dismal to try writing something.

And there were other days when I did indeed feel like writing, but what I felt like writing was something else. A chapter, say, of an ill-considered detective novel, which I could abandon after twenty or thirty pages. A short story. An outline for some other book.

Anything but the book under contract.

As my deadline approached, I began to discover some wonderful reasons why I couldn't write this particular book. For one thing, I decided, the publisher's idea was a bad one. Maybe I just wasn't good at working from someone else's idea, maybe I was better off coming up with these ideas myself. In this case, the book was one extended case history instead of a dozen shorter case histories, and maybe the problem lay in the fact that you couldn't write that kind of book that way and expect it to work.

For that matter, maybe I was burnt out on this type of book. Maybe I'd done as many of those as I could be expected to do, and maybe it was time to move on to something else, and that's why I was having this weird resistance to the book.

Then I got lucky.

I realized something surprising. What I realized was that I was *afraid* to write the book.

Afraid?

Why?

I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it.

Well, what kind of sense did that make? I'd done several of these books before, I'd never had any trouble with them, I did them (if I said so myself) at least as well as any other human being writing in the English language, so why should I even think for a moment that I wouldn't be able to do what was expected of me? How was this book different from the others I had written?

And then I saw what it was.

The difference between this book and my previous efforts lay in the fact that I was getting twice as much money for this one as I had previously.

Which meant that the publisher would expect me to deliver a book that was twice as good as my others.

And, since I was already writing these things as well as I possibly could, it didn't seem possible for me to turn out one twice as good as my usual standard.

Well, all you really have to do is look at that argument for a moment and it dissolves before your eyes. Obviously the new publisher didn't expect me to produce a book that was twice as good as my others. What he expected was for me to match my previous books, but to publish this one with him rather than with my previous publisher. He was paying me all this money not in anticipation of my improving my writing ability overnight, but because he already liked the way I was writing these books.

In this instance, once I recognized my fear and took a moment to look into it, it melted away like snow in the sun. I almost immediately sat down and went to work, and the book wrote itself as easily as they generally did, and I met my deadline and turned in a book which so pleased the publisher that he went on to buy several more from me, and at increasing advances at that. That particular book ultimately earned royalties above and beyond its

advance.

But if I hadn't had the good fortune to recognize that my fear was keeping me from writing it, and then been able to look at and dismiss that fear, the book would never have been written and a very important new direction in my career would have been closed to me. While I can't claim that world literature would have been the loser, the Block children ate better and dressed warmer during the late sixties and early seventies for my having been able to write that book.

And if I hadn't acknowledged my fear? What would have happened then?

I'm fairly certain the book would not have gotten written at all, and I probably never would have known why. Or I might have written the book in desperation, doing so under the burden of unacknowledged fear, and the book would not have been as good; even when fear doesn't keep you from doing something, it keeps you from doing it as well as you might otherwise.

If, as I suspect, I would have left the book unwritten, I'd have blamed the publisher for coming up with a bad idea. I might have blamed my agent for getting me involved in an unworkable deal. And, finally, I would have blamed myself, convinced on some level that my failure had been one of self-discipline, that if I'd only buckled down and bitten the bullet I could have made it work.

Frank Herbert is right. Fear is the mind-killer, and unacknowledged fear is the worst kind.

* * *

Now that we've looked at everything that's bad about fear, let it be said that there's another side to it. If there's no element of fear whatsoever connected with an activity, it can't be much of a challenge. If I don't have any fear at all before undertaking a particular writing project, the chances

are good that I'm not extending myself enough, that I won't be able to grow as a writer unless I take more chances.

I'm certainly not suggesting that a writing career has to consist of a series of high-wire acts performed without a net in order to amount to anything. Nor do I mean to imply that I have to seek out some task that's beyond my capabilities. But I do believe that we achieve success not by acting only in the absence of fear but by confronting our fears and, when circumstances warrant it, acting in the face of fear.

We have a tendency to equate bravery and fearlessness, when actually the two states are antithetical. It's impossible to be brave when you have no fear. Bravery consists of acting in spite of fear, not in its absence. If you have no fear, you have no need to be brave.

Being brave in the face of fear, recognizing that fear and taking positive action anyway, is enormously empowering. Turning fear into power was the whole theme of an evening seminar Lynne and I took recently. We spent four or five hours listening to a dynamic young speaker, and then, along with six hundred other brave souls, we capped the evening by walking barefoot across a twelve-foot bed of burning coals.

And here you thought all I could do was walk on water!

* * *

I'll have a little more to say about the firewalk in a later chapter. For now, let me simply note that I did not stalk fearlessly across the coals. We had all of us been prepared by a form of hypnotic suggestion so that our feet could crunch down on fiery coals hot enough to melt aluminum without burning, or even experiencing heat. But the hypnosis, such as it was, was limited to the subconscious portions of the mind. On a conscious level, I was quite certain that I had not achieved the state of mental conditioning that would enable my body to protect itself from the fire. I fully expected to walk onto

the fire and be rushed forthwith to the emergency room at St. Vincent's.

This fear notwithstanding, I stood in line until it was my turn, then walked on across the fire.

I tell you this not to show you what a hero I am but to give you an idea of the power generated by action undertaken in the presence and full recognition of fear. The firewalk as an empowering experience has had ramifications for us extending far beyond that twelve-foot bed of coals.

The firewalk took place on a Friday night in mid-June of '85, a little less than two months ago as I write these lines. It was past three by the time Lynne and I got home, and I never did get to sleep; at five my cab came to take me to the airport to catch a dawn flight to Chicago. I caught a cab at O'Hare, rode to a hotel in the Loop, and at ten sharp began conducting Write For Your Life. At seven o'clock we finished and packed up—Roy Sorrels and Donna Meyer had flown out a day early to assist—and we walked out of the hotel and caught another cab back to O'Hare, where we had time for dinner before boarding our flight to Minneapolis. We went to bed shortly after arrival, got up, and presented Write For Your Life all over again, returning to New York the following day. And, astonishingly, I seemed to gain strength measurably as the weekend wore on, and finished it more highly energized than I had begun it.

The empowerment Lynne and I have been aware of in ourselves in the past two months has been considerable, and is of far more moment than the simple act of walking on fire—which, ultimately, is nothing much more than a rather dramatic party trick. The change in our relationship to our fears and our self-confidence is a good deal more than that.

* * *

I'm not suggesting that any of you hurry out and take a walk on burning coals. I just want to stress the idea that growth and success and achievement

may be best pursued neither by skirting fear nor by overlooking it, but by moving consciously forward in the presence of fear.

Once we are aware of our fears, we are almost always capable of being more courageous than we think. Someone once told me that fear and courage are like lightning and thunder; they both start out at the same time, but the fear travels faster and arrives sooner. If we just wait a moment, the requisite courage will be along shortly.

A fellow I know tells the story of the time he was taking an extensive seminar-leadership training program. One night he had the opportunity to perform a leadership exercise in front of the group. It was something he very much wanted to do, but not surprisingly it brought up a lot of fear, and he let his fear keep him from acting.

He went home that night, looked at himself in the mirror, and acknowledged to himself that he had allowed his fear to make him miss out on an activity he had very much wanted to undertake. And he resolved then and there never to let fear keep him from doing something he genuinely wanted to do. From that point on, his life opened up dramatically. He's now a seminar trainer and will soon become that organization's national director; more to the point, moving through his fear has become a habit to him.

Do you have your notebook handy? Take a moment right now to make a list of some things fear has kept you from doing over the years that you really wanted to do. Take your time, and when something comes to mind, take a breath and write it down. Some of the items on your list may be closely connected to your writing. Others may bear no discernible connection. I don't know that it matters; fear is fear, and anything that affects you affects your writing.

When you're done, look over your list. (You may want to add to it over the next several days as other instances come to mind.)

Then, if you want, write out the following declaration in your notebook.

"I am now willing to act in the presence of fear. I hereby resolve that I will never again allow fear to keep me from doing something I genuinely desire to do."

Then sign your name, and write down the date.

The written process I suggested you do earlier in this chapter— *"A fear I have about my writing is"*—is one you may want to do more than once. It's also a wonderful process for you to do aloud with a partner, the way we do it in the seminar. Your partner does not necessarily have to be a writer. Anybody who can say *thank you* on cue will do, and I suppose a mynah bird or a Chatty Cathy doll could fill in in a pinch.

Like most WFYL processes, the fear process becomes more effective the more you play with it. Acknowledging fears and confronting them get easier with practice. In addition to enumerating general fears about your writing, you might want to get in the habit of using the fear process regularly at the onset of a new writing project. (*"A fear I have about this book/screenplay/article is …"*) And, you will probably not be surprised to learn, the process lends itself as well to areas that have nothing obvious to do with writing.

I'll give you an example. This past March, Lynne and I decided to move from New York to Florida and signed a contract to purchase our present home in Fort Myers Beach. It was just the house we wanted and we were delighted with it.

Over the next few months, the two of us experienced more fear than was collectively generated by the five top-grossing horror movies in Hollywood history. We felt awful. We ran the gamut of negative emotions—depression, despair, anger, hostility, panic, dread, then back again to depression. We sat around hoping the deal would fall through. I found myself praying that the bank would deny our mortgage application; failing that, I hoped a hurricane would demolish the house before the closing.

With all the negative energy we were generating, it's a wonder the house didn't fall down of its own accord! One thing that saved us was our

capacity—and one that both of us had only recently learned to tap—to acknowledge and confront our fears. Day after day we would find ourselves having dialogues like this:

"A fear I have about moving to Florida is that we won't have any friends."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida is that I'll get skin cancer from the sun."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida is that the house will drink up all our money."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida is that we will spend too much time together and we'll stop getting along."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida is that you'll die."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida is that we'll become boring people leading boring lives."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida is that the palmetto bugs'll eat our feet."

"That's a good one."

"You're just supposed to say thank you."

"Thank you."

"Another fear I have about moving to Florida…."

And on and on and on. Some of the same fears turned up time after time. Others took a long time to surface. By the time we did move here (where we immediately became boring people with stumps where the palmetto bugs had eaten our feet) we had largely worked through our fears. Some of them

still existed, but at least we knew what they were and had been open about them with ourselves and with each other.

Years ago I would have operated far differently. Whenever a particle of fear would begin to surface, I would stuff it back where it came from and emphatically deny to myself that it had ever existed in the first place. If we had operated that way in the present instance, I don't know if we would have managed to get to Florida; I'm sure we'd have had a much more difficult time adjusting to the move.

* * *

After the conclusion of the fear process, with the group sharing some of our reactions to the process, we move on to introductions. We go around the room, and each person in turn stands up, faces the group, and tells us four things about him or herself: your name, how you're feeling, your main interest, and what you hope to get out of the day. Almost invariably someone mentions that one of the fears he had about the training was that he would have to stand up in front of the group and say something, and the laugh of recognition which greets the observation suggests the fear is a widespread one.

During introductions is the only time anyone has to share anything with the whole group. And you'll note that it comes after the fear process, not before it.

I'M WRITING AS FAST AS I CAN

I hope you have your notebook handy.

If not, take a moment to get it, along with a pen or pencil. Because the next process, following immediately after introductions, is a written one, and you'll be able to do it at home exactly as we do it at the seminar.

It's called variously automatic writing, fast writing, nonstop writing, free writing, and, I suppose, a few other things as well. Automatic writing is the term I find myself using for it most of the time, but that particular phrase has also been applied to a spiritualist discipline in which one seeks to channel spirit voices through one's writing, in the manner of a human Ouija board, and that's not at all what this process is about.

Whatever you call it, it's an extraordinary process and an unparalleled method for increasing one's capacity for free-flowing self-expression. It seems altogether too simple and undemanding an exercise to have so great a payoff, and yet it not only works like a charm, it works for virtually everyone who tries it.

Let me describe the process for you. Very simply, I'll give you a sentence to start with. You write down the sentence I give you, and then you keep going. And you continue writing as rapidly as you can move the pen until I tell you to stop.

That's all there is to it.

What are you supposed to write about? It doesn't matter. Your aim is to put words rapidly on paper. It makes no difference whatsoever what words you choose, or if there's a logical flow to them. You can lose track of things, wander off on tangents, interrupt sentences halfway through and begin others. It doesn't matter. If you get stuck and can't think what to write next, write "I can't think of anything to write." If you're angry and want to stop writing, write "I'm sick of this crap, I want to go out and get a hamburger." Write anything at all—it really doesn't matter.

The simplest way I found to convey the essence of the process is this: As long as the pen is moving, you're doing the process perfectly.

That may sound very easy, or it may sound difficult. I suppose we can say that it's neither, or that it's both. One of the functions of this process is to introduce you to that staple character in the mythology of writing, the Little Editor on your shoulder.

Do you know the fellow? Like the poor, he's always with us. He sits on your shoulder and tells you all too persuasively that you don't know what you're doing. "Wait a minute," says the Little Editor. "Are you sure that's the right word? Don't you think you ought to rethink that last sentence? Are you positive you're saying what you mean? Are you sure you're a good enough writer to accomplish what you're trying to do here?"

Perhaps you've always thought you were the only object of the Little Editor's affections. Put your mind at rest. The little guy gets around. He's on my shoulder right now, assuring me that I'm not doing this right, that I'm taking too much time and space to introduce an elementary process, that I ought to rip up the last couple of pages and start over. (Well, the hell with him. I've already done that once this morning, and I'm not sure there was anything wrong with the page I tore up.)

Here's something you should know about the Little Editor. There's no law that says you have to listen to him. And, the more you learn to override that

critical voice on your shoulder, the more you'll be able to let your writing flow freely from the source within you that knows what it's about, and the less you'll feel compelled to do all your work with the thinking calculating reasoning part of your mind.

Automatic writing is a means toward that end. When you perform this exercise, don't let the Little Editor stop you from getting the words down. Whenever he starts chattering at you, just tell him *Thanks for sharing*—and keep on writing.

* * *

Well, shall we get started? You'll want to be seated comfortably, perhaps at your desk, with a notebook or pad and a couple of pens or pencils at hand. If you have a timer that you can set for ten minutes, go ahead and set it. If not, have a clock or watch handy so you can check the time intermittently. (You don't want to stare at the clock throughout the exercise, but will glance at it now and then so you won't go on long past the ten-minute mark.) Here's a sentence to get you started:

"She picked up the book and threw it across the room."

Now write that down—and keep on going.

* * *

Were you able to write more or less without interruption for the full ten minutes?

If so, give yourself credit. You did the process perfectly.

Maybe that's hard for you to believe. After all, there are few voices as persuasive as that of the Little Editor on your shoulder. I got a firsthand experience of that persuasiveness in September of '84. It was the night before our fourth New York City seminar, and it occurred to me that I hadn't

done the automatic writing process in a long time, although I'd been leading whole rooms full of people in it.

So I picked up a spiral-bound notebook and went to it.

And almost from the first sentence I was convinced I was doing it wrong. "You're not writing fast enough," the Little Editor told me. "You're not digging deep enough. You're just skimming the surface. You're controlling the exercise, you're not really letting your thoughts flow onto the page. You're taking the easy way out. You're doing this wrong. You're doing that wrong." And on and on and on.

The irony of it amused me even as I was hearing and trying to override the voice. For months I had been telling people that they were doing the process to perfection as long as they kept putting words on paper, and here I was, positive I was doing something wrong myself. The point, of course, is that it had been a long while since I had done the process myself. You don't master a process like this by telling other people how to do it, or by reading or writing about it. You master it by doing it.

I think I mentioned earlier that one is said to teach what one needs to learn. This was certainly true for me as far as automatic writing was concerned, because it wasn't until I had led it and praised its virtues at the first two Write For Your Life seminars that I ever tried it for myself. I had been aware of the process for years—it's been around for a long long time—but it had never struck me as something I wanted to do. (I've had a tendency over the years to shy away from writing anything unless the possibility existed that I could publish it and get paid for it. I used to think of that attitude as a mark of professionalism. Now I'm more inclined to believe it's a combination of arrogance and sloth.)

I did know, though, that it would be an excellent process to include in the seminar. That first morning in Indianapolis I wasn't sure it would work, anymore than I was sure any of WFYL would work. For all I knew, I'd stand there for ten minutes watching sixty people chew on their pencils. But it

worked just fine in Indianapolis, and it's worked ever since, and after I'd seen it work a couple of times I decided I ought to find out what it was like.

Did you enjoy it?

Most people do. Some are noticeably disappointed when I stop the group at the end of ten minutes. "Do we have to stop now?" one woman wanted to know. "Two hundred and forty-eight more pages and I've got myself a novel."

At the same time, there's a small percentage of people who have trouble staying with the process. Now and then someone picks the midpoint of the automatic writing process to have to go to the bathroom, for example. Recently one woman stopped abruptly of her own accord after six or seven minutes, capped her pen and closed her notebook. "I got to the end," she explained. "So I stopped."

For everybody who does stop like that, there are probably twenty or thirty people who have the impulse to stop but override it and stay with the process. There's nothing wrong with experiencing some resistance, or with being aware of it. The trick is to notice your resistance and go on in spite of it.

Whatever results you had, or however you experience your results, keep in mind that regular practice with the process makes a world of difference. The more you do it, the easier it becomes and the more it does for you.

* * *

There are any number of ways to make automatic writing a useful part of your routine. Here are a few of them:

1. AS A WARM-UP EXERCISE. Do ten minutes of automatic writing before you start your day's work. Do it just as you warm up your car's engine on a cold morning. (Now that we live in Florida, the car

doesn't require that sort of a warm-up, but my own writing engine can profit from a warm-up period irrespective of the temperature outside.)

Some people resist the idea of warming up with automatic writing because they want all of their limited writing time to count. It seems a waste to squander ten valuable minutes on a page of gibberish that will wind up in the trash when they could invest those minutes in work on their current projects. In my own experience, a ten-minute investment in automatic writing almost always pays off by making the subsequent writing easier, faster, and better.

There are two ways to warm up with automatic writing. One is to do the process just as you did it a few minutes ago, starting with an opening sentence and freewheeling from there. Another consists of writing nonstop about the piece of writing you intend to do that day. If your thoughts stray, that's fine, but bring them back to the topic at hand when you get the chance.

I've had great success with this technique. Before I started writing the first chapter of this book, I opened a notebook and wrote for ten minutes about the chapter I intended to write. Understand that I was not outlining or clustering or doing any formal preliminary work on the chapter. I was writing nonstop about the chapter, and this helped me mobilize my thoughts so that, when I closed the notebook and rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, I had a fuller idea of what I wanted to include and how I wanted to arrange my material.

The process works just as well for fiction. Writing about what I plan to write is very freeing. I don't have to worry about structure or word choice, and I don't even have to look at what I've written afterward. You may prefer to warm up in this fashion, or you may find it more effective to warm up with a piece of automatic writing that has nothing specific to do with the work at hand.

Experiment, follow your instincts, and see what works for you.

2. BEFORE BEGINNING A PROJECT. Suppose you've decided you want to begin a book or some similarly substantial project a week from Monday. Between now and then, do ten minutes of automatic writing every day—or even twice a day. You can write about the planned project or just leap off at random from various opening sentences. This is a fine way to prime the creative pump; however you structure the process, you can expect to find yourself coming up with a lot of ideas, some of which will likely prove useful later on.

   This pump-priming combines nicely with one or two twenty-minute periods of meditation per day. You can meditate immediately before doing the automatic writing or at different times of the day.

3. BEFORE YOU'VE GOT YOUR EYES OPEN. Try this for a week and see how it works for you. Keep a pad or notebook on the bedside table. When you wake up in the morning, before you have your eyes fully open, grab a pencil, pick up the notebook, and start writing. Don't worry about having an opening sentence to start with. Just write down anything and keep going for ten minutes.

   Not everyone cares for this sort of thing. You may be strongly disinclined to think of any words, much less write them down, until you've had a hot shower and three cups of coffee. If you can force yourself to do it anyway, you may find it an extraordinary method of getting access to your subconscious mind. Writing freely when you are not yet altogether awake can get you out from under the tyranny of the intellectual portion of the mind—not to mention the Little Editor.

4. AS A WAY OF MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH AN INTER-

RUPTED PROJECT. When I'm writing a book, I like to put in at least five days a week on it, and sometimes six or seven. One reason I prefer to do this is that I don't want to lose contact with what I'm writing. By working on it regularly, I can ensure that it will remain continually present in my subconscious mind.

But sometimes, for all that I give my work priority, I don't have any choice in the matter. Perhaps I have an unbreakable commitment that's going to take me out of town for a week. Perhaps I can't write the next chapter until I have certain research materials at hand, and they won't arrive for a week.

Automatic writing allows me to stay in touch with an interrupted piece of work no matter how demanding my schedule may be. However little free time I have, I can always find ten minutes to spend scribbling gibberish. By writing about the interrupted book, I'm letting my subconscious mind know that it's still very much a current project of mine, and that I'm still actively in the process of working on it.

5. AS A WAY OF MAINTAINING YOUR IDENTITY AS A WRITER. Some writers produce work every day. The late John Creasey wrote two thousand words before breakfast every day of his life. Isaac Asimov and Stephen King are writing fools; it's hard to get them away from their typewriters. Robert Silverberg said some years ago that he'd finally had a writer's block; it had lasted, he reported, for twenty agonizing minutes.

   Ah, well. It's not like that for all of us. Some of us have intermittent stretches when we can't seem to write. Others of us choose not to write for extended periods of time. In my own case, I like to write books rapidly and then take long stretches of time between books.

   Automatic writing is extremely useful during periods when you're

not writing. While it may not get you out of a writing block, it can do a good deal to lessen the guilt and self-loathing that is so much a part of writer's block for so many of us.

How does it work? It couldn't be simpler. Just do ten minutes of automatic writing every day. That's all. Select an opening sentence at random and write for ten minutes, just as you did earlier in this chapter.

Then close your notebook and congratulate yourself on having done your day's writing. Realize that you have affirmed your identity as a writer.

Some of us find the idea of letting ourselves off the hook that way threatening, even terrifying. Without the scourge of guilt, how could we ever get back to real productive work? After all, aren't fear and guilt the elements that finally get us writing again?

No, not really. A friend of mine calls guilt "the Mafia of the mind," characterizing it as a protection policy we sell ourselves. If we can't write, at least we have the decency to feel awful about it and beat ourselves up for it. We punish ourselves with guilt so that no one else will punish us. We feel bad about ourselves, thinking that all of this bad feeling will motivate us to get back to work.

Do you see the illogic of this? We don't have writer's block out of lack of motivation. And we don't set ourselves up to do our best work by feeling bad about ourselves. (Later on we'll see that we can only do our best work by feeling good about ourselves.)

I don't want to belabor the point. Suffice it to say that, if you find yourself blocked, or if you've chosen to take some time off and find yourself beginning to feel guilty about that choice, just do ten minutes a day of automatic writing. If you don't feel like it, do it anyway. Force yourself. You can't force yourself to work on a book or story or article, something where the quality is important, but

automatic writing has no quality, it's just supposed to get on the page, and you can perform it every bit as effectively when you have to force yourself as when it flows freely.

Do it for ten minutes. Then pat yourself on the back and take the rest of the day off.

* * *

The first two times I presented Write For Your Life, I didn't supply the group with an opening sentence. I just told everyone to start writing.

Then, at our third seminar, I decided to furnish everyone with an opening line. I thought it might do something for the energy of the group to have everyone start off with the same words.

Ever since then, I've always supplied a first sentence. I found out that it works much better that way. The fact that everyone starts off together is, I think, less significant than that everyone departs from a fixed point. When the opening line is given to you, you don't have to decide how to start. That decision is already made for you and all you have to do is keep going.

Incidentally, I can still remember the opening line I first used at the March '84 seminar in New York. I hadn't prepared it in advance, having simply decided that I would come up with something on the spot. What I came up with was, "*The hands of the clock stopped at 9:23.*"

Now I don't mean to imply that I consider it in the same league with *Call me Ishmael*, but there's a reason why it's stayed with me ever since. The time I picked for the clock's hands to stop turned out to be a significant hour for two of the people in the room, and they found this out because they compared notes when they were paired up in another process. One of them happened to have been in a house which burned up in a fire; the fire broke out at precisely 9:23. The other's father had died at exactly 9:23. (The fire was in the evening and the death in the morning, or perhaps it was the other

way around, but I hadn't specified at what time of day the clock stopped, had I?)

If you're doing automatic writing on your own, it helps to have an opening line as a point of departure. You won't need one if you're specifically writing about a current project, nor will you want to bother with a predetermined opening if you're keeping a notebook on the bedside table and scribbling away before you've got your eyes fully open, but other uses of automatic writing are facilitated by having something to get you launched.

Some people just flip through a book, jab a finger at a page, and use the first sentence they touch. That'll work, but a method that strikes me as simpler and easier consists of writing out fifty or a hundred opening sentences sometime when you're feeling creative. Type them out double-or triple-spaced on a sheet of paper, cut the sheet into strips, fold up the strips and put them in a cigar box. (No, I don't suppose it has to be a cigar box. You could use a hatbox. Or a hat. Or a shoebox. Or a shoe, or—)

Enough. When it's time to do your ten-minute stint of automatic writing, draw a slip of paper from the cigar box and get to it. Here, to get you started, are a few opening sentences.

It was a small cat, all black except for one white forepaw.

He wanted to scream.

All she could hear was the sound of the surf.

The waitress gave him an angry look.

There was only one leaf left on the tree.

He was a tall man, lean and sharp-featured, his skin weathered by the sun and the wind.

She grabbed the envelope and tore it open.

Ever patient, he sharpened the knife.

"I'll tell you what you can do with it," he snapped.

Why do people act like that?

Although there was nothing wrong with his leg, he always walked with a cane.

She poured cream into her coffee and gazed into the cup.

He had a splitting headache.

* * *

I'll tell you, there's a great freedom in writing opening lines that you know you're never going to have to go any further with. It's probably a creative exercise in its own right. You're welcome to these, and you'll have fun writing some of your own.

* * *

Sometimes we play music during the automatic writing process, usually a solo piano tape by our friend Jeremy Wall, who composed and performed

the musical track on our affirmations tape. Sometimes we don't bother with the music. When we do play it, some people usually say afterward that the music stimulated the flow of their writing, while others will say they found it distracting. Many people have remarked that the mood of the music tended to influence the mood of their writing.

I personally don't often write with music in the background, probably because I tend to find it more distracting than soothing. I don't bother to play anything when I do automatic writing because it seems to me that it would be more trouble than it's worth. You might want to experiment.

* * *

One question that comes up frequently is whether automatic writing can be done on a typewriter instead of in longhand. Obviously, you can do anything that works, but I think there's a distinct advantage in using longhand. I tend to do almost everything at the typewriter. I always compose on it, and I use it as well for correspondence, memos, and laundry lists. But I do automatic writing with a pen and a notebook and I think it works better that way.

I feel more connected to the process when I write by hand. (I type by hand, too, come to think of it, but you know what I mean.) With handwriting, the words seem to flow directly from me onto the page. There's no machine in the middle.

Some people argue that, because they do all their writing at the typewriter or word processor, it's come to be a more natural way of working for them. All the same, I'd recommend longhand. It's true that I'm used to writing at the typewriter, but it's also true that I'm used to thinking things through, working out what I'm going to say, and otherwise filtering my words through the editorial screen of the intellectual portion of my mind. The spontaneity I want to exercise in automatic writing is more accessible to me when I push

the typewriter aside and take up a pen.

There are other things, too. When you're trying to write freely and at top speed, you don't want to worry about typos or keys piling up or punctuation or any of that. Typewriters and word processors are designed to turn out finished copy, and it's hard to work at them without thinking of your output as something that ought to look finished.

Incidentally, I've been talking about using longhand, and I might mention that some people do the process in shorthand. That seems to work just fine.

* * *

What do you do with your automatic writing exercises after you've written them?

Well, you can do whatever you want, obviously. Some people save them, but then there are people who save their fingernail clippings, figuring that they may become famous and then people'll want them. (I figure if I save my fingernail clippings, I'll ultimately become famous for saving my fingernail clippings. But nobody'll want them.)

Some people like to read over what they've written, right away or later on, as a vehicle for self-analysis. Some people discover in their automatic writing ideas and themes which they can later make use of in their work.

Personally, I figure the best things I can do with these exercises is throw them out when I've finished. (Incidentally, when you do the written fear process, always throw out what you've written when you're done. You don't want to hold onto those fears. You want to toss them in the garbage where they belong.) I prefer to discard automatic writing once it's written for two reasons.

First, I think it's much easier to write freely and ignore the Little Editor's whining when I know I'm going to throw out what I've written without even looking at it. Secondly, any good ideas that turn up in this fashion will

either stay m my mind or come back to me when I need them. (On much the same principle, I rarely take notes at a lecture or seminar, figuring that I'll remember what I'm supposed to remember, and I'll get the material more effectively by just taking it in than by recording it in a notebook at the same time. Similarly, I tend to discard books that I've abandoned rather than save them for future reference. I'm not sure my method is ideal—if Moses had adopted a similar strategy, we'd probably only have seven commandments—-but it's what I seem to be most comfortable with.)

* * *

You may find automatic writing useful from the first time that you do it. If not, or if you find yourself very resistant to the whole idea, I'd like to urge you to stick with it for a while anyway.

Some people resist the process because it's so simple and easy. At one of our New York seminars, one woman sat in her seat for ten minutes and didn't write a word. I went over to her, thinking she might be stuck or confused and that I might be able to help her. She told me that she didn't want to do the process, that it was too elementary for her. I shrugged and let her alone.

During the group sharing, she volunteered the information that she hadn't done the process because it was too basic and elementary for her. "This may be good for beginners," she said, "but I don't need this. I'm a published writer."

I asked for a show of hands, just to get an idea of how many of our trainees were published writers. More than half of the hands in the room went up.

"I'm not like these people," the woman insisted. "I've had a book published."

Well, okay. At that particular seminar we had several trainees who had published books, including one who had been on the bestseller list a couple

of times. He did the process without any fuss at all, and said that he enjoyed it and got a good deal out of it.

* * *

When I wrote a column on automatic writing for *Writer's Digest*, I got a curious letter from a woman in Idaho. She wasn't ever going to try automatic writing, she advised me, because the last thing she wanted to do was get out from under the control of the censoring voice of the Little Editor. I don't recall exactly how she put it, but it was very clear from her letter that she was afraid of what she might write if she were to express herself freely and spontaneously.

I wrote back and suggested that she might want to ask herself what she was afraid she would find out about herself.

I rather doubt that this woman was unique in having this particular fear. I suspect many of us are afraid to a greater or lesser extent that anything which affords us an uncensored look within may confirm for us our very worst fears about ourselves, whatever they may happen to be. When we do use automatic writing, and when we discover there's nothing to be afraid of, the result is particularly liberating.

Let me point out, too, that it's unrealistic to attach too much significance to what does turn up on the page. Every once in a while someone at the seminar is a little disturbed over the violent nature of what he or she has written. My son-in-law has assisted at WFYL a couple of times, and his ventures in automatic writing have been violent enough to make Sam Peckinpah lose his lunch. People maim and slaughter each other left and right in Kenny's automatic writing, but that doesn't make me fear for my daughter's safety.

* * *

While I would advise anyone to make use of automatic writing, the extent to which you make it a part of your regular routine is properly a matter for you to decide. You may want to do it every day. You may employ it now and then with a specific goal in mind. You may have stretches when you do it daily and others when you don't do it at all for weeks or months on end.

That's fine. The process, don't forget, is a tool. Use it in the manner that best serves you.

If you want, you can use it as a stick and beat up on yourself with it. *Ohmigod, what a worthless wretch I am, I didn't do my automatic writing.* You can, if you want, make automatic writing one more occasion for guilt, but I wouldn't recommend it.

If you do choose to make use of it, I suspect you'll find automatic writing a process that is as powerful as it is simple. One of the nice things about it is that it works just as well no matter what stage you've reached in your writing career. Beginners can use it, extremely successful seasoned writers can use it, and it works perfectly fine with people who aren't really writers at all; a couple of graphic artists have taken the seminar, thinking it might bolster nonverbal creativity as well, and they seemed to get a lot out of the process.

Just remember how it works. As long as the pen is moving, you're doing the process perfectly.

* * *

Some people are amazed and delighted with the results of automatic writing the first time they try it. "I haven't been able to write a word in several months," someone will exclaim, "and here I've filled a page and a half in ten minutes." Others have remarked that ideas seem to come from nowhere, as if by magic, in the course of this process. And frequently people resolve to finish at home the stories they've begun via automatic writing.

Now and then someone struck by the speed and relative ease of automatic

writing will wonder if this might be of value not only as an exercise but as a way of producing finished work. The late Jack Kerouac did precisely that, at least in some of his books. His writing method, which he called his "spontaneous bop prosody," consisted of typing at full speed throughout each writing session. ("That's not writing," Truman Capote said of Kerouac's method. "That's typing.")

Kerouac's aim was to infuse his prose with the inventive improvisational spontaneity of jazz music, which he greatly admired. It's clear that he sought to do this by getting out from under the control of the Little Editor. You can judge for yourself how successful he was in this attempt; *The Subterraneans*, a book frequently considered to be his best, is supposed to have been written in this fashion.

For my own part, I wouldn't dream of trying to produce publishable work by means of automatic writing. One does not want ultimately to banish the intellectual part of the mind altogether from the writing process; rather, one wants to mobilize one's forces so that all the various portions of the mind work together toward a common goal, and it is toward this end that automatic writing is so very useful.

* * *

Can we move on? Like this process, our next section of the training is one you can do perfectly. It's called the coffee break. There's coffee, tea and Sanka in the back of the room. Please go out into the hallway if you want to smoke, and I'd like you back in your chairs in twenty minutes.

EXPERIENCE, PAST AND FUTURE

Where does our writing come from?

The ink flows from the pen. The lead rubs off the tip of the pencil. The typewriter's keys force an impression through the inked ribbon. The computer does whatever the hell it is that computers do. These are some of the ways that words get on paper, but where do the words come from in the first place? What's the source of our writing?

It's within us, of course.

The morning section of Write For Your Life is largely about access, access to portions of our inner selves that facilitate our self-expression. Our next process is designed to increase our awareness of the enormous inner resources we already possess, and to give us some ideas of ways we can add to these resources and guard against their eventual depletion.

Have you ever worried that you don't have enough to write about? That you haven't lived enough, haven't accumulated enough life experience? Perhaps you've read those author bios on the back of books and brooded upon your own inadequacies. ("After serving twin sentences for forgery and armed jaywalking, James Hamtramck was variously employed as a gandy dancer, an itinerant fruit picker, and a vice-president in the Corporate Gifts division of U. S. Steel. When his second marriage ended disastrously, he went

to sea and spent several years sailing the South Pacific. Then, at age twenty-two, he returned to this country and …")

When I went off to college, I couldn't wait to get out there and live so that I'd have something terrific to write about. I couldn't wait to spend a few nights in a Bowery flophouse like Stephen Crane, and run off to Alaska like Jack London, and store up rather more sybaritic experiences like Frank Harris. Boy, would I have things to write about!

I never even thought about the Monday Club.

What, you may ask, was the Monday Club? Well, I'll tell you. It was a group of six or eight women, one of them my mother, who gathered at one or another's home every Monday afternoon for thirty years or more. There they would play mah jongg for several hours while engaging in the Club's primary activity, which of course consisted of detailing and commenting on the private lives of their acquaintances, not to mention any members who had the ill fortune to be absent on that particular day.

For the first dozen or so years of my life, I couldn't tell you the number of Monday afternoons I spent within hearing range of that card table. I would sit in the next room reading. I'd sprawl on the floor a few feet from the mah jongg game, playing with a toy. And, throughout it all, I'd carefully screen out everything these women were saying.

Talk about your missed opportunities! Why, I must have overheard enough hot gossip and character assassination to give John O'Hara a run for his money and write three daily soaps in my spare time, and like a damned fool I didn't even listen. Imagine what Truman Capote could have done with a childhood like mine!

There's an essay called "Acre of Diamonds" which turns up frequently in inspirational anthologies. As I recall, it tells of a man who searched the world for an opportunity to make a fortune, all the while overlooking a veritable acre of diamonds in his own backyard. Well, I'd spent my childhood willfully ignoring a whole square mile of diamonds, not just the Monday

Club but the bridge game on Friday, the occasional canasta game, and all the other ways in which news and commentary—interpretative journalism, if you will—found its way into our house.

They say that nothing's forgotten, and that everything that strikes the ear is recorded somewhere, whether or not the mind is consciously aware of it at the time. So I suppose I could go to a hypnotist and have him dredge up everything I failed to listen to at what was supposed to be an impressionable age. ("Bid a heart. Did you see what she was wearing Saturday night?" "Her color sense leaves a little to be desired. I pass." "Two hearts. They were at Oliver's Thursday and Johnny had to tell them three times that their table was ready." "Pass. That's Phil, you can never get him away from the bar." "Isn't that the truth. Did you say two hearts, partner?")

On the other hand, if nothing's lost, if it's all recorded somewhere, maybe there's no need to summon it up via hypnosis. Maybe I can draw on those memories without being consciously able to recall them. Maybe indeed I have been unconsciously drawing on them all along in that they have become a part of my collective experience. Maybe I've been recreating bits of Monday Club gossip down through the years without even knowing it.

* * *

Got your notebook handy? It's time for us to do a process. We do this at Write For Your Life in the same mode as the fear process; you pick a partner, turn your chair to face your partner's chair, select an A and a B, and do the process in that fashion.

It works perfectly well as a written process. Turn to a clean sheet of paper and write this at the top of it:

Some things I can draw upon in my writing:

And then start making a list. Your list may look something like this:

1. My experience editing my college newspaper.

2. The hours I spent not listening to the Monday Club.

3. My knowledge of Irish history.

4. My sister's mental illness.

5. Taking a bus to Florida alone when I was sixteen.

6. Being a social failure in high school.

7. My years as a Boy Scout, and becoming an Eagle Scout.

8. My father's death.

9. My knowledge of coin and stamp collecting.

10. The month I spent fishing in the Outer Banks.

If I stayed with it, I could probably turn out a list as long as this whole book. Do this process yourself now, and write down everything that comes to mind without letting your internal censoring mechanism screen anything out. Don't stop to judge whether you could draw anything useful from something that comes to mind, or whether you would actually want to write about it. Similarly, don't worry what anyone would think of what you're listing. Nobody's going to read your list; you can throw it away as soon as you've finished doing this process.

I'd like you to stay with the process for ten minutes. If you're enjoying it and want to keep on going, feel free. Do it now, please.

* * *

How did you do?

When we do this process in the seminar, most people discover that they have a great deal more to draw upon in their writing than they had ever imagined. Sometimes people share afterward that their lives now seem richer than they had previously realized. Others report that whole areas of their experience which they previously took for granted are now recognizable as potentially valuable background material for their work. If you were going to share your own reaction to this process, what would it be?

Take a moment (or as long as you want) to write it down.

We all have an infinite reservoir of experience upon which we can draw in our writing. Whether we've traveled or stayed put, whether we've led publicly dramatic lives or remained private persons, whether we went to graduate school or never finished high school, every moment we've spent on the planet has been deposited in the bank account of our experience, and we can write checks against that account whenever we sit down at the typewriter.

Flannery O'Connor said somewhere that anyone who survives childhood has enough material for a lifetime of fiction. And, while it may have been touch-and-go for some of us, we have all of us survived childhood, haven't we?

* * *

Stay right where you are. There's a second part to this process.

A danger some writers face is that their bank account of experience will become depleted over time, that they will draw on it in their writing without adding to it in their lives.

Some writers plunge into new worlds with the specific intention of

transmuting their experiences directly into their work. Somerset Maugham went to the East in search of plots; Alec Waugh made a similar pilgrimage to the Caribbean. James Jones, unable to write freshly about anything but a long-dead war, threw himself into scuba diving so that he could write a novel with that for a background. (It didn't work too well; he was only able to reclaim the power of his early fiction when he returned yet again to the subject of World War Two.)

Some of us find ourselves holding back in an effort to avoid this depletion of experience. There is occasionally a richness in a first novel which is not to be found in an author's subsequent books. Some first novelists throw in everything on hand, giving the reader enough plot and character and background and incident for half a dozen books. As time passes, writers increasingly tend to write more and more about less and less.

What conservation measures can we employ? How can we avoid disturbing the ecological balance of our experiential landscape?

The answer, of course, is that as we continue to live we continue to put experience in the bank. We can make these bank deposits count for more by paying attention to the richness of our lives as they unfold, and also by purposefully opening ourselves up to new experience.

Please open your notebook to a fresh sheet of paper. At the top of it write *Actions I can take to add to my bank of experience.*

Let me illustrate the process for you by writing out a list of my own:

1. Study Spanish.

2. Visit Natchez and Vicksburg.

3. Learn something about computers.

4. Self-publish a book.

5. Go parasailing.

6. Join the local garden club.

7. Take a course in architecture.

8. Have an affair.

9. Take a boat cruise on the Caloosahatchee River.

10. Donate blood.

When you make your list, write things down without pausing to think about them. Don't get hung up on the question of whether or not you really want to do all the things you're writing down. (Some of them may be mutually exclusive, anyway. If I take a boat cruise of the Caloosahatchee, the mosquitoes will see to it that I don't have enough blood left to donate. And, if I have an affair, Lynne will so arrange things that I need a transfusion.)

Don't let yourself be inhibited by the idea that, once you've listed something, you'll either have to do it or feel guilty about not doing it. That's not what this process is about. It's just designed to give you a sense of the infinite number of opportunities we all have to provide ourselves with input for future writing. You may want very much to do some of the things on your list, and you may know for certain that you don't want to do others, while there will probably be some you don't much care about one way or the other. That's fine. All of that is true for the items on my list, and I'll leave it to you to figure out which are which.

Again, take at least ten minutes to make your list, more if you wish.

Go ahead.

* * *

How did you do?

When people share about this process, they often remark that they were surprised how easy it was to think of things they could do, and that quite a few of the things they came up with turned out to be actions they really did want to take. It's very easy for us to postpone indefinitely a lot of actions we would enjoy taking, actions that would very definitely provide knowledge and memories upon which to draw in our writing.

Very often we do so because these actions strike us as frivolous and self-indulgent. After all, our time is limited. If we're to be serious about the business of writing, we should be spending all our available time writing. Isn't that what Sinclair Lewis was telling us? If we're writers, why the hell aren't we home writing?

If I'm growing corn, I can't plant the same field to it year after year. I have to put in a leguminous crop one year to restore nitrogen to the soil. And I have to let the ground lay fallow another season to replenish itself. When I do this I'm not being self-indulgent. I'm being a foresighted farmer.

The actions we take to increase our knowledge and experience are always actions undertaken in support of our writing careers. It's easier for us to believe this of activity we do not find enjoyable, perhaps because of a vestigial commitment to the puritan ethic, which H. L. Mencken once defined as the haunting fear that someone somewhere may be happy.

Writing, as we've noted, is a holistic activity. We do it with more than our fingertips and our forebrains, and we do it at times other than when we're actually putting words on paper. It is by no means a gross exaggeration when we say that we are writing all the time.

A key purpose of this second list you just made is to help effect an attitudinal change. If you regard everything you do as the groundwork for writing you may do at some later date, you may be inclined to pay a little

more attention to your life while you're busy living it. At the same time, you may be encouraged to choose the road not taken, to explore the unfamiliar, to pick the alternative which extends your experience.

In the fullest sense, of course, everything you do is experience and every experience is new. Even if you drive the same route to work every day, it's new each time to the extent that you let yourself be open to its newness. Heraclitus has told us that we can never step twice in the same river, for other waters are flowing. To the extent that we are present in the moment, we are constantly adding to our banks of experience, whether we're climbing an Alp or sitting home watching Jackpot Bowling.

You may want to do this process more than once. It's not something that lends itself to daily use (unless you have a really strong emotional investment in the idea that you have nothing to write about, or that you're in a rut) but it's something you can profitably repeat every once in a while.

More important, let it all sink into your consciousness. When you find yourself remembering some past failure or hurt, remind yourself that it's just another experience you're able to mine in your writing. And, when you cover the typewriter and spend the day fishing, assure yourself that you're adding something valuable to your bank of experience.

YOUR MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTERS

The next process at the seminar is a process of spontaneous character creation. It's easy enough to describe. Everyone finds a partner, rearranges the furniture, and picks an A and a B. Then A begins describing a character, one sentence at a time, to B. ("My friend Susan has red hair." "Thank you." "My friend Susan lives in a rented room upstairs from a funeral parlor." "Thank you." "My friend Susan is nineteen years old." "Thank you." "My friend Susan could stand to lose five pounds." "Thank you." "My friend Susan had rheumatic fever when she was seven years old." "Thank you." "My friend Susan is afraid of dogs." "Thank you." "My friend Susan has terrible luck with house plants." "Thank you.")

Then it's B's turn, and B does the same thing with a different character. Then you thank your partner, return your chair to its original position, and close your eyes while I lead you all into a process of visualizing the characters you just created.

Then you write about the character for fifteen minutes.

As I've said before, most of the processes in Write For Your Life have their origin elsewhere. The fear process came straight from a relationships-centered seminar, automatic writing is a technique that's been around for ages, and many of our other processes have been adapted from something I

saw or heard or read about.

The character creation process is, as far as I know, an original one. It came to me in essentially its present form when I was first figuring out what WFYL would consist of. I didn't have to think it through much; it came to me full-blown, an unsolicited gift from my unconscious mind or from the cosmos. If it had any antecedents, I don't know what they were.

The only problem was that I had no way of knowing if it would work. That was true for the whole kit and caboodle of WFYL, but it was especially true for this process, because I hadn't seen anything like it tried with any sort of group.

It worked like a charm in Indianapolis, and it worked two weeks later in New York, and ever since then it has never failed to work beautifully.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid you'll have to take my word for it. Because the process doesn't travel well from the seminar room onto the printed page, and I can't think of a way for you to do it on your own.

Come to think of it, maybe I can. This won't be the same process, certainly, but it touches some of the same bases and ought to be a useful exercise in and of itself.

First off, put this book aside and go out in search of a person you can observe for a few minutes without making a spectacle of yourself. Pick a stranger, someone about whom you know nothing beyond what you're able to perceive through observation. Someone across the aisle from you on a bus, or a few tables away at a restaurant.

Then spend some time just looking at the person and getting a sense of the person. Don't take notes. Just observe the person as closely as you can, noting how he or she is dressed, how the person moves, talks, etc. It's the sense you get of the person that is important, not how many specifics you are able to recall.

On your way home, think about the person. Try to let yourself get a sense of who the person is, how he or she feels, reacts, thinks. If you've found

meditation a useful tool, you might want to meditate on the person you've been observing after you get back home.

Next, get out your notebook, turn to a fresh sheet of paper, and give the person a name. Write that name at the top of the paper.

Then, a sentence at a time, write down some things about the person. Some of the things you write down will be direct observations you made. Others will be your own invention. A few may range somewhere in between.

Your list will probably look something like this:

Melvin

Melvin is forty-two years old. Melvin has never been married.

Melvin's hair is thinning on top, and he combs it in an unsuccessful attempt to conceal the bald spot.

Melvin was a supply clerk in Vietnam.

Melvin has had three homosexual experiences in his life but tells himself they don't count because he was drunk at the time.

Melvin has glasses but rarely wears them.

Melvin's parents are dead.

Melvin has an older brother he has never been able to get along with.

Melvin has an intuitive ability to repair any kind of machinery.

Melvin sells and repairs garden equipment.

Melvin went into the business two years ago and is having a hard time keeping his head above water financially.

Melvin's been keeping steady company with a divorced schoolteacher for four years and he'd rather die than marry her.

Melvin once sold encyclopedias door to door and quit when he didn't make a single sale in the first three weeks.

Melvin likes country music, especially when he's driving.

Melvin has an old truck that he uses for business and a four-year-old Ford Mustang with a peeling vinyl roof.

Melvin needs dental work and won't go.

Melvin started to fall in love with a black woman once but didn't let himself get involved.

Melvin never drank hard liquor after he got out of the service but he does pretty good with beer.

Well, that's more than enough about Melvin. I'm sure you get the idea. Write your list freely and spontaneously, as if you were telling all of this to a partner. Don't worry about inconsistencies, and for heaven's sake don't concern yourself with syntax or niceties of style. Let your list run at least as

long as the example I've just given you, and feel free to let it run a great deal longer. Fill several pages if you can.

Then close the notebook without reading over your list. Go have a cup of coffee. Get out of the house and walk around the block.

After fifteen minutes or a half hour, get into whatever posture you prefer for meditation and let yourself visualize the character you've written about. (Do this without looking at or referring to your list in any way.) For ten or fifteen minutes, let yourself picture the character going through an ordinary day. See the character in a variety of situations—eating, sleeping, walking, running. Place the character in different settings.

Then open your notebook to a fresh sheet of paper and spend fifteen minutes writing about the character. Your writing can take any form you choose. It can be a character sketch, a scene, a story, a letter from the character, a letter to or about the character, anything at all. Remember, this is an exercise, and there's no wrong way to do it, so don't worry about style or syntax. Let your writing flow as easily as it did in automatic writing, with as little concern for the Little Editor's criticism.

* * *

I want to emphasize that the process you've just gone through differs in several important respects from what we do in the seminar. This doesn't make it necessarily inferior, just different. In either form, it can be a powerful tool for increasing your capacity for effective self-expression.

The home version of this process, as described here, is one you can do whenever you want, as often as you want. If you make a habit of this kind of observation and extrapolation, you may find some of the people you pass on the street turning up increasingly in your writing, but that's not really the point of the exercise. Far more important is its potential to bring out portions of you yourself in your work.

For this reason, the process is of just as much value whether or not you have any interest in writing fiction. Because so much of my own writing has consisted either of fiction or of writing about the writing of fiction, some people quite naturally assume that Write For Your Life is solely or primarily designed for fiction writers. That's not at all true of most of the processes, and even in an exercise like this one, which appears to use the form of fiction, the process is far more concerned with imagination and intuition and creativity than it is with developing a technique for fabricating fictional characters.

In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to tell the difference between fiction and non-fiction, anyway. With novelists putting real people and events into their books and cloaking them in the guise of fiction, while journalists make up characters and conversations in the name of the New Journalism, it's not all that easy to tell where one takes up and the other leaves off.

And it's even harder to discern any difference between writers of fiction and non-fiction. All sorts of people come to Write For Your Life—novelists, journalists, poets, songwriters, screenwriters, and any number of folks who get by turning out a little of everything. One thing we've discovered, and something most of our trainees discover for themselves in the course of the seminar, is what an astonishing amount all of us writers seem to have in common.

One thing we have in common is the stubborn belief that we don't have anything in common with anyone. Getting together with other writers and discovering this isn't true can be a warmly enriching experience all by itself.

Contact with other writers can be vitally important to all of us. Most of us feel, correctly or not, that people who don't write can't begin to understand what we're about. I've come to believe that the most important function of writers' conferences is the opportunity they afford writers to confer with one another. The company of our fellows at such gatherings far outweighs the

value of what the lecturers tell us or what criticism we get of our work.

Obviously, you don't have to come to Write For Your Life in order to come into contact with other writers. The emotional climate of the seminar is such that people do form strong supportive connections quickly and easily, but there are other ways to enable yourself to enjoy the company of other writers. We'll talk more about that later on.

For the moment, we'll talk about intuition.

WANNA BUY A CRYSTAL BALL?

One year in the late fifties, Chrysler Corp. did an extensive market research study of what the American consumer really wanted in an automobile. The survey results were clear-cut and conclusive. The American auto buyer wanted a sensible car with clean lines and no frills. Above all, he was tired of the large ornamental tailfins which most cars sported.

Chrysler's design decisions for the coming year were made accordingly. Then one evening a top executive of the company was driving home, perhaps to Damascus, when he was struck as if by a bolt from the blue. "No, dammit!" he said. "I like tailfins."

So he went in the next morning and threw out the survey, and the next model year saw Chrysler's car sporting the largest tailfins ever. And that year the company had its best sales in history.

Why? Not because the survey was at fault, but evidently because what the American consumer said he wanted and what he really wanted were two different things. He liked to think of himself as sensible and practical and economical, so he told himself (and anyone who asked) that tailfins belonged on a fish, not a Plymouth. But later on when he walked in and out of dealers' showrooms, the car he picked out was a veritable monster from the deep.

That's all hindsight. The man who overruled the research report acted

not because he managed to figure out what was wrong with it. He did so because he did indeed like tailfins, and he sensed intuitively that other people liked them too—no matter what they said, or what a survey said they said. He went with his intuition and his intuition turned out to be right.

* * *

That automaker took an enormous risk. If he'd gone along with a decision based on the hard data of a market research survey, he could have justified the decision whether the cars sold well or not. By disregarding data and following his own best instincts, he was putting himself on the line. If his action turned out to be right, he would wind up looking like a genius. If sales plummeted, he would be widely regarded as a shortsighted headstrong jackass.

Our whole culture has a considerable rationalist bias. As science has grown at the expense of superstition, we have become increasingly reliant upon the capacity of our intellect, abundantly equipped with factual knowledge, to put two and two together and Figure Things Out. When we apply rational analysis to all aspects of our day-to-day lives, we tell ourselves that we are being scientific.

We might be less inclined to do so if we spent more time listening to scientists.

When astronaut Edgar Mitchell returned from the moon, he had a mental/emotional experience that left him convinced that the most important exploration to which Man could devote himself was of inner rather than outer space. Accordingly he founded the Institute of Noetic Sciences. In *Higher Creativity*, a recent book by Willis Harman, the Institute's current head, one scientist after another is cited to demonstrate that creative breakthrough experiences come not as a result of grappling intellectually with a problem but of letting go of it, that creativity flows directly out of the intuition.

Scientists have been saying this for years. It is the rest of us who have gone selectively deaf to what they've told us. We prefer to think of them as purely intellectual and altogether rational, when all along they've been following their hunches and paying heed to their dreams.

We don't want to believe in the power of the intuition, perhaps because our intellects can't understand it. For centuries now, learned human beings have been trying to prove that someone other than William Shakespeare wrote all of Shakespeare's plays. Almost everyone from Aeschylus to Disraeli has at one time or another been put forth as a candidate for the Shakespearean mantle. I'm not interested in arguing the point one way or the other—I don't know and I don't care who wrote the stuff—but I find it interesting that we want the author to be someone other than William Shakespeare.

Because he doesn't seem to have had the education or the intellect we assume he must have had in order to have written so brilliantly. Because, for heaven's sake, the whole universe sparkles in those plays. How could this man Shakespeare possibly have had the wit to write them?

On the other hand, how could anyone else? How could such profound iambic perfection flow out of any human mind, regardless of the depth of its intellect and the breadth of its education? How could any mere human write this stuff?

For that matter, how could Mozart have composed his symphonies? He began composing at a shockingly early age, and it seemed to have been an almost effortless process for him. He is supposed to have announced that musical composition was the easiest thing in the world, that all you had to do was write down the music you heard in your head.

But first, of course, you have to hear that music.

* * *

How do we explain Shakespeare and Mozart? How do we account for

people who are able to produce work beyond their capacity to understand what they are doing?

What we generally do is beg the question by calling them geniuses. That word seems to play a role similar to that of instinct in discussions of animal behavior. When we don't have the faintest clue why pigeons are able to find their way home, or why a dog turns around three times before lying down, or how all the eels in the world find their way back to the Sargasso Sea, we call it instinct. When some human being is inhumanly brilliant at writing music or extending the bounds of mathematics or handicapping horse races, we call the person a genius and let it go at that.

And what's a genius?

Various dictionaries will supply various answers to that question. May I propose a definition? Genius is a much greater than normal ability to operate out of one's undiluted intuition in a particular area.

* * *

One of the principles of Write For Your Life is that we are all intuitive geniuses.

I still recall (and have mentioned at least once in my WD column) a cartoon that appeared thirty years ago in *Saturday Review* and was posted on the bulletin board of the English department at Antioch College. A school principal is gazing over his desk at a small boy. "It's not enough to be a genius, Arnold," he tells him. "You have to be a genius at something."

We are all of us geniuses *at* something.

It is customary for us to think of intuitiveness as relative. All of us know some people who seem to be more intuitive than others. When I was a boy, a friend of mine answered phones before they rang. He would start walking toward the phone for no discernible reason, and then it would ring. He didn't think of this as a psychic ability, or anything extraordinary. As he explained

it, he heard something when a phone was about to ring. What he couldn't understand was why nobody else seemed to hear it.

I have come increasingly to the belief that we are all intuitive, that the apparent difference in our ability to perform intuitively is that some of us are more readily able than others to gain access to our intuition.

Access. There's that word again. It may help you to note the distinction if you think of the mind as a huge sprawling house with a web of hallways and innumerable rooms off the halls. Some of the doors to these rooms are open all the time. Some of them swing open easily. Some open only with a strong shove, and others appear to be locked.

Learning to operate increasingly out of one's intuition is more than anything else a matter of learning how to get those doors open. I don't like to think in terms of developing one's intuition, as if intuition were a muscle that would grow if only it were properly exercised. I believe that, just as we are all intuitive, so are we all possessed of intuition that is already fully developed. All we have to do is get the door open.

I'm sure you've had moments or hours or whole days when you were able to operate at a higher-than-normal capacity in some area. Perhaps there was a time when your writing flowed in a perfect stream; you were able to write at the absolute top of your form and it felt almost as though you were taking dictation from on high. Perhaps you were playing cards, and just knew what everybody else had.

The equivalent in sports is what John Jerome calls "the sweet spot." I can remember two instances in my life when I, always a mediocre player at sports, was able to operate briefly in that sweet spot. I'm sure I'll never forget either of them.

One came during my freshman year in college, when I played intramural basketball on a thoroughly hopeless team. Everyone beat us, generally by forty or fifty points a game. One astonishing afternoon I was suddenly possessed of the ability to fling the ball in the hoop every time I got my hands

on it. It was pure magic. Our entire team scored twenty-eight points, and I accounted for twenty-two of them. (The other team scored sixty-six, as I recall.)

The next day I was just as bad as I'd always been. But for that one afternoon I'd been touched by grace.

Something similar happened in the early seventies at a pool table. An indifferent player at best, I had an evening when I couldn't miss. Shot after shot went in, and each time I left myself in position for the next shot, and while I might not have been quite ready to play nine-ball with Minnesota Fats, I was hot stuff indeed at Don Westlake's pool table. Even as I was running out the rack I remembered that afternoon on the basketball court, and I told myself I might as well enjoy this, because it was likely to be a one-time-only experience. And, sure enough, the next day I was my usual self again.

What both of those experiences suggest to me is that I have the capacity to shoot baskets with great accuracy and make billiard balls go precisely where I want them to go. On the two occasions described, I somehow had access to that capacity. The door to that particular chamber of the self was open for a certain amount of time—although God knows I did nothing consciously to open it—and then it slammed shut. I'd love to open it again, but I don't know what opened it in the first place, or even where to find the door. When I look for it, all I find is an apparently seamless wall.

At the typewriter, I've spent more time in that sweet spot. Sometimes paragraphs or pages or even whole books have seemed to write themselves. At other times, while I've been very much aware that I'm the one doing the writing, the words that I want just come effortlessly. I know just what to do and how to do it. Plot developments I haven't planned in advance suddenly suggest themselves at just the right moment. Stray elements I dropped into the narrative for no reason beyond that it felt right to do so later hook up as if in accordance with a master plan.

My best writing is like that. I am, let us understand, light-years removed from Shakespeare and Mozart, but when I'm writing at the top of my form I am operating out of intuition, employing my own capacity for genius.

* * *

At Write For Your Life, all of the morning's processes aim at liberating the intuition and increasing our access to it. The final process is designed to show us all what psychic wizards we are. It's another paired process, and it's one which doesn't lend itself to the printed page, so we won't be able to do it here. Nor will I bother describing it, beyond saying that partners share with each other their intuitive impressions of one another.

Typically, our trainees amaze themselves with their intuitive brilliance. A surprising number of us operate in this process at a surprising level of accuracy, perhaps because the energy level in the room creates a comfortable climate for the process.

We do the process not because we're starting a workshop for professional clairvoyants, or with the idea that exercises like this one will "develop" the intuition. Rather, we use the process because it does two things. On the one hand, it shows us in dramatic fashion just how intuitive we are. At the same time, it helps us understand something about the workings of our intuition, and the ways we habitually interfere with its functioning.

In the latter regard, we've found that the greatest bar to our intuition is the meddling of our intellect. As soon as we start trying to figure things out about our partners by consciously trying to read things like clothing, facial expression, and body language, we immediately slam the door shut on our intuition and start making wrong guesses. As soon as we get our minds out of the way, we're able to channel true intuitive knowledge.

We've found out some other interesting things, too. For example, we learned early on that our little mind-reading exercise was very much a two-

way process.

"My partner started off getting everything wrong," a woman told us in Buffalo, "and then I remembered the white light you had us envision in the introductory meditation, and I put that white light over my partner's head and pictured it flowing down over her body, and as soon as I did that she started getting everything right. What does that mean?"

"I don't know," I said. But what I would guess it meant is that, by performing that mental exercise with the aim of helping her partner, she was opening herself up to her partner's intuition. And one person's openness seems to be a requisite for another person's insight.

"My partner was uncannily accurate," another person shared. "And I really liked that, and then I got a little uncomfortable that someone could see into me so completely. And as soon as I felt the discomfort she started getting things wrong. And then after a little while I felt something relax inside me, and then she started getting things right again."

* * *

One of the things we say at Write For Your Life is that your intuition already knows everything, and that your intuition is always perfect. This does not mean that all we have to do is write without thinking about what we are doing and we'll be able to kick off our shoes and start rehearsing our Nobel acceptance speech.

Just what is your intuition? I don't know. How you regard your intuition would probably depend upon the nature of your personal spiritual beliefs. If you believe in a Higher Power in one form or another, you might be inclined to see your intuition as a channel into that Power. If you're of a Jungian bent, you might perceive intuition as your pipeline into the collective unconscious of the human race. Perhaps all human beings share some profound telepathic network, and your intuition is your hookup to that network.

In my own case, I can sometimes tell when I'm operating intellectually and when I'm coming more directly from my intuition. For me, the most personally demanding portion of the Write For Your Life seminar comes in the afternoon, when I spend some time helping people determine what their individual personal laws are and finding their ideal affirmations.

As we'll see a few chapters down the line, people often have trouble sifting through their thoughts to zero in on the single negative belief that's at the heart of things. To help them, I have to listen to more than the words they speak. Sometimes I can't get any place, and the more I try to think my way through the jungle, the more I miss the mark.

Then, if I'm lucky, my mind will let go, and the right phrase will just come to me. It will often be something I couldn't possibly have "thought" of, because it won't connect up rationally with anything that's been said. But I know it's right on target.

It's very satisfying to figure something out. It's satisfying, but in a different way, to channel an answer. One can't take all the credit. That may be why the ego has such a preference for the world of reason. It wants to be sure it gets the glory.

I remember when Robert Marine came home from leading a one-day seminar in Atlanta. The day was designed largely as an enrolling device with the aim of getting participants to sign up for a weekend seminar, and on this occasion a higher than usual percentage of people did sign up for the weekend—almost all of them, in fact.

"It was wonderful," Robert said. "And you know, I can hardly remember a single thing I said. I channeled the whole thing."

* * *

We're always channeling, always writing out of our intuition to at least some extent. How can we widen the channel? How can we learn to come

more fully from our intuition?

First of all, by having that as a goal. Secondly, by learning to trust our intuitive responses and impulses. Third, by liberating ourselves from fear and doubts and the carping criticism of the Little Editor on our shoulders.

Everybody take a breath, please.

Ah, thank you. And now it's 1:30 already, and time for something I know you've all been waiting for. It's called lunch.

You're on your own for lunch, but in a sense it's still very much part of the seminar, and we have some suggestions you might want to follow. We suggest that you don't eat lunch alone, but that you dine with at least one person you did not know before today. We also suggest you spend some of your time getting names and phone numbers of some of the people with whom you've had a strong connection so far today.

Please be back in your seats ready to play at three o'clock sharp.

Bon appetit!

LOOKING AT THE WRITER IN THE MIRROR

The afternoon section of Write For Your Life begins with a meditation, essentially the same meditation we used to start the morning. Then we move on to the main focus of the afternoon, which is about success.

Success is a word that means different things to different people. The way we use it at WFYL, success means getting what you want as a writer. One thing we certainly don't do is make any judgment of what you should want, and what ought to constitute success for you.

Some of us want fame and critical recognition. Some of us want to make a lot of money. Some of us want to write in such a way as to influence people. Some of us are more interested in using writing to get in touch with our inner selves, and some employ it to gain entrance to the world of the imagination.

Whatever you want, that's fine. Success for you is whatever success means to you. Sometimes we shortchange ourselves by telling ourselves we want less than we really do want. Other times we beat ourselves up for failing to achieve levels of success we never really aspired to in the first place. We'll look at these points later on when we talk about goals in another chapter. For now, we'll do a process designed to help you become more aware of what you like about yourself as a writer, and what you'd like to change.

* * *

Our first process is a paired process. You can do it at home, and you might as well do it right now. Turn to a clean sheet in your notebook and head it *Some things I like about myself as a writer.*

Then make a list. Mine might look something like this:

1. Something I like about myself as a writer is that my dialogue flows naturally and freely.

2. Something else I like about myself as a writer is that I get a lot of work accomplished.

3. Something else I like about myself as a writer is that I can make a living at it.

4. Something else I like about myself as a writer is I'm becoming more honest in my work.

5. Something else I like about myself as a writer is I'm becoming increasingly willing to take chances in my work.

6. Something else I like about myself as a writer is I have a clear fast-paced writing style.

7. Something else I like about myself as a writer is the feeling of fellowship I have with other writers.

8. Something else I like about myself as a writer is the connection I feel to my readers.

9. Something else I like about myself as a writer is my characters are lively, interesting and memorable.

10. Something else I like about myself as a writer is that writing is easy and fun for me.

Okay—your turn. Write out the whole sentence each time, starting with *Something I like about myself as a writer.* If you can't think of anything you like about yourself as a writer, make something up.

I'd like you to stay with this process until you've written down at least ten items. If you have trouble with it, do it anyway. If something comes to mind and you think to yourself, "That's ridiculous, I don't really have that particular good quality," write it down anyway.

If the process turns out to be a breeze for you, that's great. In that case, don't stop at ten. Write down was many things as you can think of in ten or fifteen minutes.

Go ahead. Do it!

* * *

Now for the second half of the process. Turn to a fresh sheet of paper and write this heading:

Some things I would like to change about myself as a writer:

And then make a list, which may look something like this list of mine—

1. I'd like to get more work done.

2. I would like to have the courage to dig deeper in my work.

3. I would like to tackle more ambitious projects.

4. I would like to enjoy the process of writing more and not be so centered on getting things over and done with.

5. I would like to allow myself to enjoy my time away from the typewriter without feeling guilty about not working.

6. I would like to do something with more substance.

7. I would like to use myself more in my work.

8. I would like to give up the fear of hurting other people with my writing.

9. I would like to write more short stories.

10. I would like to write more songs and do something commercially with the best of the ones I've already written.

Again, write out your own list, and try to be as spontaneous as you possibly can, letting your thoughts flow onto the page without screening or censoring them. Don't hold back for fear that listing a change you'd like to make in your writing self will mean that you'll have to feel bad about yourself if you don't make the change tomorrow.

You should be able to find ten items. List more if you like, but don't devote the whole weekend to this process.

When you've finished, we'll look at what you like and what you'd like to change.

* * *

Did you find it easier to list things you'd like to change than things you already like about yourself? Well, you're in good company. A great many of our trainees have that experience.

During the first half of the process, did you occasionally think of something and then feel embarrassed about writing it down? That's a common reaction. Even if we do think highly of ourselves in some areas, we don't want to admit to having a good opinion of ourselves. It's often hard for us to say "I'm very talented" or "I'm a skilled and well-disciplined writer." It's much easier to tell ourselves (and others as well) how rotten we are.

By the time you got done with the list, however, you may have been pleased to discover that, by George, you actually did have a good-sized list of things you like about your writing self. Instead of trying to invalidate the good feeling by assuring yourself that all those nice things you wrote down aren't really true, let yourself relax and enjoy it.

Some of us think it's not safe to hold a good opinion of ourselves. As we'll see shortly, it's not only safe, it's absolutely essential. The negative thoughts and feelings we have about ourselves can be devastating.

In the summer of '84 I spent a week as an instructor at the Cape Cod Writer's Conference, where John Payne was literary agent-in-residence. In his lecture one evening, he began responding to a question by explaining that he's not interested in representing any writer who hasn't already published one or preferably two books. In the next breath he qualified this statement by admitting that he naturally is always on the lookout for promising writers, and will look at new work.

"But I don't want to see manuscripts," he said. "I like to receive query letters. I can almost always tell from a brief letter whether or not the writer will be someone I would want to represent."

Take a breath and read that last sentence again. Isn't it a startling statement?

John went on to explain it. "There's a sense I get from a letter of how the

person feels about himself and his work."

Well, naturally, someone missed the point and asked John if he could give them a sample of the kind of query letter that would give him the right kind of feeling. The point, of course, is that the feeling John gets from the letter is the feeling that is installed there by the person who writes it. If you have the right sort of self-esteem, it will come through in your letter.

Remember, please, that there's a difference between self-esteem and ego. Ego in this regard might be defined as the facade we throw up to conceal a lack of self-esteem. "I have written a book with more commercial potential than anything since *Gone With The Wind* and I'm giving you a break by sending it to you and if you don't sell it for a lot of money you're dumber than I think you are"—that's ego, and it's highly likely to provoke a response, but probably not the sort you'd want. Self-esteem is quiet, assured and confident. Ego is loud, arrogant and secretly terrified.

There are ways we can build self-esteem, so that it will become increasingly easy to find things you like about yourself as a writer. Similarly, there are ways to make the changes we would like to make in our writing selves. Both of these ends can be realized through the application of one overall process.

Which is precisely what we're going to examine in the next chapter.

AS A WRITER THINKETH

Why do some people get what they want? Why do some of us succeed while others fail?

Well, some of us are more talented than others, right? And some of us work harder than the rest of us. And either or both is what makes the difference.

Right?

I don't think so.

Let's take talent first. A few years ago I wrote an article for the *Digest* (since reprinted in *Telling Lies for Fun & Profit*) which I called "It Takes More Than Talent." In it I cited examples of writers who had achieved substantial success without showing very much in the way of talent, and I balanced these with examples of people I've known who are very obviously talented, but who have never really gotten anywhere with their writing.

Another interesting thing about talent, is that, while I may be able to spot it in a writer's work, I can never be certain of its absence. A writer may not show any talent for an extended period of time. And then, sometime later on, his work may have a brilliance for which nothing he wrote previously will have prepared us.

How can that have happened? He can't have learned to be talented, for talent isn't supposed to be something one can learn. Did he then "develop"

his talent? How does one do that? By exercising it? But how do you exercise something unless you have it in the first place, and if you've got it all along, why doesn't it show from the beginning?

I've been increasingly drawn to the belief that talent is much as I believe intuition to be, something accessible to everyone who takes the trouble to gain access to it.

For some of us, this is very little trouble indeed. In some people writing talent lies on or near the surface, and it is these people we describe as natural writers. Some of us are so constituted, and while this easy access to talent is certainly no obstacle to success, neither is it a guarantee of success.

For others of us, our talent is like a pool of oil far below the surface. We have to drill deep, and we may have to call in the geologists and the dowsers and sink a few shafts before we bring in a gusher. But once we do, our oil brings the same price per barrel as the surface pool in the guy next door's field.

Does this mean everybody has what it takes to succeed as a writer?

I'm not sure.

My first impulse is to say that I believe everyone has what it takes to succeed in some area. Like Arnold, we can all be geniuses at something. Everyone has at least one area in which he or she possesses sufficient talent to perform distinguished work. For those of us with a powerful urge to write, the probability exists that our talents lie in that direction.

After my experience with the firewalk, and calling to mind my two moments of athletic glory, first on the basketball court and then at the pool table, I'm inclined to extend that argument. More and more, I've found myself coming around to the belief that virtually every human being has the capacity to do anything that any other human being can do.

This might be a good time to take a breath.

* * *

Thanks. What, you may be asking yourself, did he mean by that outrageous statement?

Well, let me tell you a little about something called *Neuro-Linguistic Programming*, or NLP. NLP was developed by a couple of scientifically-minded chaps who discovered that, if they could duplicate the physiology and mental syntax of another person, they could get results similar to that person. In other words, if I can get my mind and body synchronized with you, and can study your eye movements and stance while you answer certain questions and perform the tasks at which you are an expert, I'll be able to duplicate your performance.

This is a sketchy explanation of a complicated system, and I don't expect you to understand how NLP works, let alone take it as gospel that it does. Just let me tell you how Tony Robbins, who led Lynne and me and six hundred others across that twelve-foot bed of coals, learned to walk on fire in the first place.

As he tells it, Tony, a student of NLP, was trying to think of the most frightening act he could even imagine himself performing. The one he chose was walking on fire. Accordingly, he found a man who had mastered firewalking, an American who had studied for years with the firewalking Tamils of India and Sri Lanka. Tony tracked the man down and announced that he wanted to learn to walk on fire.

"Well, I've never thought about taking on an apprentice," the man said, "and I don't really have the time for it, and it would probably take you ten to twelve years to learn it—"

"No," Tony said. "I want to do it today."

And he did.

Similarly, he learned in a couple of hours to break six boards with a thrust of his hand, a karate skill that is supposed to take years to develop. Nor does this prove that he's Superman, because it takes him only a couple of hours to teach children at his summer camp to perform the same feats of

breaking boards and bricks.

The implication would seem to be that we are all Superman. What one of us can do, any of us can do. The potential is there in all of us.

That would explain my afternoon as a basketball star. Through some happy accident, I unwittingly put my mental and physical self into a state that gave me access to a latent capacity to throw a ball through a hoop. A natural athlete would have the same sort of effortless access to that state all the time. (And a student of NLP would presumably be able to enter into that state at will by studying and mirroring the natural athlete.)

There's something at once exhilarating and unsettling about the idea, isn't there? On the one hand, it's wonderful to realize that one's capacity is so much greater than one ever expected—indeed, that it's virtually unbounded. In the next instant, the ego recoils at the whole idea. "Wait a minute," I find myself thinking. "Do you mean to say that anybody can learn easily and quickly to do everything that *I* can do? It took me years to become as good as I am at whatever it is I'm good at. Now you tell me that anyone with a certain type of training can study me for a while and then do what I do as well as I do. I don't like that—it means I'm not special, and if I'm not special, then I'm nothing.

When I start thinking this way, I have to remind myself that it's who I am that makes me special, not what I can do. I can tell myself further that another person's accomplishment never diminishes my own, and that giving up the ego's idea of specialness is a small price to pay for entry into a whole new world of possibilities.

* * *

If talent's not the answer, then hard work must be.

Right?

I don't think so. It's very tempting to believe that we don't get what we

want for not working hard enough at it. That way we not only get to feel bad about not getting what we want, but we also get to despise ourselves for being lazy wastrels. Never underestimate the appeal of any line of thought that allows us to beat up on ourselves!

Another virtue of this argument is that it gives us something clear-cut to do—or not to do. If we just put in more hours, if we just get more written and sent out, if we just put more struggle and effort into everything that we do, why then we're on the right road to success, whether or not we ever get there. We don't have to rethink our thoughts, we don't have to confront any longstanding beliefs, we don't have to change anything. All we have to do is whatever we've been doing, but we have to make it more arduous, more demanding, and less enjoyable.

The trouble with this is that it doesn't work. It may make failure more comfortable ("At least I know I really tried"), but why not be comfortable with success instead? You may care that you really invested a great deal of effort in a piece of work. But I'll tell you a secret. Nobody else gives a damn.

Billy Wilder once said that nobody ever called up a friend to say, "Let's get over to the Criterion right away. The new movie there came in fifty thousand dollars under budget!" Similarly, nobody ever rushed out to a bookstore for a new novel because he heard that the author worked himself into an early grave writing it. I don't care how much effort went into a piece of writing, nor does any editor or publisher I've ever heard of. As a matter of fact, most of us have a preference for writing that looks as though it must have been effortless, as though it wrote itself. (Sometimes work that looks easy turns out to have been hard, but that's something else.)

Are the writers who succeed the ones who work the hardest at it? I don't think so. I know some unpublished writers who work harder than any successful writer I've ever known. I know people who struggle mightily and barely eke out a living, and others who take it easy, have a good time, put in

easy hours, and are doing very nicely, thank you very much.

Writing is not unique in this respect. If hard work were the secret of success, society would reserve its highest rewards for those who do the hardest work. Neither our society nor any other society on record has ever done this. The hardest workers are people who put in long hours of drudgery doing arduous manual labor under unpleasant and sometimes dangerous working conditions; they typically earn far less in money and prestige than almost anyone else. While it's true that many top professionals and corporate heads put in long productive hours, they'll usually tell you that it doesn't really seem like work to them, that they get so much enjoyment out of their work that the hours fly by. (Another sort of person, the compulsive workaholic, is addicted to work in a way that rarely has anything much to do with success or failure.)

This is not to say that a certain amount of work is not a requirement for writing success. Obviously, you can't realistically expect to publish a book unless you put in sufficient writing hours to finish the thing. But everyone who wants to write certainly has the capacity to put in the requisite hours, and a persistent failure to do so doesn't indicate terminal sloth or some innate propensity to procrastinate.

Some people turn up at Write For Your Life like penitents eager to be scourged. "I want you to give me holy hell," they tell me, "so that I'll go home and lock myself in my room and go without food and water until I produce a novel. That's why I came here."

Well, sorry. I'm not into flogging anyone. In the first place, I don't think it works. In the second, where do I get off deciding that you should push yourself harder?

Anyway, if you're not putting in as much work as you want, you're already punishing yourself far more rigorously than I could punish you. And what good is it doing?

If you want to get more work accomplished, or improve the quality of

what you write, or earn more money and acclaim with it, you have to do something that is at once much easier and much more demanding than slipping into a hair shirt and chaining yourself to your typewriter.

You have to change your mind.

The internal state of your own mind is the biggest single factor in determining whether or not you succeed as a writer. The beliefs you hold about yourself and your writing and the world around you are responsible for your success or failure in getting what you want.

Thought is creative. The thoughts you hold in your mind, conscious or unconscious, produce palpable results in your life.

What you think is what you get.

Does this sound like something you may have heard before?

Well, of course it is. The first time I wrote on this subject, in an article with *Writer's Digest* featured on the cover of the April '84 issue ("Overcoming the Ultimate Writer's Block"), I discussed this proposition at some length. I drew more mail with that article than with anything I'd ever done for WD, almost all of it gratifyingly favorable.

One dissenting letter, however, said in essence, "This is nothing new."

Well, no fooling. Whoever said it was? The notion that our thoughts produce our reality is a lot older than I am. My correspondent cited Coué, the Frenchman who came over here in the 1920's and had half the country chanting "Everyday in every way I am getting better and better." The principle antedates Coué. It may well be as old as time, or at least as old as thought.

Henry Ford (who may or may not be older than Coué, you could look it up) said, "If a man thinks he can or cannot perform a task, he's right." And the author of the Book of Proverbs put it this way:

"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."

I especially like that last because it so completely embodies the precept I'm trying to get across. As a man thinketh, not just in the conscious portion

of his mind, but throughout his being, *in his heart*—so is he.

It's not terribly difficult to grasp the idea that thought and writing ought to be somehow connected. After all, writing is quite obviously more a mental activity than a physical one. You don't write better by hitting the typewriter keys harder. You write better by thinking of the right words and putting them down in the right order. It doesn't take great strength to do this, or exceptional hand-eye coordination, or blinding speed. The skills involved are mental skills.

That's why I like to drive this argument home by turning from writing for a moment and looking instead at the sports world, where strength and coordination and speed are what separate the men from the boys, the sheep from the goats, and the wheat from the chaff. Obviously, physical skills and capacities are what make the difference, and they're either inborn or the product of nutrition and training.

Except that you get a different story if you talk to the athletes. In sport after sport, you hear the same thing. Every athlete will tell you that the difference is in the mind, that the mental edge provides the difference between winning and losing. "It's all in the mind," a player will tell you. "It's the mental game that tells the story. It's ninety, ninety-five, ninety-nine percent mental."

How can this be so? Oh, perhaps we can see it in golf or billiards, where concentration seems to play such a paramount role. But what about track? What about weightlifting? What about boxing? What about—

According to the athletes, it's all the same thing. "I wasn't psyched," an athlete will say in explanation of a poor performance. "I couldn't get my energy up. My concentration was off. I didn't have it mentally."

In recent years, the extent to which all sports are mental sports has increasingly begun to be appreciated. A new breed of sports professional has grown up, the sports psychologist, whose chore it is to maximize the performance of the athlete by seeing to his emotional and mental wellbeing.

Football teams take est. Baseball players take Silva Mind Control. Boxers glower at each other at weigh-ins. Tennis players read *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Track stars get hypnotized. Swimmers get analyzed.

Let me show you what the mind can do in what might look like a purely physical endeavor. A quarter of a century or so ago, one of the impossible goals in sport was the four-minute mile. The systematic reduction of the record time in the mile had stalled as the four-minute mark approached. Every great miler could come close to running a mile in four minutes, but no one could seem to do it. Experts who should have known better were starting to talk of the four-minute mark as physiologically unassailable. Man's capabilities were finite, they were saying, and no one was going to be able to break four minutes in the mile. And time was proving them right, because, race after race, no one did.

Then Roger Bannister ran a mile in under four minutes. He was a superb athlete running at the peak of his prowess and under optimum conditions, and he broke the unbreakable mark.

Now we could argue that Bannister ran his race so well because he was a little more able to believe in his ability and a little less invested in the idea that the four-minute mile was impossible, and that this mental edge was enough to facilitate his triumph. We could say that, but we could also call it luck or coincidence or attribute it to phases of the moon and what he had for breakfast.

What's more significant, I think, is not what Bannister did. It's what happened next.

The first thing that happened was that a second runner shattered the four-minute mark in the very same race! Just finishing second to Bannister, trailing along in his wake, he too performed a presumably impossible feat. And, in the weeks and months that followed, other athletes who had never been able to run a mile in under four minutes were suddenly doing it.

Each of them had previously believed, to one extent or another, that a

four-minute mile was impossible. When Bannister broke the tape, he gave everybody's belief system a nudge in the ribs. Every world-class miler immediately subscribed a little less strongly to the belief that the four-minute mile couldn't be run. Each believed a little more strongly that it could, and that he himself could do it.

And, with each further assault on the mark, it became a more accessible target for future runners. Nowadays the best high school milers turn in four-minute miles. Are they as outstanding athletes as Roger Bannister? Certainly not. It is the strength of their belief systems that enables them to run faster than he did.

* * *

Can we do anything we believe we can do? If I'm hypnotized into believing that I'm a bird, does that mean I can fly?

It's a little more complicated than that. In order for me to do something "impossible"—like flying by flapping my arms—I would have to believe in my ability to do so in every atom of my being. The part of me that the hypnotist could reach might buy the whole thing, but the rest of me would fall to earth, and take the hypnotized part down with it. Remember how the Book of Proverbs put it:

As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.

When a person's whole self is committed to a particular belief, our notions of what is and isn't possible may take a beating. Impossible feats are achieved every day. How many times have you read of someone performing a genuinely impossible feat of strength under emergency conditions? A man lifts a car off his child, never before having picked up anything heavier than a sack of laundry. How did he do it? Where did he get the strength?

We can call it a miracle and let it go at that. Miracle is another word like instinct or genius. It's what we call something when we don't know how it

works.

We can deny it ever happened. I saw people doing something similar after the firewalk. A fellow sitting a few seats from us said what he'd just done didn't really amount to anything because the coals didn't feel hot to him. Here was a man who had just walked through a fire hot enough to melt aluminum cookware and he was trying to find a way to invalidate it. Rather than allow some of his beliefs about the nature of reality to change, he was looking to discount this extraordinary thing he'd just done.

Or we can say that the man was so thoroughly mobilized by the urgent need to move that car off his child that he had no room in his mind for other thoughts. *I've got to move that car* was the only thought in his mind. He did not remember, anywhere in his mind, that such an act was impossible.

Does that mean the incident is not a miracle? Only if you insist on defining the miraculous as something entirely beyond comprehension. As I see it, miracles happen every day all over the world. People heal themselves of incurable illnesses, break presumably insurmountable barriers, and even sell books to Hollywood. Those are miracles. You can stick a seed in the ground and water it and more often than not it'll grow into a plant. That's a miracle. You can put a letter in an envelope, put a stamp on it, drop it in a mailbox, and most of the time it'll get delivered. Dropping it in the box is an act of faith. That it gets delivered is a miracle.

Do you think it'll take a miracle for you to get everything you want in your writing career?

In that case, you'll want to make a miracle. You don't have to change the world to do that. All you have to change is your mind.

Because it's what's in your mind that has been keeping you from getting what you want. You already have the capacity for success. You've got the strength, the speed, the coordination. But you've also got thoughts that are sapping your strength, shackling your speed, and knocking your coordination to hell and gone.

Let's take a look at negative thoughts, and how they do what they do.

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

Remember the Little Editor?

He's the fellow who sits on your shoulder like Peter Pain in the old Ben-Gay ads and socks it to you with his pitchfork. Well, he's got a cousin, a colleague in the industry. We call him the Big Editor in the Sky.

The Big Editor in the Sky doesn't say a lot of different nasty things. He says one thing and one thing only, and he says it no matter what you say to him.

This is what the Big Editor in the Sky says:

"You're right!"

And what are the negative things you say to him to elicit this response? They're all your negative thoughts about yourself. Here are some of them:

I'm not good enough.

I lack talent.

I'm stupid.

Writing is too much of a struggle for me.

I don't know how to say what I mean.

I'm not ready.

My writing will hurt other people.

It's not safe to let people know who I really am.

People will hate me if they know what I'm really like.

Nobody wants to hear what I have to say.

No one wants what I have to offer.

I'm boring.

It's not safe for me to succeed.

I don't deserve to succeed.

I can't get it right.

I can't do it perfectly.

It's not safe for me to express myself.

Success would separate me from those I love.

I don't have what it takes.

I'm too old.

I'm unwanted as a woman.

There's something wrong with me.

Sweeping negative statements like these are what we call *personal laws*. Your personal law is the most significant negative belief you have about yourself, and we call it that because it's personal, individually designed with you in mind, and because it's a law in that you march in obedience to it.

(Now might be a good time for you to take a breath.)

I want to stress two things right now about your personal law.

1. IT'S NOT TRUE. It's a lie you've made up to tell yourself.

2. IT OPERATES AS IF IT WERE TRUE. You make it come true by struggling to disprove it while sabotaging your own best efforts at every turn.

How does this work?

Let me give you an example. Roy Sorrels, an excellent writer and teacher of writing and a WFYL seminar leader, has the personal law *I'm boring* or *I'm not interesting.*

First of all, nothing could be farther from the truth. Every time I have a conversation with Roy I find out still another facet of the man and another fascinating element of his background and history. He's been a teacher and an actor, he served aboard an aircraft carrier, he's traveled widely, he's held innumerable unusual jobs. Moreover, he has a quick wit, an original way of looking at things, and a genuinely exciting and stimulating mind and spirit.

So his personal law is a lie. But it operates as if it were true.

On the one hand, Roy has always endeavored to disprove his personal law, to demonstrate to himself and to the world that he is in fact interesting. Look at the vocations he's chosen, for heaven's sake. You can't be effective as a teacher or actor or writer without being interesting. Because Roy has worked hard to disprove and overcome his personal law, he has indeed had some success in everything he's turned his hand to.

At the same time, he has held himself back by believing and striving to confirm his personal law. Because he believes himself to be uninteresting, he has always held himself back from his work. This withdrawal of self from the work kept his writing from having his own individual stamp to the effect that it might have. His writing was alive, it was interesting, but it lacked the richness that is a part of its writer's personality.

When he did write fiction that drew more upon his own life experiences, he held himself back in such a way as to confirm his personal law. And, face to face as well as on the page, Roy frequently failed to come across as anywhere near the interesting man he is. At our first meetings, I would find myself unintentionally tuning out when he would talk about himself or his work, although I listened intently when he discussed another student's work. (Our first contact was when Roy participated in a weekly class in mystery fiction that I was leading.)

Why was I tuning him out? Because his unspoken belief in his personal law, his commitment to the idea that he was not interesting, communicated itself to me. I'm not interesting, he was saying. You're right, said the Big Editor in the Sky. And, without knowing why, I was letting my mind wander.

As a teacher, Roy could let his material be interesting. As an actor, he could submerge his real self in the role he was playing. As a writer, he could be a teacher in his non-fiction and an actor in his fiction, and withhold himself one way or the other. But he was still wedded to the belief that his real self was not interesting, and he made others believe it in the bargain.

When he became aware of his personal law the first time he took Write For

Your Life, he started working with the affirmation *The real me is fascinating.* Since then he has been able to write *The Leading Cause of Death in Pigeons*, a wonderful mystery. Its absolutely fascinating lead character is a cab-driving actor drawn directly from Roy's own life experience.

For me, the changes in Roy have been more pronounced than those in his work. As he has increasingly been able to change his belief about himself, I find him more and more interesting. He was interesting all along—but, since he didn't know it, neither did I.

My own personal law is *I don't deserve to succeed.* And, like everyone else, I have spent my life struggling to prove otherwise while sabotaging myself every time I get the chance.

In my endeavor to prove myself as worthy of success, I began writing professionally at a relatively early age. But I quickly established a pattern of achieving small successes early on and then backing away from them.

For example, the first novel I wrote was, as I have written elsewhere, a sensitive treatment of female homosexuality. (The lesbian novel was a popular if minor paperback genre in the late fifties and early sixties.) I wrote the book in two or three weeks, and my agent sent it to Fawcett, which at the time was the best market for that particular kind of book.

And damned if they didn't buy it. I had to do some revisions, but they were no great problem, and I did them, and the book was published and I received an advance of two thousand dollars, which was not at all bad in 1958.

So then I wrote another one, right?

Wrong. While Fawcett was reading and evaluating my book, my agent got me started writing soft-core sex novels, originally for six hundred dollars a book. I did a batch of these. I had no trouble turning out one of them a month, but I couldn't seem to come up with an idea for another lesbian novel for Fawcett.

Then, a couple of chapters into what was to be my monthly sex novel, I

decided the character and plot had some life to it. I revised what I'd written and went on from there, and Knox Burger at Gold Medal Books bought the book and published it as *Mona*.

I tried to write another suspense novel for Gold Medal, but I couldn't seem to do it. Then, writing a TV tie-in novel based on a dying television series, I decided what I was writing was too good to waste on the thousand-dollar advance and sure oblivion that awaited such novels. I changed the name of the character, and that became my second Gold Medal mystery.

But it was a couple of years before I could write a third one.

Do you see the pattern? I kept writing inferior books well enough to exceed the mark, selling them to a better market than I'd originally intended them for. Then, when it was time for an encore, I would back away from my success and return to the lower level where I was certain I deserved to be. When I thought about this pattern—which I did as infrequently as possible—I beat myself up for having insufficient ambition. But I had tons of ambition. What I didn't have was a sufficiently good opinion of my own worth to allow me to be comfortable pursuing the success I wanted.

I did indeed want to succeed, which is to say that I wanted to be rich and famous. (Later on, when we talk about goals, I'll explain how I tried to keep myself from knowing this was what I wanted.) Because I didn't believe I deserved to be rich or famous, I repeatedly sabotaged my own pursuit of these objectives.

For years, I managed the neat trick of being one of the most widely-published unknown writers in America. Part of this was my own doing in an obvious way. I wrote most of my work under pen names, including several books that were as good as anything else I'd written and of which I was proud enough. I told myself I did this because it made sound commercial sense, and I may have believed as much, but it simply wasn't true. On another level, I may have figured that, although Lawrence Block clearly didn't deserve to be rich and famous, no one out there would know that Paul Kavanagh or Chip

Harrison didn't deserve it, either. But *I* knew it, and consequently I projected the same negative thought out into the universe, and the Big Editor in the Sky threw it right back at me.

When people asked me why I used pen names, I used to have plenty of reasons. A few years ago I began to cite something different. "I think I must have been trying to avoid building up a following," I said.

I was certainly successful in that respect. The Big Editor in the Sky, quick to agree with me that I didn't deserve to be rich, kept my income disproportionately low for the writing ability I showed and the volume of work I turned out. He agreed too that I didn't deserve to be famous, and I succeeded in maintaining a surprising level of anonymity. A couple of important reference works in the mystery field failed to list me at a time when I had a dozen or so books published in the field under my own name. Mystery Writers of America, an organization which actively solicits membership from all writers who have published a single mystery novel, never got around to inviting me to join. I got less attention than I deserved, and far less than I wanted.

I thought my failure was my own fault, that the kind of books I was writing were not the sort that would bring me money or fame. From time to time I tried to write something more commercial and the results were always discouraging. At that point I decided I just didn't have what it takes to get what I wanted, and that I had better learn to settle for less.

Of course I'd been settling for less all along. Settling for it? Hell, I'd been *insisting* on less.

When my career began to take an upturn, when I began to find myself getting more and more in the way of recognition and financial success, I wasn't doing anything different at the typewriter. I was writing the same kind of books I'd been writing for twenty years. All that was changing was my opinion of myself, and the consequent message I was sending out to the rest of the world.

To the extent that I continue to believe that I don't deserve to succeed, I construct barriers to success. To the extent that I allow myself to believe that I deserve to be rich and famous, I allow riches and fame to come into my life.

* * *

Are you beginning to get an idea how personal laws work?

I'll tell you, they work like a charm, like needles in a voodoo doll. You use your own hair and nail clippings, make a doll in your own image, and wonder why it hurts when you jab pins in it.

At our second seminar in Indianapolis, five women discovered that they subscribed to the belief that, if they were to succeed with their writing, it would mean the end of their marriages. (Their personal law was *Success separates me from those I love*.) What do you think happens if you pitch a curve like that to the Big Editor in the Sky? You're *right*, he'll say, as he knocks it out of the ballpark.

With that belief, one of two things will happen. Either you'll hold yourself back to make sure you don't succeed, or else you'll go ahead and achieve success and it will mean the end of your marriage. Or, if you really play your cards right, you can have it all—failure in your writing, and then a failed marriage because you blame *him* for your lack of success.

The affirmation I suggested for those women was *My writing success enhances all my relationships*. To the extent that they can replace their personal law with it, their writing and their marriages will bolster each other rather than detract from each other.

In one of our early chapters, I mentioned the one person we did almost lose during the opening meditation, the one who left the room in Boston. Remember her?

Her personal law, as she discovered later in the day, was *I don't belong*

here. In various ways, the conviction that she was in the wrong place had been operating throughout her life, in a variety of situations.

When she got stirred up, when fear started making her uncomfortable, her personal law supplied a way to get her out of the room. She simply told herself she didn't belong, and fabricated a reason—i.e., that what we were doing was in conflict with her religious beliefs. The realization that she had been run all her life by this personal law, and that it was false, that she did indeed belong in the seminar room and in all the other rooms of her life, was a moving experience for her.

I can identify with her, because *I don't belong here* is, if not a personal law, a long-time strong negative belief for me, and one I have struggled over the years to disprove and confirm at the same time. This has led me frequently to place myself in regions and situations where I demonstrably did not belong. I prided myself in being able to fit in anywhere, while secretly arranging things so that I never felt truly at home.

* * *

I'm stupid is a personal law we've encountered several times while presenting the seminar. Invariably, people with this personal law are anything but stupid. More often than not, they have IQs that go off the top of the chart. One woman in Chicago had this for a personal law, and admitted that it persisted in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, including acceptance into an advanced program at the University of Chicago.

"Each time I just tell myself, 'Well, you fooled 'em again, but one of these days they'll get on to you,'" she said.

Recently a couple of books have been published on the so-called Impostor Syndrome, in which successful people are haunted by the fear that they've succeeded in spite of their lack of ability, and that one of these days the world will find out the truth about them and they'll be ruined. The woman

in Chicago exemplifies this pattern perfectly. Throughout her life she had demonstrated her intelligence, but she herself remained the one person she could never convince.

She illustrates, too, another frequent characteristic of the personal law. Like many of us, she was convinced that she *had* to believe her personal law, that it brought her what success she had.

"If I stop thinking I'm stupid," she explained, "I won't keep trying to prove I'm not, and I won't accomplish anything, and then I and everyone else will know that I was really stupid all along."

Do you see the circular reasoning there? It all rests on the bedrock assumption that the personal law is really true.

A great many writers (and other people as well) have the personal law *I'm not good enough.* (My own personal law, *I don't deserve to succeed*, could be described as a variant of *I'm not good enough.*) A lot of very successful people have this for a personal law, and they may wind up attributing their success to it and being consequently reluctant to let go of it. "If I ever start to believe I'm good enough," they reason, "I'll become complacent, and I'll stop trying, and I'll be more not-good-enough than ever."

Which would you rather read, a book by someone trying to prove he's good enough even though he knows he isn't, or one by someone who knows he's perfectly good enough just the way he is?

* * *

Sometimes personal laws are subtle. We may have trouble figuring out what they are.

At one Boston seminar, one woman said that her biggest negative thought about herself was that she couldn't finish her fiction. Now that didn't seem like the kind of basic stuff of which personal laws are made. I asked her what she meant exactly.

"Well, I don't have trouble writing articles," she said. "But when I work on my fiction, it never seems to get finished. I guess my problem is that I procrastinate."

"I don't think so," I said. "Procrastination is almost always an effect, not a cause. Five different writers may think their biggest problem is procrastination, and they'll turn out to be procrastinating for five different reasons. Since you just have this problem with your fiction, why don't you see if you can figure out how fiction differs from non-fiction in your mind."

She thought about it. "I suppose I put myself into my fiction," she said reluctantly.

"Then your personal law is probably something like *It's not safe to let people know who I am*."

"I think that might be it," she said, "because when you said it, a horrible chill ran down my spine."

Later on, when it was time to create affirmations designed to reverse our personal laws, this woman announced that she had written down three and didn't know which was the best. I asked her to read them. She read two.

"They're both all right," I said, "but didn't you say you had three?"

"Yes," she said, "but I'm afraid to read the third one."

"Then it's probably the one to go with," I said, "but let's hear it to make sure."

"To know me is to love me," she said. (Actually she said, "To know me is to love me?" in an inflection brimming over with doubt.)

"Great," I said. "And abundantly true. Use it."

In the process that followed, when her partner said to her, over and over, "Jan, to know you is to love you," Jan wept for five minutes. That's a long way from the intellectual observation that one has trouble completing one's fiction.

* * *

One reason some of us have trouble zeroing in on our personal laws is that we're afraid to find out what they are. We think that to acknowledge them is to empower them, that knowing what our negative thoughts about ourselves are will make us feel worse about ourselves than ever.

As you've probably begun to suspect, that's not the way it works. Your personal law already has as much power over you as it could possibly hope to have. Recognizing it and looking at it straight on is the first step in the process of getting out from under its control.

Remember the fear process? Remember how fears tend to melt away when we begin to see them for what they are? It takes more than recognition and acknowledgement to keep your personal law from running your life, but you have to do that first and the rest will follow.

Of course you always have the option of using your personal law as yet another instrument for self-flagellation. "I'm so not good enough," you can tell yourself, "that I even have the personal law *I'm not good enough*." You can do that if you want, but it doesn't really make much sense, and you certainly don't have to do it.

Helping trainees find their personal laws is, as I remarked earlier, the most demanding section of the seminar for me. Lynne generally helps me lead this portion of the training, and we work one-on-one with people (or two-on-one) to get them through the smokescreen of the ego to what's behind it. When we work with one person, the exchange is frequently illuminating for other people in the room, and by the time we're done everyone has a personal law to work with.

I can't work with you in quite the same fashion through the pages of this book, but all the same I'd like you to try to find out now what your personal law is. Before we get started, turn back to the list of personal laws at the beginning of this chapter. Read through them and pay attention to your reactions to the different sentences.

(Remember to keep breathing while you read the list, and throughout this

process.)

Now turn to a clean page in your notebook. I'm going to give you the start of a sentence. Read it, think about it, close your eyes, ponder it, take a breath—and then open your eyes and write down the rest of the sentence.

Ready? Here's the sentence:

"THE WORST THING ABOUT MY WRITING IS—"

Now take a breath and write down what comes to mind.

Let's try it again. I'll say the same thing a little differently, and what you write down may be the same phrase or it may be a different one.

Here we go:

"MY MOST NEGATIVE THOUGHT ABOUT MYSELF AS A WRITER IS—" Take a breath and write down the thought.

And, from a slightly different angle:

"MY BIGGEST OBSTACLE TO WRITING SUCCESS IS—" Take a breath and complete the sentence.

And, finally:

"THE VERY WORST THING I CAN SAY ABOUT MY WRITING IS—"

Take a breath and write it down.

Now take a look at what you've got written down. You should have four

brief sentences of the sort listed at the beginning of the chapter. Read them over to yourself and try to find the most basic one, the strongest one, the one that carries the most emotional charge with it. One of them may seem to be the foundation from which the others sprout. Pick that underlying sentence and circle it.

That's your personal law.

If you've done the process correctly, it's very likely one of the personal laws on the list. But it may not be. Every once in a while someone comes up with a personal law we haven't encountered before, and it proves to be the right law for that person.

In Minneapolis this past spring, one man had no trouble finding his personal law. He hit it right away and was very clear that it was the right one. At the same time he was almost apologetic for it because there was no logical reason why the thought would have anything to do with his writing.

His personal law was *I'm not big enough.* (He was, I might add, of normal size. Personal laws may create reality, but they don't necessarily spring from reality.) Working with an affirmation aimed at reversing this belief was very visibly advantageous to this man.

A woman at the same seminar had a similarly unusual personal law. At first I thought it was going to be *I'm stupid*—like everyone with that personal law, she was clearly of above-average intelligence—but a little work with her showed that there was a stronger belief operating, and she managed to find it. "If I let people know how intelligent I am," she said, "I will be destroyed."

Would you like to see how a personal law can influence the course of a person's life? As a child, this woman spent several years in a home for retarded children. Her commitment to her personal law had led her to conceal her intelligence so effectively that she was misdiagnosed.

Where do we get these beliefs? Why on earth would a normal-sized man think he wasn't big enough? Why do perfectly adequate people think they

aren't good enough? Where do these personal laws come from? They seem so utterly in conflict with reality, so lacking in factual basis, you might think they were arbitrarily assigned to us at birth.

As we'll see in the next chapter, that's pretty much how it happens.

THE BIRTH OF A WRITER

It will probably not come as a great shock to you to learn that our personal laws have been with us longer than we've been writing. As a matter of fact, a considerable body of evidence exists to support the theory that our personal laws have been ours since birth.

According to this theory (to which I subscribe myself), we are born into this world without having formed many ideas about ourselves and the universe. Our minds are clean slates, and the first thoughts written on them are accordingly etched into our consciousness. Thus it is that the birth process, as we subjectively experience it, determines the personal law we select for ourselves.

Sometimes when I'm having trouble finding out a person's personal law I'll ask him if he knows what his birth was like. (Actually Lynne is more apt to ask this question. She is frequently more courageous than I am.) Certain birth patterns frequently give rise to certain personal laws.

For example, people who experienced a dry birth or a prolonged and difficult labor very often subscribe to the belief that life is a struggle, that they have to struggle to survive. Because the Big Editor in the Sky keeps telling them they're right, their lives will frequently be marked by the need to struggle. Their experience, like Alice's in Looking-Glass Land, is that they

have to run very fast to stay where they are.

My daughter Jill exemplifies this pattern perfectly. She went to the same high school as her older sister Amy, and was equal to her in intelligence. Jill spent hours and hours every day studying and doing homework. Amy coasted through without working terribly hard. Both did about as well academically.

Both had similar births—induced labor, normal presentation—with one significant difference. Jill's birth was dry. Amy's was not.

People born by Caesarean section often expect or require assistance in completing things. They also often have difficulty in distinguishing between rescue and attack.

Preemies frequently have the personal law *I'm not ready* or *The world's not ready for me*. They and others who spent time in an incubator may believe they have to be separate from others in order to survive. The personal law *Success (i.e. survival) separates me from those I love* could derive from this kind of natal experience. Incubator babies occasionally are more comfortable wearing glasses, even if they don't really need them for vision. They feel safer with a barrier of glass between themselves and the world.

Breech birth may leave a person convinced he has to act differently from others in order to survive. Once at a seminar a trainee asked how a breech birth could affect a person's writing. "Do you get the endings of stories before you think of the beginnings?" Lynne asked. "How did you know that?" the woman demanded.

When the birth is arduous for the mother, the infant often believes he has hurt his mother. The personal law *Expressing my aliveness hurts other people* is a natural consequence of this type of birth experience. Writers who are overly concerned that their work will hurt people, or who do indeed wind up hurting people through their writing via the Big Editor syndrome ("You're right!") generally have this personal law, often as a result of this birth pattern. Writing that is flat, dry and lifeless is often attributable to this

personal law.

(Now would be a good time to take a breath.)

* * *

If you don't see any relationship between your own birth and your personal law, don't worry about it. What determines your personal law is not so much the precise nature of your birth as your own subjective experience of it. Two babies can have what looks to an observer like identical births and can pick up very different ideas from the process.

For example, let's consider the gentleman in Minneapolis whose personal law was *I'm not big enough*. How might he have formed that idea about himself?

Most obviously, he could have been small at birth. If he was a tiny premature infant, he could have realized that his size raised questions about his ability to survive, and he could have incorporated those questions permanently into his belief system.

But he could have created the same personal law for himself even if his weight were well within the normal range at birth. Perhaps someone in the delivery room said "Look how small he is" or "He's too small." We hear and understand far more far earlier than we realize, and there's a part of our mind that never forgets anything.

Alternately, he might simply have looked at all the big people in the delivery room, compared their size to his, and concluded that he was too small to measure up. That may seem a rather sophisticated line of reasoning for an infant, but I find it plausible enough.

I'm not good enough. I can't make it. I don't know how to do it right. There's something wrong with me. I'm not wanted as a women (or man). I'm bad. I'm ugly. These are all personal laws. And they are all decisions we can make about ourselves as a result of our interpretation of the circumstances of our

birth.

Here's a process you can do now at home. We don't do this at the seminar—we only touch fleetingly on birth at Write For Your Life, if at all. But it should be a useful process for you now.

Turn to a clean page in your notebook. (I hope you still have some clean pages in your notebook.) At the top of the page, write: *What I know about my birth.*

Then write down everything you know about your birth. The time of day, the circumstances, the duration of labor, everything you've been told or otherwise learned about.

If you really don't know anything about your birth, let your intuition and imagination carry the day. Use the heading *My fantasy about what my birth was like* and write down a description of your birth as you imagine it. Give your imagination free rein.

After you've done this, take a moment or two to read over what you've written. Try to let yourself be available to whatever feelings come up around the memory of your birth. Keep track of your thoughts. Breathe a lot.

Now turn the page and write this sentence:

Here are some of the ways my birth might have led me to make certain decisions about myself and the world.

And then start writing. Try to let your thoughts flow as freely as they did during the automatic writing process. Don't bother to distinguish between the known facts of your birth and what you imagined. Treat it all as fact for the purposes of this exercise.

If I were to do this process, I might write something like this:

> *Here are some of the ways my birth might have led me to make certain decisions about myself and the world. My mother was*

knocked out with anesthesia in the late stages of the birth. I was angry that I had to do all the work myself at the end, and formed the idea that I have to do things myself if I want them done right. All my life I have worked best alone, and have found it difficult to accept support and assistance from others.

I was terrified when the doctor held me upside-down by my feet. I tensed my neck and shoulders in response to this fear. Ever since I have stored tension in that area. Years later when I tried using gravity boots I found the experience of hanging by my feet from a bar disproportionately frightening and uncomfortable because it brought up echoes from my birth.

My mother lost a baby in the second trimester about a year and a half before I was born. If that baby had lived, I would not have been conceived. I could have developed the idea that someone else had to die in order for me to live, that my success or survival is at the expense of others and I consequently don't deserve it.

I was angry at the obstetrician for the unpleasantness of my birth. I decided then that it was safer for me to get support and assistance from women than from men.

Someone in the delivery room seemed to disapprove of my crying out. I formed the belief that it wasn't proper for me to get attention by making noise. I was as a result an atypically quiet baby. I grew up finding myself most comfortable seeking attention, and most effective in getting it, by writing, which was something I could do silently and removed in time and space from my audience.

Okay. Your turn now. If anything comes up that makes you irritated or uncomfortable, just breathe a lot and stay with the process. *I* got stirred up emotionally just now doing this process, and I've been working with birth-related material for several years.

* * *

As I said earlier, we don't do this process in Write For Your Life, nor do we go into the subject of birth in much detail. It is, after all, a seminar centered upon our writing and time is limited; we originally ran the seminar from ten to six, adding an hour because we found ourselves running late all the time. Even now, with the seminars running until seven, we have trouble fitting everything in.

If you'd like to know more about how birth affects the rest of one's life, I'd recommend you read a book called *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, by Thomas Verney, M.D. Several books by Sondra Ray and Bob Mandel also treat this subject. Rebirthing, a holistic modality which uses connected breathing to integrate birth trauma and produce physical and emotional benefits, is another area you might investigate. Some of the books listed in the back of this volume can explain rebirthing and help you decide if it is something you want to pursue.

* * *

Perhaps you were able to see clearly how your personal law and other negative thoughts could have developed for you during the process of your birth. Perhaps neither the available information about your birth nor what you were able to create in fantasy form seemed to apply to your personal law in any discernible way.

Don't worry about it. Remember, the most important thing about your personal law is not how you got it, but how you can get rid of it, or at least diminish its effects upon you.

It's very definitely possible to accomplish this. However, it's not something you can bring about by snapping your fingers. Simply understanding where your personal law came from and how it works to the detriment of your

writing and the rest of your life will not in and of itself make that personal law go away. Remember, it has been with you a long time, probably since birth.

And somewhere along the way, you probably got the idea that you need it in order to survive.

Why would you think that?

Well, how could you help coming to that conclusion? Remember, your personal law is something you chose in the first place as a survival technique. You've had it all your life and you've survived all your life, so it's perfectly logical for you to attribute your survival to this belief you've had about yourself.

Suppose your mother had a difficult protracted dry birth and you had to struggle to be born. You came into the world certain that life is a struggle and that you have to struggle and struggle hard to survive.

You have survived. Now someone's suggesting that you'll do better to give up believing in the necessity of your struggle.

The hell with that, your mind says. *If I quit believing that I have to struggle to survive, I'll quit struggling. And then I'll die.*

Think of yourself as a runner. Your personal law is the good luck charm that you carry with you every time you run. You wouldn't dream of entering a race without it, because it's always been with you and you're certain you owe a good measure of your success to it.

There's only one problem. This particular good-luck charm is a concrete block, and it weighs twenty-five pounds.

Tell the truth now. Do you really think you run faster with that hanging around your neck?

If you think you might run faster and farther without that good-luck charm, you're ready for the next chapter.

THE LITTLE WRITER THAT COULD

We don't get rid of a deep-rooted thought like our personal law by willing it out of existence. Instead we work to replace it with another thought which will contradict it. We call this new thought an affirmation.

And what exactly is an affi rmation? An affirmation is nothing more nor less than a strong positive thought which we implant in our consciousness with the intention of producing results in our lives.

(That's the sentence WFYL trainees tend to write down. You don't have to write it down. It's *already* written down.)

Here are some other things to know about an affirmation in order to create one that's right for you:

IT SHOULD BE IN THE PRESENT TENSE. "I please people with everything I write" is better than "People will love the books I am going to write."

IT SHOULD BE IN THE ACTIVE VOICE. *"My writing nourishes me and everyone else," not "I and others are nourished by my writing."*

IT SHOULD BE POSITIVE RATHER THAN NEGATIVE. *"I am a good writer" is better than "I am not a bad writer."*

IT SHOULD HAVE SOME PUNCH TO IT. *Not "I now possess the requisite skills to obtain the success I crave through the medium of my writing." Instead, try "I have everything I need to get everything I want."*

IT SHOULD BE BRIEF. *Long flowery affirmations with dependent clauses trailing off in all directions may appeal to one's poetic impulses, but they don't work very well. By the time you get to the end of the sentence, your mind has lost track of the beginning. Affirmations work better when they're short, direct and to the point.*

IT SHOULD GET THE JOB DONE. *Some people come up with excellent affirmations fulfilling all of the other requirements. Unfortunately, they have nothing at all to do with the personal law. If your personal law is I'm unwanted as a woman (perhaps because you thought, rightly or wrongly, that your parents wanted a boy), you wouldn't want to come up with the affirmation "I am a wonderful writer and I always express myself clearly." That may be true, and it's a good thought, but it doesn't address your personal law. (You'd be better off with "My female energy enriches everything I write" or something along that line.)*

Here are some personal laws and some affirmations that confront them directly:

Personal law: *Writing is a struggle or Writing is too hard for me. Affirmation: Writing is easy and fun for me.*

Personal law: *There's something wrong with me and/or my writing. Affirmation: I'm perfect just the way I am right now. Or I'm a perfect writer just the way I am right now.*

Personal law: *I don't have what it takes. Affirmation: I've got what it takes or I have everything I need to get everything I want.*

Personal law: *It's not safe to reveal myself to others. Affirmation: It's safe to let people know who I am. Or The more I reveal myself to others, the safer I am. Or To know me is to love me.*

Personal law: *I'm stupid. Affirmation: My intelligence enlivens everything I write. Or I'm smart enough to know how good I am.*

Personal law: *My writing's not important. Affirmation: My writing is important to me and everyone else.*

Personal law: *I'm not good enough. Affirmations: I am more than good enough to succeed. I am a richly talented writer. I am a wonderful writer.*

Personal law: *My writing hurts people. Affirmations: My writing nourishes me and everyone else. My writing is a gift of love to the universe.*

Personal law: *I'm not interesting. Affirmation: My real self is fascinating.*

Personal law: *It's not safe to succeed. Affirmation: The more I succeed the safer I am.*

PERSONAL LAW: *I don't deserve to succeed. Affirmations: I deserve to succeed. I deserve to be rich and famous. Everyone profits from my success.*

PERSONAL LAW: *Nobody wants to hear what I have to say. Affirmation: Everyone wants to hear what I have to say.*

PERSONAL LAW: *Nobody wants what I have to offer. Affirmation: Everybody wants what I have to offer.*

PERSONAL LAW: *The world's not ready for me. Affirmation: The world is ready for me and my writing.*

PERSONAL LAW: *Success separates me from others. Affirmations: My writing success enhances all my relationships. My writing brings me closer to those I love.*

You may want to use one of these affirmations. You may prefer to create your own. In either case, try to select an affirmation that resonates strongly for you. (If it upsets and irritates you, that's not necessarily a bad sign. The part of you that's bothered by it is the part that doesn't want to let go of your personal law.)

It's funny how people react to affirmations. The first time I presented Write For Your Life, I had a fiercely independent older gentleman in the front row. (He sat through the meditation with his arms folded across his chest and his eyes wide open. That'll give you an idea.)

His personal law as he came up with it was *I'm a rebel*. By this he meant that he had to do things in his own highly original fashion. The affirmation I gave him was *Everyone loves it when I do things my way*, and he professed to be delighted with it when we worked it out privately.

Then, when I asked the group if everyone had an affirmation, he raised his hand. "I don't have one of my own," he said. What, I asked, was wrong with the one I'd given him? "Nothing," he said. "I like it, but it's yours. I haven't been able to think of one of my own."

Well, of course not. That was his personal law talking; he was a rebel, he had to do things his way.

(To show you how his personal law influenced his writing career, a woman who'd talked with him told me later that he had recently sent out a long novel to an agent, and that he'd single-spaced the entire manuscript. I said some people evidently didn't know that publishers expect double-spaced manuscripts, and that our friend was unfortunate. "Oh, he's unfortunate, all right," the woman told me. "He said he knew manuscripts were supposed to be double-spaced, but he likes them better single-spaced." Of course, I thought. He really did think he had to do things differently, and in such a way as to incur disapproval.)

Now's a good time for you to write out your own affirmation. Turn to a fresh sheet of paper and write out the affirmation you've selected for yourself, whether it's one I suggested, a modification of one of mine, or one you've created for yourself.

If you feel slightly uncomfortable with what you've written, don't be overly concerned. There are two main reasons why people tend to dislike their affirmations.

One is that they figure it's obvious, that they already know it. Suppose, for example, that your personal law is *I'm stupid*. Suppose that, like most people with this personal law, you actually are of more than average intelligence, and that you know this intellectually. The affirmation you have chosen is, let us say, *I'm smart enough to write well*. It may strike you as self-evident. Why work to drill it into your consciousness when you already know it's true?

The answer is that we're not just dealing here with the rational part of the

mind. As Lynne is fond of saying, life is not a logic problem. No matter how many arguments your intellect can bring to bear, a part of your mind goes on thinking your personal law is true, and that's why you have to work with an affirmation even though you think you already believe it wholeheartedly.

Other people resist their affirmation because they think it's not true. They honestly believe their personal law is the truth, and that trying to believe otherwise is nothing but an exercise in self-deception. If everything you ever write comes back like a boomerang, how can you tell yourself that everyone wants to read what you want to write? Won't you just be lying to yourself? And what good can you possibly accomplish that way?

First of all, your personal law is false. It's only true to the extent that you've made it true. The proof you have has simply been the tangible result of your holding that particular negative thought in your mind. When you change the thought, you'll change the results.

I'll never forget a young woman who attended our seminar in Denver this past spring. At about this stage in the seminar, she asked what you do if your personal law happens to be true. I told her it wasn't true.

"Oh, yes it is," she said. "I'm really not good enough. This is just a thought for everybody else, but for me it's the God's honest truth. So what do I do?"

"Work with your affirmation anyway," I suggested.

"But it's not true!"

"Fine," I said. "You work with it anyway and see what happens. And if it turns out that you're right, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll take your picture and put it up on our office wall, and underneath we'll put a little plaque, and on it we'll have them engrave, "This is Mary Dean B. She really *wasn't* good enough."

She laughed at that, and moments later rushed up laughing to report that her partner had suggested an affirmation for her: "Maybe I don't really stink as bad as I think I do sometimes." I loved her sense of humor, but I saw

how she used it as a way of maintaining low self-esteem; at the same time, I picked up on her thought that her ability to entertain people demanded a bad self-image. I was able to suggest another affirmation for her: "I'm even more amusing now that I know how good I am."

If you think your personal law is absolute truth, something carved in tablets of stone, and if you consequently think that working with your affirmation makes about as much sense as writing "The earth is flat" over and over, let me suggest that you simply say "Thanks for sharing" to the part of your mind that keeps telling you this. And get on with the process whether or not it makes sense to you.

* * *

A brief word, before we see how to use affirmations, for all those people with the personal law *I'm not good enough.*

People who think they're not good enough frequently feel the same way about everything around them. They're never good enough, and what they have isn't good enough, and what they do isn't good enough. Nothing is ever quite good enough—including their personal law. It's pretty standard for people with this personal law to keep trying to change it and settle on another personal law.

Similarly, no affirmation is ever quite good enough for someone with this personal law.

If you're an I'm-not-good-enough, don't be too upset with yourself when you find yourself exhibiting this sort of discontent. Just accept it as confirmation that you've got the correct personal law, and that you're on the right track to doing something about it.

* * *

At Write For Your Life, we have a drill process as a chief method of implanting our affirmations into our consciousness. Remember, it's not enough to select an affirmation. That's the easy part. The tricky part is making ourselves believe it on a deeper and deeper level.

Toward that end, we have everyone pick a partner, move the chairs so that they're facing one another, and pick an A and a B. In the first stage of the process, A says his affirmation over and over to B, who receives it with enthusiasm:

"I deserve to be rich and famous."
"You're absolutely right."
"I deserve to be rich and famous."
"That's the truth."
"I deserve to be rich and famous."
"You bet."
"I deserve to be rich and famous."
"You certainly do."
"I deserve to be rich and famous…."

Then, in the second half of the process, B says A's affirmation over and over to A, and A just sits there and breathes it in. Then, of course, roles are reversed; B says B's affirmation which A receives with enthusiasm, and A says it back to B, and B just takes it in.

Does this strike you as mindless, pointless, and clearly ineffectual?

I'm not surprised. The intellectual mind can hardly be expected to react otherwise to a process that is so far removed from the realm of the intellect. Let me just say that drill processes of this sort, when properly structured and performed, are extraordinarily powerful.

After we'd done this process in West Texas, one man said he felt touched by the spirit, as if he'd just been to a revival meeting. A woman at another

seminar said something I thought was quite wonderful; she shared that when her partner was repeating her affirmation to her, she felt as though she was hearing something she had always known, but that she had somehow forgotten.

There's an ancient Jewish legend that seems to fit in with what that woman said. Just before every child is born, an angel appears and tells the child all the secrets of the Universe, all the unknowable truths. Then the angel puts his finger right below the baby's nose and gives a push, and the baby forgets everything. (And that's why we've all got that groove in the center of the upper lip.)

Perhaps we once all knew our own worth. We forgot it in the process of being born. But a part of our mind still knows deep down that our personal laws are lies. When we hear the truth again, when we're able to listen to it, it's as though we're remembering it.

* * *

How can you duplicate this process at home?

I'm not sure that you can. You could hunt up a partner and try to make it work that way, but without having previously experienced the process in a group situation, I don't think it would work too well.

Rather than attempt to adapt this particular exercise for home use, I'd like to suggest some other ways you can work toward the same result—i.e., the implantation of your affirmation into your consciousness. Here are several approaches you can try.

USE THE AFFIRMATION AS A MANTRA. Run it over and over in your mind. Say it to yourself when you're walking down the street, when you're digging in the garden, when you're doing any activity that leaves your mind disengaged enough so that you can keep repeating the affirmation to yourself. When you're walking or running, fit the rhythm of the affirmation

to the rhythm of your steps, so that you are marching in time to it.

SAY IT ALOUD. Try it this way: Sit in front of a mirror and gaze into your own eyes. Say your affirmation over and over and look at yourself as you say it. Say it five times in the first person ("I deserve to be rich and famous"), five times in the second person ("Larry, you deserve to be rich and famous"), and five times in the third ("Larry deserves to be rich and famous"). Then start over again in the first person, and keep going. This process, I might add, is not always as easy as it sounds. You may find yourself manifesting all sorts of resistance to the exercise; right now, even as you read these lines, you may be deciding that you'll do this exercise some other time, but that it sounds dumb and you don't want to do it now.

I'm going to suggest that you do it right now, before reading any further. Sit or stand in front of a mirror and say your affirmation over and over to yourself for five minutes. Keep breathing throughout, keep looking yourself in the eye, and keep saying the affirmation.

Go ahead. Do it right now.

DECORATE YOUR HOUSE WITH IT. Print your affirmation on index cards and hang them up at strategic spots around the house, where they'll catch your eye from time to time. Every time you happen to look at one of them, you'll be reminded of your affirmation. When that happens, repeat it a couple of times to yourself to reinforce the reminder.

The wall above your desk is a good place for one of these index cards. When you look up from your work, you'll be reminded of the real truth about yourself, and it'll be a useful bit of ammunition in the ongoing battle with your personal law.

MAKE A TAPE. One of the most effective ways to absorb an affirmation on a deep inner level is to listen to it over and over again, especially when you've just awakened, when you're drifting off to sleep, or while you're concentrating on another activity. We play our own tape, *Affirmations for Writers*, right after the sharing that follows the drill process described a few

pages back. While we had played a portion of Side One at the start of the seminar, we play all of Side Two now.

We do this for a couple of reasons. After the emotional energy expended during the drill process, everyone is ready for a breather. We encourage people to get comfortable while we play the tape. We dim the lights and tell people to feel free to drift off, to think of other things, to pay no attention to the tape, indeed to fall sound asleep if they wish.

After having just worked with affirmations in the drill process, our trainees are more than usually receptive to the strong positive thoughts on the tape. Playing it at this point helps us to heighten the experience of the seminar.

It also helps us sell the tape; people who can't imagine themselves listening to an affirmations tape over and over often wind up purchasing one as a result of this second exposure to it. We're pleased when this happens, partly because the tape is an excellent profit item for us, but at least as much because we believe in it and want people to have it. We make money on the books we sell, too, but we don't push them on people. We push the tape rather more aggressively because we believe it to be such a valuable device for improving the quality of one's thoughts and taking the seminar home with you. That's why we give it a fairly hard sell.

(And that's why I'm giving it a hard sell right now. If you don't already have the tape, there's information in the back of the book on how to order it, and I'm going to urge you to do just that.)

If you want, however, you can get the benefits of an affirmations tape without buying ours. You can make your own. In fact, I'd recommend that you do so whether or not you buy ours. The experience of hearing your own affirmation in your own voice is more powerful than you might suspect. If you have an aversion to the sound of your own recorded voice, incidentally, don't worry about it. Almost everyone does at first. As you become increasingly accustomed to hearing yourself on tape, you'll probably lose your distaste

for it. You may want to buy a loop tape, so that you can record a thirty-second or one-minute message that will play over and over indefinitely. Or you can record a full-length tape, as you prefer.

* * *

These are all good ways to make use of affirmations. But the most outstanding way to get an affirmation really installed in your mind, and a method that is particularly of value to writers, deserves a whole chapter to itself.

THE MOST PROFITABLE WRITING YOU CAN DO

Writing affirmations increases their effectiveness beyond measure. By writing your affirmations, and by using what we call a negative response column, you turn the whole process into something that is worlds removed from simple positive thinking. It's not enough to drill positive thoughts into your mind, not if you're still holding onto negative thoughts that keep you from believing your affirmation. Trying to do so is like trying to keep on breathing in without ever breathing out. You have to exhale in order to make room for the next inhalation.

The process I'm going to show you will enable you to let go of negative thoughts and make room for positive ones. At the same time, it's a remarkable vehicle for self-analysis; as you get the hang of it, you'll be able to use it to discover disempowering negative thoughts you never even knew you had.

Here's how the process works. Take a fresh sheet of paper and draw a line down it, a little to the right of center. On the left side of the page, write your affirmation in the first person. Then, without thinking about it a whole lot, write down on the right hand side the first negative thought that pops into your mind.

Then write your affirmation again. And, in the response column, write down another negative thought, the first one that comes to mind, but not the

same one you've already written down.

What you write may look something like this:

Writing is easy and fun for me	*Bullshit!*
Writing is easy and fun for me	*It's always a struggle*
Writing is easy and fun for me	*I hate it*
Writing is easy and fun for me	*I have to work at it*
Writing is easy and fun for me	*Nothing that hard is fun*

After you've written the affirmation five times with a different response each time, switch to the second person. And put your name into it, like this.

Larry, writing is easy and fun for you	*The hell it is*
Larry, writing is easy and fun for you	*Don't I wish*

Larry, writing is easy and fun for you	*Good writing has to be a struggle*
Larry, writing is easy and fun for you	*Nothing worthwhile comes easy in this life*
Larry, writing is easy and fun for you	*Sometimes it's fun, but not often*

Note that last negative response; as you do the process, a little ray of sunshine occasionally creeps into the negative response column. Now, after five entries in the second person, you switch to the third person:

Writing is easy and fun for Larry	*I'll never believe this*
Writing is easy and fun for Larry	*Yeah, and so is root canal*
Writing is easy and fun for Larry	*It's not easy*
Writing is easy and fun for Larry	*Sometimes I enjoy it*
Writing is easy and fun for Larry	

Don't bother to write down a response the last time you write the affirmation. Let yourself end on a positive note. You might also want to cap the series by returning to the first person and writing the affirmation five more times without a response column, just to drill in that upbeat finale.

I have a lot to tell you about this process, but first I'd like you to experience it for yourself. Use your own affirmation, the one you chose during the previous chapter, the one you said over and over aloud while looking at yourself in the mirror. Use your notebook, write the affirmation on one side and the responses on the other, and do it five times each in the first, second and third persons and five times again in the first person without a response.

Remember, after you've written your affirmation each time, write the first negative response that comes to mind. Don't stop to figure out whether or not you really mean it, or whether it really applies. Just write it down. If you can't think of a negative response, ask yourself what your response would be if you could think of one. If you still can't think of anything, make something up. Don't allow yourself to leave the space blank, or your mind will seize that as an escape clause and be "unable" to think of responses on other occasions. Make sure you produce a negative response every time, except when you write the affirmation again five times in the first person without a response column.

Go ahead, do it!

* * *

I hope you enjoyed the process, and I hope you found it interesting. Because I'm going to recommend that you work regularly with affirmations.

Writers are particularly apt to enjoy working with affirmations in this fashion because it's a written process and a verbally interesting one. The way negative thoughts surface, the way they have their own particular logic or illogic, is likely to be especially interesting to those of us who are so

intimately concerned with words. Visual artists probably have an advantage in visualization exercises, but we writers have an edge in verbal processes like this one.

Did you find it difficult or unpleasant to work with a negative response column? That's not an uncommon reaction, especially for people who've had some exposure to old-style positive thinking. The idea of actually writing down a negative thought seems dangerous and counterproductive. We've been learning that thoughts are powerful, that negative thoughts can harm us, and won't we just be giving them power over us by writing them down?

That's not how it works. By using a negative response column as I've demonstrated, we don't strengthen or reinforce the negative thoughts. We provide a means for their escape. We vent them. We're not creating them when we write them down this way. We created them long ago, and they're inside us already, where they can do the most harm. Think of them, if you will, as a pernicious form of anaerobic bacteria that thrives in the absence of oxygen. Once we bring them out into the fresh air and sunlight, they can no longer harm us.

Remember, your fears had more power over you before you knew what they were. Your personal law had its greatest hold upon you before you learned what it was. And the negative thoughts that support that personal law operate in exactly the same way.

Does the negative response column still bother you? Look at it this way: Your resistance to using a negative response column represents your desire to remain loyal to your personal law.

* * *

Do affirmations really work? Can such a simple process actually enable us to change the nature of the thoughts in our conscious and unconscious minds?

In a word, yes.

The process is really quite remarkable, and one of the more remarkable things about it is that you can actually see it work. The negative response column provides your window on the workings of the process.

Because, as you work with a particular affirmation over a period of weeks, you'll notice a change in the nature of your responses. Certain thoughts that were powerful immediate reactions for you at the beginning won't come to mind at all. When you do write them down out of force of habit, they'll have lost their emotional charge. When this happens, you'll know you've been increasingly able to internalize belief in your affirmation.

Eventually the affirmation will go flat for you. It will no longer serve to generate any strong negative responses. When this happens, you can still write it twenty times a day without a response column, just to reinforce it, while moving on to another affirmation, one that does provoke strong negative responses.

You'll also notice other changes besides what does or does not show up on the page. When your personal law or its corollaries come into your mind, you'll find yourself responding with your affirmation. You'll notice changes for the better in the way you feel about yourself, and the way you perform at your writing desk and in other areas of your life.

You may notice significant changes in the way other people react to you, too.

We all know that you can't change other people. That's the bad news.

The good news is you don't have to.

Because, when you change yourself, the response you get from other people will change. Over the years many of us have set up other people in our lives to be our negative response columns. These people—and they're generally people close to us, friends or family or coworkers—seem to exist just to run us down and tell us unpleasant things about ourselves. In the great majority of instances, all they're doing is feeding our own negative thoughts

back to us. They're taking the role of the Big Editor in the Sky, saying a fervent "That's right!" to our own unspoken message of self-deprecation. It's pointless to blame them. You might as well blame a mirror for giving you a nasty look when you're the one scowling in it.

When we change our thoughts about our thoughts about ourselves, the response we get from other people in our lives will change dramatically. I have seen this myself in both my personal and my professional relationships. The first place to start improving any relationship, I have come to believe, is within my own mind.

* * *

Affirmations work. But there are a couple of ways you can keep them from working.

For example, you can be adamant in the belief that affirmations won't work for you. If you cling to this belief stubbornly enough, you'll get the benefit of the Big Editor factor, and sure enough, your affirmations won't work for you. The cure? Work with the affirmation "My affirmations work miracles for me."

An even better way to keep affirmations from working is to avoid using them altogether.

When I first learned about the process of writing affirmations, I was immediately enthusiastic. I found the technique very appealing and was attracted to it as a medium for self-improvement.

Then, when I tried writing affirmations, I hated it.

That seemed curious to me. Here was a process I believed in and one that looked as though it ought to be intellectually engaging, simple, pleasurable, and interesting. Why was I resisting it?

To find out—and at the same time to do something about it—I set myself the task of working with an affirmation. The one I created for myself was "I

enjoy writing affirmations."

Understand, please, that before I did this I was not aware of any reservations I was holding toward the process. But what a ton of negativity surfaced in the response column! I got responses like *It's brainwashing* and *It's mind-rot* and *It's a Mickey Mouse exercise for morons*. A response I particularly liked was *I'm too hip for something like this*. Other responses showed I was afraid the process wouldn't work, or that it would take time away from my writing.

With all of that unconscious negativity operating, how could I expect to enjoy writing affirmations? It's surprising I was able to get started with them at all.

In this instance, by the time I had worked with the affirmation *I enjoy writing affirmations* for two days, it had become true for me. The negative thoughts surrounding it were evidently not that deeply implanted—they certainly did not have the force of personal laws—and simply allowing them to surface was enough to draw their fangs. From then on, I've found the process of working with affirmations both enjoyable and effective.

My daughter Amy, on the other hand, has never been able to make herself write affirmations. Our friend Doreen Marine, who was Amy's rebirther, gave her an affirmation and told her she didn't have to do anything with it, just to let herself think about it from time to time. Doreen's suggestion was *My affirmations work for me whether I use them or not*.

* * *

Some people resist affirmations, not because they doubt their efficacy, but because they don't think it's proper to tamper with their thoughts. After all, they reason, isn't it brainwashing? And isn't it rather whimsical to think we can change our thoughts anytime we want to?

I don't know if the process of turning negative thoughts into positive ones

ought to be called brainwashing. I suppose that would depend on what the term means to you. But it does occur to me to wonder what makes us think that the brain ought to be the only unwashed organ in the body.

Brainwashing, as most of us use the term, suggests that someone else will choose our thoughts for us. The process we've been looking at is the exact opposite. It consists of our selecting our own thoughts.

Does that seem highhanded? Is that the ultimate ego trip, deciding what thoughts you are to think?

I don't think so. Because what you have to remember is that you always decide what thoughts to think. You always have and you always will.

Don't forget, we all chose our personal laws in the first place. We made those individual decisions about ourselves and the world around us because they seemed to be true at the time, and they looked like a proper and useful response to reality as we perceived it. Perhaps some of those beliefs even served us well at one time. The fact remains that they no longer serve us. They are the means by which we continually get in our own way. If we are to change our results we will have to change our thoughts, and we have every right in the world to do precisely that.

It's no more willful to decide to start believing that you're perfect just the way you are than it is to cling stubbornly to the belief that there's something wrong with you. Either way, you're making the choice to hold a particular thought in your mind. It might as well be a thought that works to your advantage.

If you have trouble getting this notion across to yourself, here's a transitional thought that might prove useful:

Since I was the thinker who thought (your personal law), I can be the thinker who thinks (your affirmation).

* * *

Was your first language different from the one you use now?

If so, I urge you to experiment with affirmations in your first language. Remember, some of our thoughts have been with us ever since birth, and if you originally thought them in another tongue, you may be more easily able to rethink them in that tongue.

This may apply even if you no longer have any conscious memory whatsoever of your original language. I knew a woman who grew up in a Polish-speaking home. She was separated from her parents at age two or three, however, and did not know Polish at all, nor did she have any recollection of having heard it spoken in her presence.

After she had already done a fair amount of work with affirmations in English, someone suggested she try them in Polish. She had to find a Polish speaker who could translate her affirmation for her, and had to memorize the sentence he gave her phonetically.

When she started using it, both aloud and as a written affirmation, the results were stunning. She didn't even understand the words she was speaking, but some part of her mind understood and was reached as no message in English could ever reach it. And she wept.

Some suggestions on working with written affirmations:

1. DON'T TRY TOO MUCH AT ONCE. Work with one or two affirmations at a time, no more than that. Work with each affirmation twice a day. A good pattern is to write your affirmation twenty times in the morning and twenty times at night, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter. If you work with too many affirmations at a time, the mind gets confused and can't take in anything.

2. STAY WITH AN AFFIRMATION FOR A FEW WEEKS. If it goes flat after two or three weeks, you can continue to write it without a response column. If it seems to go flat in a few days or a week, that's

just your mind trying to keep negative thoughts suppressed. Force yourself to come up with some even if you just seem to be fabricating them.

3. LET YOUR NEGATIVE RESPONSES GUIDE YOU. You don't have to pore over your negative response column as if it were a cryptogram holding the secrets of the Universe. Remember, there's no point in sifting through the garbage on the way to the dump. But sometimes there are lessons in the negative response column that deserve some attention. If you keep getting certain responses, time after time, it may be worth your while to develop specific affirmations to deal with them.

   For example, suppose you were working with *Writing is easy and fun for me*, as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. One response you might find yourself writing is *Good writing has to be difficult*. If that response comes up repeatedly, you might have to confront it head on in order to fully internalize the affirmation. Affirmations like *The more I enjoy my work, the more everyone else enjoys it* and *If it's easy to write it's easy to read* might serve you well.

4. AFTER YOU WRITE YOUR AFFIRMATIONS, THROW THEM OUT. This is optional, of course. You can save these exercises, just as you can save automatic writing. But I would advise against it. Affirmations are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. You do them in order to change your thinking, not to produce a body of work in the form of a notebook filled with your scribbling. When you've done your affirmations for the day, crumple the paper and throw it in the wastebasket. As you do so, visualize yourself throwing out and releasing all of the negative thoughts that surfaced in the

response column, and any others that may not have come to light yet.

5. DON'T BEAT YOURSELF UP WHEN YOU DON'T WRITE YOUR AFFIRMATIONS. Affirmation-writing is a technique, a tool you may choose to employ to help make changes in your thoughts, and consequently in your life. Use this technique as much as you can, but don't drive yourself crazy during periods of time when you find yourself choosing not to use it.

   It's not uncommon for people to go home from Write For Your Life bursting with the resolve to do everything at once—daily automatic writing, daily affirmations, daily use of some of the other WFYL exercises, and more hours at the typewriter for actual writing, too. They'll do everything for a while, and then they'll let everything go, and then they'll spend their time in self-loathing.

   In my own case, I have times when I use affirmations a lot, times when I use them a little, and times when I don't use them at all. I've learned to be reasonably comfortable with this, and I suggest you allow yourself to do the same. You can begin working with affirmations without committing yourself to go on with them, day in and day out, until the end of time. Similarly, you can drop a technique of this sort for a day or a week or a month or as long as you want without having to worry that you are abandoning it forever.

6. WRITE OUT YOUR AFFIRMATIONS IN LONGHAND. This is optional, to be sure. At least one pioneer in the use of affirmations prefers typing them because she can do more of them in less time that way. I think, though, that you'll be more connected to the process and that it will flow more organically if you write them by hand.

7. ENJOY THE PROCESS. It's largely your choice whether affirmations are a game or a chore. If you can allow yourself to enjoy the process, you'll practice it more and probably get more benefit from it.

   Either way, the process works. If you address your personal law regularly with affirmations, you will engender monumental changes throughout your whole life. If you write *Writing is easy and fun for me* as shown, twice a day for a month with a response column, writing is going to be easier and more fun for you.

THIRTY DAYS TO A MORE POWERFUL SELF-IMAGE

Let's look at a way for you to improve your thoughts about yourself in a month. I've selected thirty key affirmations from the *Affirmations for Writers* tape. By working with one a day for thirty days, you'll get a good start on internalizing a broad spectrum of positive thoughts connected with your writing.

Here's what you do:

1. Write each day's affirmation twenty times in the morning and twenty times at night. Copy the affirmation exactly as it's given here, not switching to the second and third persons. Do not use a response column in this thirty-day program. Just write the affirmation itself twenty times in the morning and twenty times at night.

2. Think about the day's affirmation throughout the day. Whenever you remember to do so, let it run in your mind as a mantra. Meditate on it. Think about how it might be true. Imagine how your life would be different if you believed it wholeheartedly.

3. After your morning session with the affirmation, write it on a

postcard. Address the postcard to yourself and carry it around with you. Before the end of the day, drop it in the mail. When it returns to you a few days later, read it. Then retain or discard it, as you prefer.

4. To do this right, you will want to do the entire process in thirty consecutive days. If you forget and skip a day, start the whole thing over from the beginning.

When you do this process, write only the sentence that appears in capital letters. The other sentences are for you to think about in connection with the daily affirmation.

Day One: WRITING IS EASY AND FUN FOR ME. The more you take it easy, the more you accomplish. If it's easy to write, it's easy to read. If it's fun to write, it's fun to read.

Day Two: I AM A WONDERFUL PERSON—I DESERVE TO SUCCEED. The love in your work brings you rich returns. It's safe for you to get what you want. No one has to lose for you to win.

Day Three: EVERY REJECTION BRINGS ME CLOSER TO SUCCESS. Whenever your work is rejected, you gain in self-acceptance. It's safe for you to risk rejection. You accept yourself; therefore you can never be truly rejected.

Day Four: MY WRITING ENHANCES ALL MY RELATIONSHIPS. Your writing brings you closer to the people you love. The energy you put into your work comes back to you multiplied. You have a perfect right to write.

Day Five: EVERYTHING I WRITE IS HIGHLY PLEASING TO ME. You please others when you please yourself. Your writing works. The more you play, the more your writing works.

Day Six: NO ONE KNOWS MORE THAN MY WRITER'S INTUITION. It's safe for you to trust your intuition. You always know what to say and how to say it. You are never at a loss for words.

Day Seven: SUCCESSFUL WRITERS ALWAYS INSPIRE ME. You gain whenever another writer succeeds. You can learn something from every book you read. You have nothing to fear from competition.

Day Eight: MY WRITING TALENT IS A GIFT FROM GOD; THE WRITING I DO IS MY GIFT TO THE UNIVERSE. You have a valuable contribution to make. Your writing makes a difference to you and to others. Your writing is worth more than money.

Day Nine: IT'S NATURAL FOR ME TO WRITE HONESTLY. Because you mean what you say, it's easy for you to say what you mean. People like it when you write truthfully. The truth is always beautiful.

Day Ten: EVERYONE WANTS TO READ WHAT I WANT TO WRITE. People want to hear what you have to say. You can sell without selling out. What interests you interests everyone.

Day Eleven: MY WHOLE LIFE NOURISHES MY WORK; MY WORK ENRICHES MY WHOLE LIFE. You can discover something

in every person you meet. You can grow through every experience you undergo. Thank God for everything that ever happened!

Day Twelve: I AM A RICHLY TALENTED WRITER. Your talent is always greater than you think. Your writing is always better than you realize. It's safe for you to know how good you are.

Day Thirteen: I NOW RECEIVE FULL ASSISTANCE AND COOPERATION FROM ALL PERSONS NECESSARY FOR MY WRITING SUCCESS. Everyone is eager for you to succeed. You're talented enough to let others help you. Everyone wants you to get what you want.

Day Fourteen: I'M PERFECT JUST THE WAY I AM RIGHT NOW. You have all the skills you need to write well. It's safe for you to see your own perfection. You are already a successful writer.

Day Fifteen: IT'S SAFE FOR ME TO REVEAL MYSELF IN MY WORK. The more you let people know you, the more they love you. The less you keep to yourself, the more you have to give. Your real self is worth knowing.

Day Sixteen: EVERYTHING I DO FOR ENJOYMENT FURTHERS MY WRITING CAREER. Everything you do out of generosity brings you rich returns. Everything you do out of love makes you a better writer. Everything you do out of truth fills your writing with beauty.

Day Seventeen: I HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED TO GET EVERYTHING I WANT. It's easy and natural for you to succeed.

You have what it takes. You are ready and willing to achieve your goals.

Day Eighteen: I AM AN OPEN CHANNEL FOR DIVINE INTELLIGENCE. The less you struggle, the more open you are to inspiration. Your inspiration is the very breath of life. All your ideas are divinely inspired.

Day Nineteen: I AM ALWAYS GROWING AND MY WORK IS ALWAYS IMPROVING. You never have to stop growing. The more you grow, the more your writing grows. You are becoming a better writer with every line you write.

Day Twenty: I AM AN ENDLESS SOURCE OF WONDERFUL IDEAS. It's easy for you to think of things to write. Your mind never stops producing ideas. The more you write, the more you find to write about.

Day Twenty-one: I DESERVE TO BE PAID WELL FOR MY WRITING. The more money you receive for your writing, the better you write. The better you write, the more money you receive. You can sell without selling out.

Day Twenty-two: THE MORE I PURSUE MY OWN VISION, THE MORE CLEARLY I SEE SUCCESS. The more you are true to yourself, the more you please others. Your originality adds to the appeal of your work. It's safe for you to show your unique originality.

Day Twenty-three: I ALWAYS LOVE ALL MY CHARACTERS. Your love for people breathes life into your work. You appreciate people as individuals—therefore your characters are distinctive and memorable. Because you love yourself, it's natural for you to love the characters you create.

Day Twenty-four: MY WRITING IS IMPORTANT TO ME AND EVERYONE ELSE. Everything you do is well worth doing. You have all the time you need to write successfully. The more time you give to your writing, the more time you have for other people.

Day Twenty-five: I AM NOW COMPLETELY WILLING TO BE A COMPLETE SUCCESS. You have nothing to fear from success. The more you succeed, the easier it is for you to go on succeeding. The more you succeed, the safer you are.

Day Twenty-six: I CAN ALWAYS AFFORD TO TAKE CHANCES. It's safe for you to risk rejection. Taking chances makes you certain of success. The more you take chances, the more you know you're safe.

Day Twenty-seven: MY HONEST SELF-EXPRESSION HELPS EVERYONE. The aliveness in your work adds to everyone's aliveness. Your writing enriches everyone who reads it. No one is ever hurt by what you write.

Day Twenty-eight: I CAN WRITE WHENEVER, WHEREVER, AND WHATEVER I WANT. You don't need anyone's permission to write. You don't need anyone's approval of your work. It's always the right time and place for your writing.

Day Twenty-nine: MY INVESTMENT IN WRITING ALWAYS PAYS OFF. Your writing time is always well-spent. Your writing career is a great investment. Everything you write is worth writing.

Day Thirty: THANK GOD I'M A WRITER! You are an excellent writer. Your writing gets better with every breath you take. Thank God you're a writer!

OPENING UP

The final process in the Write For Your Life seminar is designed to let you see what it feels like to reveal things about yourself that you might ordinarily be inclined to keep hidden. The format of the process is simple enough. Everyone picks a partner, turns the chairs so that they're facing one another, and the partners take turns saying sentences that start, "Something I'm willing to let you know about me is—"

We encourage trainees to play this process on the highest level of honesty with which they feel comfortable. One person might say that something he's willing to reveal about himself is that he once served thirty days in jail for being drunk and disorderly in a public place. Another person might be willing to reveal that his favorite color is blue. Each statement might be factually correct; one would seem to be a more intimate revelation.

Why do we include this process?

Because we've found that almost all writers subscribe to one degree or another to the idea that it's not safe for them to reveal themselves to others. For many of us, this constitutes our personal law. For others, it's usually present to some extent.

One of the things that makes our writing exciting and alive is that it bears our unique stamp. Whether we're writing autobiographical fiction or

an article on a corporate takeover, our personal presence in what we write accounts for much of its impact. If we're afraid or unwilling to be present in our work, we inevitably limit its effectiveness.

On top of that, we may be working to defeat one of our purposes in choosing writing in the first place. In many cases, the careers and avocations we select for ourselves are picked out of an unconscious desire to heal our strongest negative thoughts about ourselves.

For example, a disproportionate number of people in the healing professions came out of the experience of birth believing they hurt their mothers. They equipped themselves with the personal law *Expressing my aliveness hurts others*, or something along those lines. By choosing a career in medicine or nursing, they make their self-expression a healing force.

Typically, models have the personal law I'm ugly. Perhaps someone in the delivery room said, "What an ugly baby!" Perhaps their mothers recoiled from their first view of their unwashed offspring. Whatever the reason, a large number of the most attractive men and women in the world, people whose success in their profession derives largely from their appearance, were propelled into their careers by the conviction that they were unattractive and the urge to heal that thought.

Whatever your personal law, there's probably a way it helped propel you toward the choice of writing as a career.

Here are a couple of processes in this connection:

First, on a fresh sheet of paper, write your personal law at the top of the page. Underneath it, write a paragraph discussing some of the ways in which your personal law might have led you toward writing as a career or avocation. When you're satisfied with your response, pick some other major negative thoughts you've become aware of having about yourself, and treat them in a similar fashion.

When you've completed this process to your satisfaction, you might want to write the following declaration beneath the last line you've written: "I

no longer need to believe these negative ideas in order to pursue my chosen career as a writer. The more I give up my negative thoughts, the stronger my commitment to writing." Then sign your name, and date the document.

* * *

To work the self-revelation process at home, write this at the top of a fresh page: "Things I would not want people to know about me."

Then make a list of everything you feel inclined to keep secret from people. Put down everything you can think of that you wouldn't want everyone to know.

When you've finished the list, destroy it.

The more resistance you have to this process, the more useful it will be for you. Even though you know in advance that you're going to destroy the list as soon as you've finished it, you may find it very difficult to write down certain things that come to mind. Those are the ones it's especially worth your while to write down.

If you react strongly to this process, you may want to do it more than once. Doing the process on a daily basis can be very liberating for those of us with a really strong fear of revealing ourselves.

* * *

At the seminar, people vary in their reaction to the self-revelation process. Some people find it emotionally moving and experience a high level of safety and acceptance. One man at our most recent San Francisco seminar said it was the highlight of the day for him, that it had made him feel wonderful. Other people are less strongly affected.

Many people remark that it's relatively easy to open up to strangers whom they'll probably never see again. I doubt that this is sufficient to explain the

high level of sharing that characterizes this process, especially in view of the fact that people rarely feel like strangers to one another at this point in the day.

As someone pointed out, this process is a lot easier to do after having done the intuition process at the end of the morning session. People figure they might as well be open with their partner, since he or she can probably intuit everything there is to know about them anyway!

A FEW QUICK THOUGHTS ABOUT TIME

This will be a brief chapter. I want to say just a few words about time. I don't often get the opportunity at the seminar. I don't usually have the time for it.

Which is to say that I choose to devote the time to something else, which is what people generally mean when they say they don't have time for something. People rarely mean what they say when they're talking about scarcity issues—scarcity of time or scarcity of money. "I don't have the time" means "I choose to spend my time otherwise." Similarly, "I can't afford it" means "I'd rather do something else with the money."

There are exceptions, of course. If I tell you I don't have two hours a week to spend reading to a blind person, I mean I don't want to devote the time to the task. If I tell you I don't have forty hours a week to spend heading a committee on social services for the blind, my statement is a shade closer to being literally true—although I could theoretically cancel my commitments and make the time. In the same fashion, when I say I can't afford a Mercedes, I mean that I'd rather not spend that much of my funds on a car. When I say I can't afford a Rolls, I mean I couldn't put my hands on the money it would take to buy one.

Almost all of us have all the time we need to write. If we choose not to

make time, that's our business. If we really want to make time but don't seem to be able to do it, we're probably engaging in one or another form of self-sabotage.

As we change our thinking and let go of our fear and form more positive self-images, many of us find ourselves making better use of our time without any conscious effort or design on our parts. I've remarked earlier that procrastinators generally put things off not because they're constitutionally incapable of prompt action but because they're afraid such action will prove that their personal laws are true. In other words, if I believe I'm not good enough, I may procrastinate for fear of having to confront the reality of being not good enough. If I believe revealing myself to others is dangerous, I may procrastinate for fear that my work would be dangerously revealing. When my personal law loses its grip on me, there's less of a payoff for procrastination.

This said, there are a couple ways to make better use of your time.

The first method is one that goes back at least sixty years. One of the first time-and-motion-study experts is said to have suggested it to Charles Schwab, the legendary kingpin of U.S. Steel. When Schwab asked the price of this advice, he was told to try it for a month and send a check for what it was worth to him. A month later, Schwab sent the man a check for $25,000.

Here's how it works: In the morning, before you start work for the day, make a list of every single task you would like to accomplish that day. Then number them in order of importance. Do #1 first, then #2, then #3, and so on. Don't start the second task until you have completed the first.

At the end of the day, stop working, even though there are items you haven't gotten to yet. The next morning, make a new list and number it.

If that method was worth twenty-five grand in the 1920's, it ought to be worth a quarter of a million dollars now. But don't send me a check. You already paid me ten bucks for the book, and that's plenty.

All I ask is that you try the process. It makes a great difference, not only

in what you accomplish but in how you feel at the day's end.

* * *

The other thing I want to tell you about time is one I picked up from Dennis Hensley, whose lecture on time management for writers is invaluable. If you think you don't have time to write, find a way to create two hours of writing time a day. Get up earlier. Stay up later. Find some way to carve two hours out of each day, Monday through Friday.

The arithmetic of this method is irrefutable. Two hours a day, Monday through Friday, adds up to ten hours a week, which gives you one forty-hour week a month or three months a year. Three months a year of full-time writing! That's probably about as many hours annually as most successful full-time writers spend at their typewriters.

And you can manage that without falling prey to what Dennis calls the IDIOS fallacy. That's an acronym for *I'll do it on Saturday*, and it's a fallacy because (a) you won't, and (b) if you do, you'll hate writing for lousing up your weekends.

SETTING YOUR SIGHTS AND APPLAUDING YOUR SUCCESSES

Write For Your Life generally winds up with a few words about goals. A good case could be made for including this material earlier in the day. The afternoon of the seminar centers upon getting what you want as a writer, and the first step in getting what you want is determining what it is. If you are going to attain a goal, first you have to establish that goal.

For a lot of us, the prospect of setting goals for ourselves is unsettling. We have trouble saying what we want. We may be superstitious about it, figuring that our wanting something will make it less likely that we will get it. We may fear that writing out some sort of celestial shopping list will just make us uncomfortably aware of how much we don't have and how little we've accomplished.

Or we may believe that it's not proper for us to want too much, and that if we are greedy in our desires, the least we can do is conceal our greed.

I know that I subscribed to all of these beliefs at one time. I was especially imbued with the last, having somehow grown up thinking that people would disapprove of me if I wanted more than I deserved, and that I would be a better person (and thus more likely to be given what I wanted) if my desires were limited.

When it came time for me to be a writer, I was careful not to appear to

want too much, and I believed the lies I told the Universe. I said to myself that money and fame were not really important to me.

Now this was not true. I was always very conscious of how much I made and aware of what recognition I was getting. I was forever hatching ill-conceived schemes for self-promotion. But I professed not to care much about wealth or recognition, and guess what happened?

I didn't get much in the way of wealth or fame.

And this annoyed the hell out of me. Why, I seemed to be asking the Universe, why aren't you giving me what I've never asked for? Why can't you read my mind and give it to me without my asking?

* * *

When we set goals for ourselves, we put our subconscious minds on notice that we want to bring about a particular set of circumstances. We mobilize our energy on several different levels at once.

The apparent hazards of goal-setting are all based on faulty negative thinking. If we fear, for example, that we will be less likely to get something because we want it, we're essentially saying that we don't deserve to get what we want. The fear of being (or appearing) greedy is similar in origin. Greed has been defined as wanting more than you think you deserve; when we are able to believe that we deserve the things we want, we won't feel greedy about wanting them.

And the desires exist whether we acknowledge them or not! I always wanted to be rich and famous, even when I was busy keeping that desire a secret from myself and others. I wasn't winning brownie points with God by pretending I didn't want more than I thought I had coming.

All I was doing was lessening my chances of getting what I wanted.

* * *

Here's a written process you can do right now. Turn to a clean sheet of paper and write at the top of it, *"Five things I want to accomplish in the next five years."*

Then list them.

If I were to make a list of my own, it might look something like this:

Have a book on the fiction bestseller list.

Have published four new novels.

Present Write For Your Life in England and Australia.

Renovate the house completely.

Win a major professional award.

After you've completed your list, turn the page and write the heading, *"Five things I want to accomplish in the next year."*

Then make your list. Here's mine:

Complete a novel.

Have the Burglar series made into a film or TV series.

Write six short stories and place one of them with Playboy.

Self-publish Write For Your Life and sell 10,000 books.

Have 1,250 in attendance at the Spring '86 seminars.

Finally, on another page, write "Five things I want to accomplish in the next thirty days," and write a list that might look something like this:

Send the edited manuscript of Write For Your Life to my production man.

Book space for all spring seminars and write advertising copy and prepare brochures.

Write a short story.

Have the weakened beam at the front end of the house reinforced.

Travel to Los Angeles.

For all three of these lists, it's advisable to be realistic in the goals you set. This does not mean, however, that you ought to lower your sights on purpose and write down goals that are less than you'd really prefer to achieve. Try to list the highest realistic goal you can. Have the thought that these are goals you really intend to pursue, not that you'll be an abject failure if you fall short of them.

Make all three lists now, please.

Good. Now take a moment to look them over. If you're satisfied with them, you might want to add this declaration, signed and dated, at the bottom of the third page:

"I am now entirely willing to achieve or surpass all of these goals."

Here's another goal-setting process, one in which realistic expectations

are not a requirement. Once again you're going to make three lists. The first will look something like this:

100 THINGS I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE

1. A Cadillac.
2. Built-in office bookshelves.
3. A hot tub.
4. A white dinner jacket.
5. Perfect vision without glasses.
6. A big color television set.
7. A vegetable garden.
8. A wheatgrass juicer… .

And the second list:

100 THINGS I WOULD LIKE TO DO

1. Take a boat trip through the Everglades.
2. Set foot on another planet.
3. Make a parachute jump.
4. Study Neuro-Linguistic Programming.
5. Go to India.
6. Go to Natchez.
7. Reach and maintain my ideal weight.
8. Live forever… .

And, finally:

100 THINGS I WOULD LIKE TO BE

1. Rich.
2. Famous.
3. Healthy.
4. A grandfather.
5. Suntanned.
6. Serene.
7. A success in my own eyes.
8. Immortal… .

Have a good time with these lists. The process is supposed to be fun. You don't have to produce these lists at one sitting; you'll probably add to them over a period of time, and it may be difficult to get a hundred of each, because you'll have to cross out some of them as they start to appear in your life.

Because it is almost magical the way we can bring certain things into our lives simply by listing them. We put our subconscious minds on notice, and all the power of our minds is enlisted to bring about our desired goals.

I had this process recommended to me at least half a dozen times before I finally broke down and tried it. I resisted it for what I suppose are the usual reasons. I was afraid it would make me conscious of all the things I didn't have, and that I'd feel bad about my lot. I feared it would make me see myself as a failure. I probably feared, too, that I would have to confront the fact that I was greedier than I liked to think I was.

And, finally, I figured I would just be setting myself up for disappointment. I'd list all these things, and then I wouldn't get them, and I'd be disappointed.

All of these lines of reasoning are based upon the premise that we can succeed at fooling ourselves. On some inner level, we already *know* that we want these things. Whether or not we make lists, whether or not we acknowledge our desires, we'll be disappointed if we fail to get what we want.

Let me tell you what happened when I finally made the lists.

I wrote out some forty or fifty items for the Have list one Sunday afternoon. One of the items on my list was a humidifier. Apartments in New York get very dry in the winter, and my sinus condition was greatly aggravated by the hot dry air, especially at night. For years I had been telling myself that I wanted a humidifier, and I thought of it while I was making the list, and included it.

Two hours later I left the apartment where I had spent that afternoon and walked out of my way on Broadway because I wanted to try a particular new restaurant, which turned out to be closed. On my way I passed a store and crossed the street to look in their window, and they were having a sale on humidifiers. It happened to be a store where we had a credit, having taken back some wedding presents.

Tuesday afternoon I picked up, at no real cost whatsoever, a perfectly fine humidifier. I have no need for it now—Florida *is* a humidifier—but that little gadget got us through two winters in comfort.

Now humidifiers aren't that expensive, or terribly difficult to locate. I

didn't have to make a list in order to get one. But the fact remains that they had always been easy to find and reasonably priced, and I had never managed to get around to obtaining one until I'd made the list. There's no magic involved; by making the list I implanted in my mind the idea that I wanted a humidifier, and that drew my attention to the sign in the window and jogged my memory later to act on the information.

Okay.

Another thing on the same list was an Edgar. I had twice been nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe award, the honor annually awarded to writers by the Mystery Writers of America. Twice in the past I had been nominated but I'd never taken home one of the little porcelain statues. So I put that on the list and forgot about it.

This past May I was awarded an Edgar for my short story "By the Dawn's Early Light." It was the only piece of fiction I published the previous year, and I almost didn't write it; I had decided to take the year off from fiction writing and only wrote the story because I'd promised one for an anthology of the Private Eye Writers of America. And it won, and, since Lynne is a great-great-great niece of Edgar Allan Poe, I think it only fitting that I have a statuette of him in my office.

Was it greedy of me to want it? Will you be greedy if you list all the things you want? Will you be any less greedy if you want things but fail to put them on the list?

Remember our definition of greed—it's wanting more than you think you deserve. Remember, too, the words Rev. Ike has to say on the subject.

"You can go to the ocean with a teaspoon or a bucket," he has said. "The ocean doesn't care."

* * *

Here's one final suggestion for a process you can work at home. It's especially valuable for you if you are persistently bothered by the feeling that you don't do enough, that you're not making progress, that you don't take sufficient action on behalf of your career as a writer.

First, make a list with this heading: "*Some things I could do to advance my writing career.*" Then take your time and write out a long list. Don't limit yourself to actions you have the slightest intention of taking. In fact, you may put down things you know you don't want to do. That's fine. This is a brainstorming process designed to stir up ideas for you. Your list might start out looking something like this:

Do book reviews for local newspaper.

Query editors for an article on the Lost Dauphin of France.

Do character sketches as preparation for adult western novel.

Start thirty-day affirmation process.

Work with automatic writing.

Join a gym.

Take a long solitary walk at sunset.

Read up on Early American silver.

Revise and resubmit that short story.

Take a computer science course.

You might find it useful to make a list like this once a month. You don't have to refer to it during the month. Write it as freely as you can and put it away or discard it after you've written it.

There's another part to the process, and it can be done without doing the first half. If you've been beating yourself up a lot for inaction and procrastination, I suggest that you start doing this process every night before you go to bed. You might want to devote a whole notebook to it, so that you can keep an ongoing log. (Or, if you prefer, just write out your list each night and discard it afterward.)

You'll head this list *"Five things I did today to advance my writing career."*

And then list them.

Some days, when you've been an absolute dynamo of activity, you'll have to force yourself to stop at five items. (But do stop at that number, no matter how many other things you may in fact have done in the course of the day.) Other days, you'll sit down convinced that you haven't done a damn thing and can't possibly find a single item for the list.

You'll find, though, that you're always able to dig up five items. Did you read the paper? Put that down. Did you take a walk and think about a project you hope to start?

That goes on your list. Did you reread a chapter of this book? Send away for a brochure for a writers conference? Those are actions you can list. Once you've got four items, you can always add *Made this stupid list* as your final entry.

If you do this process regularly, dry periods will be less devastating, and they'll very likely end sooner, too. You might even reach the point of realizing that there are no dry periods in a writer's career, that those times that appear less productive are just part of the whole creative process.

It's difficult for most of us to grasp this. It is a discovery I have had to make for myself over and over again in order to counterbalance a deep-

rooted tendency to believe just the opposite. I have always been inclined to invalidate any period of time that did not lead directly to the accumulation of typed pages to the left of my typewriter. Even clearly essential groundwork never felt like real work to me because it did not produce tangible results.

One of the most important lessons of Write For Your Life is that the most productive action we can take as writers is not necessarily to work harder, to drive ourselves more relentlessly, and to turn out more work. Very often we can make more real progress by writing affirmations, listening to a tape, meditating, or going for a walk in the country. It may take a profound shift in our consciousness to allow us to get the same feeling of accomplishment from actions of this sort, but it's worth it. After all, what's more useful to a writer in the long run—to turn out one more mediocre book, or to unleash his creativity and improve his self-image so that the next book he writes is significantly better than the last?

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING

What does Write For Your Life do for the people who take it? What do they get out of it?

That's a hard one to answer. Because of the nature of the seminar, different people get different results. I get some sense of what WFYL does for people by asking all our trainees to drop us a line a month or so afterward to let us know how the day worked for them. Perhaps the best way to suggest WFYL's impact is to present a selection of excerpts from some of these feedback letters.

As you read them, bear in mind that they probably don't constitute a true random sample. People who leave the seminar room feeling they've wasted their time and money don't generally write us a month later, nor have I been inclined to include letters from dissatisfied customers. (We get a few of those, too.) I think, though, that the letters which follow will give you a good cross-section of the kind of reactions people have to the seminar, and the kinds of changes the experience engenders in their lives.

FROM A WOMAN IN DEERFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS:

I took your seminar in Cambridge in late October, mainly because I wanted to be a writer, had been trying for ten years, and suffered horrible

fear of rejection, exposure, and failure. Magical things have happened in my life since then!

… In January something wonderful happened. I received a call from my mentor, a famous and respected writer of whom I have never asked any favors. An opportunity had come up for which a writer was needed, and would I be interested in writing a book? Would I!

An incredible door has opened in my life. I still have to prove myself as a writer. If my outline and sample chapters are not up to par, the publishers will seek a different writer. I'm scared half to death, but so very excited as I make airline reservations, pack my tape recorder, sharpen my pencil, and reach out to the universe for all the creative energy and self-confidence I can gather. If this writing project works out, it will open the doors to what I really want in life. But even this door would not have opened if I hadn't opened my mind to the opportunity. Thank you, Larry, for giving me full value for the $100 I could hardly afford at the time. You're doing wonderful things!

FROM A WOMAN IN BROOKLYN:

I'd have written sooner to express my appreciation for the workshop, but I've been busy with my own writing. That is a major change for me.

Since the all-day training in Boston I have taken my unfinished novel out of the drawer, rewritten the first three chapters and completed a fourth, outlined the rest of the book, started the fifth. And written to my agent. And bought myself a word processor. I have also sent a few chapters to a friend—I'm working at dropping self-consciousness and secretiveness about the writing, which had begun as a safety device but had become inhibiting.

… There's probably a lot more detail to go into, but you get the idea—I loved it. I may want to repeat it in the fall.

FROM A MAN IN STONE MOUNTAIN, GEORGIA:

Your approach was refreshingly different, personally terrifying, professionally candid and, most important, result producing. I haven't sat down yet to write the Great American Novel, but the power you managed to impart has convinced me I could if I wanted to.

At present I have no trouble getting down to work any more. There's no such time or place as perfect— just here and now and whether or not you really want to write.

FROM A WOMAN IN CLARENCE, NEW YORK:

Something about the seminar has oiled the wheels of my coughing engine of a mind. Magical changes have happened here and there along the way. My mind is not the same limping lefty it used to be. I think I've created a new solar system in my mind. Now I'm starting to have ideas about fame. It adds a twinkle to my life.

For a long time I had an identity crisis. Now I know I am a writer.

FROM A MAN IN SAUK CENTRE, MINNESOTA:

It's been six weeks since I attended Write For Your Life in Minneapolis. I feel that it has helped me to remove some mental blocks that I've been placing in my path for years. I felt energized afterwards, and that has carried over into my writing habits.

FROM A MAN IN FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA:

I took Write For Your Life last month in Washington and I want you to know that it provided one of the most important insights of my life. I'd known for some time that life isn't a struggle, but I could never figure out why, despite knowing this, mine was. It makes so much sense to think it's because of these negative thoughts I've been meditating on since early childhood. Your story about the oil man who wanted to get published was

terrifically revealing. I suddenly understood how my subconscious mind had me by the balls.

But now that you've brought all this to my attention, I've begun to do my best to let go of it, to believe otherwise, and it's bringing about a beautiful renaissance in my life. I want to thank you.

FROM A WOMAN IN BROOKLYN:

I *hated* your Write For Your Life seminar. I thought we were just going to listen to a lecture. I have a lot of trouble with oral communication. And I am terrified of one-to-one situations. But the conference helped me to discover something very important about my writing problems.

I started to think about why I hated it so much. And I realized that I am associating all of communication (both oral and written) with a very traumatic childhood experience which has had a devastating effect upon my whole life. I think all editors and publishers are like my father. And I associate myself with my mother. I feel that I can't win a fight. The editors are dominant and they are just going to criticize and reject whatever I send them. I don't stand a chance.

Although recognition of the problem is an important step, it will take a long time for me to overcome my obstacle. Affirmations are finally working, very slowly, to produce a change in my attitude.

FROM A WOMAN IN BETTENDORF, IOWA:

Between the time I signed up and the time I attended, "Write for your life" had become a battle cry. I was in deep stuff, personally and professionally.

I came to the seminar feeling I needed to revive some strength which had fled, leaving me uncertain of my creativity, my honesty, my love for the world in general. Throw in sanity, too. I came willing to risk almost anything which would allow me to write for a living, or maybe just write to keep living.

I left the seminar feeling I loved my own craziness enough to risk it

forever. I left certain that my creativity was, is, and always will be. I left talking more openly with myself about my penchant for isolation, resisting "creative" writing in favor of straight journalism, using time as a weapon against myself.

"Your ideas come from your ideals," you said.

This statement was a toggle switch for me. As a peace advocate, mother of teens and wife of a first-class conservative, my ideals have seemed in jeopardy at every juncture. Call it creative paranoia. In any event, I left your seminar also understanding ideals are the source of my ideas and the channel through which my creativity *must* flow. I left knowing my creativity is the one thing which allows me to love, freely and wonderfully, a million things at once. That alone was worth the fee.

The week after Minneapolis, I traveled with a group of writers on a familiarization tour. It was like finding a feather from my own wing. I saw again like an artist, thought again like a writer. And I sold two pieces within the first week back. I deserve to be rich and famous, too! Thank you!

FROM A WOMAN IN WELCHES, OREGON:

Perhaps you'd like to know that I put your tape to the ultimate test—non-use. I played it for two weeks after the Seattle seminar, then put it away for three weeks of partying, shopping, and picking tinsel out of my coffee cup.

The first week of January I started back to work, and the first few days it was hard to get my feet out of the quagmire of laziness. But once free, I began to work again with the same lack of tension I noticed when I first started using the tape.

I can't say writing is now effortless, but there sure is less tooth-grinding and fist-clenching. Like a love/ hate relationship, it is work/play.

Anyhow, I love it.

I'm sure many of your seminar pupils have experienced the same release. May our combined gratitude and good wishes manifest magically in your life.

FROM A MAN IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND:

I have been a serious student of and adept upon the path of Western Occult training for some years now. It was easy to recognize WFYL techniques as specific applications of general metaphysical laws. Because of such techniques' potential for generating energies without necessarily generating wisdom to handle them, I was skeptical and concerned about what you were trying to do. The safety valve, as I'm sure you realize, is giving voice to the negatives in response to all the affirmative declarations of a new day.

As I said, your techniques are not new to me, but applying them to writing is. The results have been wonderful. I now eagerly look forward to the outpourings of those negative habit patterns, getting them out, seeing who I am beneath the shit.

I realized that so much "I can't" had surrounded those two first drafts that their apparent failure was poisoning everything else. I also suddenly knew that if enough vision had sustained me through completion of the drafts with passion, there were certainly enough there to revise and transform into marketable material.

Since the seminar, I have daily worked on two affirmations, done ten minutes of automatic writing, and listened to the tape. This morning preparation has made going to the computer to work on those revisions a matter of course. Whether or not the two novels are published, I know I need them out of this house and on the market, so I can go on to novel three with fresh eyes.

It's so strange. When I first began to read, I began writing Tarzan novels and soon after dreaming of the writer's life and recognition and joys. Somehow life— divorce, the perennial doubt if whether a 'smart, exceptionally well-educated boy' shouldn't be out there carving a career that would pull in a six-figure income like his former classmates—is very good in aiding you in building up a vast repertoire of negative habit patterns. Three weeks of your exercises and that confidence, which is a natural birthright

attached to what we know in our hearts we were meant to be, begins to fill the heart and guide.

FROM A WOMAN IN PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA:

First let me say, "The more I reveal myself the safer I feel. The safer I feel the more I reveal myself."

Now that we have taken care of that I'd like to tell you how much I enjoyed the day I spent with you. I felt all the exercises were valuable to me. I especially appreciated the character profile. I have used the same basic technique in discovering characters for a couple of stories I am working on and have been amazed at the results. They seem to spring full-blown from my subconscious.

The intuition exercise went so well I felt I must have been cheating in some way, but who am I to argue with results.

I'm not sure I was prepared for my partner to feel safe in telling me she was a communist who planned on attending an orgy her father was throwing that evening. However, it was for me a valuable encounter because of my fear of revealing myself.

I am hoping to attend again when you return to SF.

FROM A WOMAN IN NEW BRIGHTON, MINNESOTA:

It's been three weeks now since the Minneapolis seminar, and I am just beginning to note some improvement. That's not surprising because that negative personal law of mine was buried very deeply for a long, long time.

Discovering the scope of that negative feeling was horribly painful. And, so far, it's been a bit like dealing with a wound that's healing badly.

You know, you probe gingerly around the edges of the wound because it hurts. And you're afraid that if the edges hurt that much, touching the center will be unbearable. Actually, the wound needs to be opened and cleaned out. That takes a lot of courage. I don't have that much courage every day, but I

keep working at it….

And Lynne, what do I owe you for dry cleaning the dress I wept all over? Thank you for lending me an unselfish shoulder. I didn't expect to cry. It was embarrassing as hell. There was a terrible temptation to just go home right then. I'm glad I didn't let myself run away.

FROM A MAN IN MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE:

The affirmations are very powerful. In fact I found that they affected aspects of my life other than writing. I could say writing is easy and fun for me, but at the same time feel that communicating with two teenage sons is very difficult. That's because they are rude and inconsiderate to their parents. You're right! It hit me. The first thing I must do is change my perceptions of family relationships. That doesn't immediately solve all the problems, but at least it directs my efforts in positive channels. Thank you!

With the easing of strains with a possible antagonist, I can concentrate on my protagonist. I'm looking forward to your June seminar. In the meantime, writing is easy and fun for me!

FROM A MAN IN OTTAWA:

I've attended many writing seminars, but none as practical as Write For Your Life. Those few hours we spent together in Boston are helping me change my life. How lasting the change will be time will tell. But you started the process.

FROM A WOMAN IN INDIANAPOLIS:

I want to let you know how productive the seminar proved to be for me. I've completed two projects that were "semi-finished" for months. I've reorganized my writing office. I've also invested in a new electronic typewriter. You are looking at the first thing to come out of it!

I play the affirmations tape every day and I know it is making a real

difference in my attitude toward myself as a writer. Not only has my writing improved, but I am resolving plot problems much more quickly and easily. Those affirmations really work! All those positive thoughts planted in my subconscious are releasing a lot of previously untapped potential.

FROM A WOMAN IN HOUSTON:

I just wanted to drop you this line even though it has been more than a few weeks since I attended your wonderful seminar. My initial reaction, to be honest, was to arrive home and be ill in the bathroom for an hour. I suppose that sort of physical reaction to an emotional liberation is not so unusual or unexpected.

At first I listened to your tape religiously and then made a tape of my own, and then got sick of listening to both of them. I also went through a period where I watched my progress, waiting to see the wonders that others have described occurring after your seminar. Not much happened immediately.

I kept many of the thoughts from the tape in mind. I gradually found that getting up at 5 a.m. (when I do my best writing) became no problem. Then I found that once I sat down to the typewriter there was absolutely nothing to stop me. It's as if the cork has been let out of the bottle. I allow myself to write what I feel, without constantly questioning the correctness of it at the time, or keeping always in mind what other people (like my mother) would be saying about the work. I am much freer to get the work out so that I have something to edit and revise later. I have made slow steady progress, where before I would make no progress at all.

FROM A WOMAN IN HAMMOND, INDIANA:

Since attending your seminar in Chicago three weeks ago I haven't been writing much of anything. Instead I've been going to the beach, riding my bike, seeing my friends more often. In short, I've been relaxing and enjoying my life more.

When a magazine editor called me this afternoon to tell me he's using a piece I submitted in February, I was surprised. When he commissioned me to write another article, I was doubly surprised. But the real shock came after I hung up the phone. Instead of falling into a catatonic state from sheer terror (What if my next article isn't good enough?) I ran around the house yelling, "Thank God I'm a writer!"

Can you tell me when you'll be in Chicago again so that I can register now for the next seminar?

* * *

When I sat down to put this chapter together, I didn't realize how many people had written, or how impossible it would be to choose among their letters. There are a couple dozen it seems unthinkable to omit, but as a novice self-publisher I have to think about production costs and keep an eye on the length of the manuscript. Besides, such glowing testimonials tend to cloy after a while.

Let me take a moment, then, to tell you what WFYL's effects have been on my own writing. After all, every time you lead a seminar you're also taking it, and by that yardstick I've taken the seminar around thirty times. How has my writing been changed?

For a time, it was suspended altogether. I took an intentional sabbatical from writing in 1984 and announced to myself and others that I would begin a new novel in January of '85. I suppose an initial effect of WFYL was that I was able to take a full year off without being consumed with guilt and anxiety.

As the new year approached, however, I felt more than a little apprehensive. Suppose I couldn't get started. What would it do for my seminar's credibility? More important, what would it do to me? And how would we pay the bills in the coming year?

I won't keep you in suspense. By early March I had completed a full-length novel, *When the Sacred Ginmill Closes*. It was, to coin a phrase, easy and fun for me to write it. I put in long hours, and felt significantly less drained by my work than I had in the past. When the book was done, I didn't seem to require a long period of recuperation; ten days after I typed the last page, we started our spring seminar season in New York. The book itself was well received by my agent and my publishers, and as I write these lines I look forward to its publication.

At least as significant, I think, is the progress my own writing career has made since I started offering Write For Your Life. As I've become increasingly open to the idea that I deserve to be rich and famous, more and more money and recognition has come into my life. Early works are returning to print, books are being optioned for film and any number of good things keep happening. I don't doubt for a moment that what I've learned at Write For Your Life has had a great deal to do with the direction my career has taken.

In a sense, I suppose you could say I continue to present WFYL for the same reasons people take it. It helps me get out of my own way and get what I want.

* * *

Should you take Write For Your Life?

I can't answer that for you. I certainly don't think anyone *has* to take the seminar. In fact, one of the things I hope you'll get from this book is the realization that you're fine just as you are, that you don't need the seminar, that you don't even need to apply any of the lessons of this book. If you do want to work with them, or if you want to enroll for the seminar, realize that you're doing so out of choice, not out of necessity.

There's no way to say for certain what WFYL will do for you. It's certainly

possible to sit through the seminar and notice no effects whatsoever. (Which is not to say that nothing happens. I'm reminded of the story about the man who insulted the samurai, who promptly drew his sword and took a swing at him. "Ha!" said the man. "You missed." The samurai smiled. "Let me see you nod your head," he said.)

My guess is that the seminar makes it easier for people to move in the direction their feet are already pointing. I suspect this is true for all transformational experiences of this nature. They help you grow into the person you already are, to remember great truths you used to know long ago—but somehow forgot.

I hope this book will enable you to decide either that WFYL is something you want to experience for yourself, or that it's not. Whichever decision you make will be the right one for you.

AFTERWORD

After that wildly enthusiastic finish, designed to get you all excited about enrolling in the seminar, I feel obliged to remind you of what I told you early on in the introduction. (You did read the introduction, right? About shooting the dog?)

We discontinued the Write For Your Life seminar a couple of years after I wrote the book. I found myself tiring of the guru trip, and tiring as well of the sheer amount of work involved. And it became clear to me that my real interest lay in my own writing. I never regretted the time devoted to the seminar, but neither have I regretted moving on.

Nor, to be sure, did I ever regret the book itself, a remarkably painless and even profitable venture into self-publishing. We printed 5000 copies and sold all but a box of them by the time we left Florida and gave up the seminar business. If I had a regret, it was that the book was no longer in print, and that a great many people seemed to want copies. I wasn't sure I wanted to reprint it, and the need to update it kept me from taking any steps in that direction.

I wondered, too, if the world really needed it. In the years since it was published, several books for writers have appeared taking a simiar metaphysical approach to the whole business. I decided, ultimately, that

WFYL still has something special to offer, after all these years. (Whether it has anything useful for you, Dear Reader, is something only you can determine.)

In the end, I decided I wanted to make the material available again, so that interested readers could adapt the techniques and processes for their own use. E-book format seemed an easy way to do that, and that's the course I've chosen.

I hope you've found the book of some value, and the rather wide-eyed enthusiasm of its youthful author not too off-putting. Have fun with the processes, and with all your writing; if it's no fun, why bother? And, if you want to get in touch: www.lawrenceblock.com, lawbloc@aol.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Mystery Writers of America Grand Master, LAWRENCE BLOCK is a four-time winner of the Edgar® and Shamus awards, as well as a recipient of prizes in France, Germany, and Japan. He also received the British Crime Writers' Association's prestigious Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement in crime writing. The author of more than fifty books and numerous short stories, he is a devout New Yorker and enthusiastic world traveler. Visit his website at www.lawrenceblock.com.

BOOKS BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

The Bernie Rhodenbarr Mysteries

Burglars Can't Be Choosers • The Burglar in the Closet • The Burglar Who Liked to Quote Kipling • The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza • The Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian • The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams • The Burglar Who Thought He Was Bogart • The Burglar in the Library • The Burglar in the Rye • The Burglar on the Prowl

The Matthew Scudder Novels

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