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WRITING WITH POWER

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Techniques for Mastering
the Writing Process

Peter Elbow
The Evergreen State College

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I dedicate this book
to Cami
with my love

NOTE TO THE READER

Writing with power means getting power over words and readers; writing clearly and correctly; writing what is true or real or interesting; and writing persuasively or making some kind of contact with your readers so that they actually experience your meaning or vision. In this book I am trying to help you write in all these ways.

But writing with power also means getting power over yourself and over the writing process; knowing what you are doing as you write; being in charge; having control; not feeling stuck or helpless or intimidated. I am particularly interested in this second kind of power in writing and I have found that without it you seldom achieve the first kind.

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P.E.

Olympia, Washington
September 1980

Contents

WRITING WITH POWER

I

SOME ESSENTIALS

INTRODUCTION: A MAP OF THE BOOK

I have designed this book so you can either read it straight through or else skip around. That is, I have arranged it in what seems to me the most logical order; you will find some cumulative benefits from reading it in the normal sequence. But I have also made each section and chapter fairly complete in itself so you can thread your own path and find the chapters you need for your particular writing tasks or for your own particular temperament or skills. By reading Section I and the short introductions to the remaining five sections, you will get a good sense of how the whole book works. In addition, almost every chapter ends with a short summary or section of advice which you can consult for more information about what the chapter treats.

• • •

There is no hiding the fact that writing well is a complex, difficult, and time-consuming process. Indeed I fear I may even heighten that impression by writing a book so full of analysis and advice. In this first section, therefore, I want to emphasize that the essential activities underlying good writing and the essential exercises promoting it are not difficult at all.

In addition this first section serves as a kind of introduction to the whole book. Chapter 1 explains the approach to writing that I take. Chapters 2 and 3, "Freewriting" and "Sharing," present two ways of working on your writing that are at once simpler and more

powerful than any other ways I know. Chapters 4 and 5, "The Direct Writing Process" and "Quick Revising," comprise together a simple and practical method for getting something written—a method particularly suitable if you are working under a tight deadline. I call Chapter 6 "The Dangerous Method" because I discuss there that common and tempting practice of trying to write something right the first time.

Sections II and III, "More Ways To Get Words on Paper" and "More Ways To Revise," could together be entitled "Getting Power over the Writing Process" since they focus on the actual steps used in writing something. These two practical, step-by-step sections constitute what is probably the core of the book.

Section IV, "Audience," could be called "Getting Power over Others," yet one of the main themes is the power others have over us as we try to write to them. I suggest ways to use the power of an audience to your benefit instead of letting it get in your way. I also analyze the difficulties of some particular audiences or writing situations and suggest ways to overcome these difficulties.

Section V, "Feedback," could be called "Getting Power through the Help of Others" because I show you how to figure out what kind of feedback you need for your particular writing situation and then how to get readers actually to give it to you.

Section VI, finally, is about a mystery, power in writing: not correctness in usage or clarity in language or validity in thinking or truth in conclusions, but that extra something—or that inner something—that makes readers *experience* what you are talking about, not just understand it. When this mysterious power is absent your writing makes no dent on most readers, however correct, clear, valid, or true it may be. Needless to say, this section is more speculative and theoretical than the others—and longer—but it also contains specific practical advice. It contains the ideas about writing that are most exciting to me as I write. If you love theory, you might wish to start with this section. If you are in a hurry just to get things written competently, and that's all, you can skip this final section.

A note on gender. In some chapters I call people "he" and in others I call them "she." I do so because I believe that "he" refers to men more than it does to women, despite the convention that says it can refer equally to both sexes. Of course the ideal pro-

1

An Approach to Writing

I direct this book to a very broad audience. I'm not trying to tailor my words to beginning or advanced writers in particular, or to students, novelists, professional people, pleasure writers, or poets. Perhaps I shouldn't try to talk to so many different kinds of people, yet in truth I feel my audience is very specific. I am talking to that person inside everyone who has ever written or tried to write: that someone who has wrestled with words, who seeks power in words, who has often gotten discouraged, but who also senses the possibility of achieving real writing power.

> I've learned how to take more control over my writing while still giving it free rein. . . . I've learned the value of not expecting a twelve year old child to come out when you're giving birth to a baby; that any writing needs time after its birth so it can change and grow and eventually reach its potential. I've come to realize that you most probably won't find a pearl if you only pick up oysters once a year. So I will try to write a lot—a whole lot—and not expect that every piece emerge a gem. I'll learn to put up with (maybe even enjoy) the bad stuff, remembering that the more I do of it, the closer I get to coming out with something good. When I feel that a good idea has emerged, but I don't know where to follow it, I won't feel that it's a lost cause—that its moment has passed. I'll let it sit for a while and then go back to it with renewed energy until I can make something whole out of it, or decide that I've gone as far as I can with it.
>
> JOANNE PILGRIM

This is part of a self-evaluation written by a student at the end of a course I recently taught. It says what I hope readers will be able to

noun arrangement would not distract any of a reader's attention away from the main message of the sentence—as I fear mine sometimes does. But I can't imagine a really ideal arrangement until we finish the process of relinquishing cultural habits of male primacy.

say after reading and working with this book. It reflects my interest in the writing *process*. That is, I think I can best help you improve your writing by talking not only about the words you should end up with on paper but also about the processes that should occur on the way to that final draft. Sometimes, in fact, when people think too much during the early stages about what they want to end up with, that preoccupation with the final product keeps them from attaining it.

Three themes run through this book.

1. A view of the writing process. Writing calls on two skills that are so different that they usually conflict with each other: creating and criticizing. In other words, writing calls on the ability to create words and ideas out of yourself, but it also calls on the ability to criticize them in order to decide which ones to use. It is true that these opposite mental processes can go on at the same time. When they do, you find yourself writing words that are at once inventive and rich, yet also shrewd, toughminded, and well ordered. But such magical sessions are rare. Most of the time it helps to separate the creating and criticizing processes so they don't interfere with each other: first write freely and uncritically so that you can generate as many words and ideas as possible without worrying whether they are good; then turn around and adopt a critical frame of mind and thoroughly revise what you have written—taking what's good and discarding what isn't and shaping what's left into something strong. You'll discover that the two mentalities needed for these two processes—an inventive fecundity and a tough critical-mindedness—flower most when they get a chance to operate separately.

2. An assumption that virtually everyone has available great skill with words. That is, everyone can, under certain conditions, speak with clarity and power. These conditions usually involve a topic of personal importance and an urgent occasion. But the fact that everyone can sometimes rise to an urgent occasion shows that the capacity for spoken eloquence is there. Most readers of this book have probably had at some time the experience of writing with great power. And as a teacher I have had the opportunity to see that even people with marginal writing ability can sometimes muster their eloquence on paper.

Needless to say, however, much writing, most writing—indeed most published writing—is pretty bad. Not only does the meaning

usually fail to come through to the reader lively and clear; the meaning that comes through usually differs from what the writer had in mind. People often sound dumber and more incoherent on paper than they really are. Nevertheless, I have found that people improve their writing much more quickly and easily when they realize that they already have many of the crucial skills they need—even if these skills are hard to mobilize on paper. It helps to realize that learning to write well is not so much like learning to speak a new language as it is like learning to speak to a new person or in a new situation

3. A strategic decision about how best to solve the following problem: on the one hand I think you should take complete charge of yourself as you write (and not accept any of the helpless feelings that writing so often arouses), yet on the other hand I think you should follow my directions since I have lots of good advice here. My solution has been to adopt a kind of cookbook strategy. In most sections I give you a choice among different recipes: various recipes for getting words down on paper, for revising, for dealing with your audience, for getting feedback on your writing, and still other recipes for approaching the mystery of power in writing. I provide choice among them, but within any given recipe I have not hesitated to spell out in explicit detail the steps you should follow. My theme in the end is that you should take charge of yourelf by practicing the different recipes till you have them at your disposal (and can tinker with them). You will end up able to exert great choice and control as you work on any particular writing task.

A Two-step Writing Process

When you begin to realize how writing calls on the two opposite skills of creativity and critical thinking you get a better understanding of its difficulties. If you are trying to be inventive and come up with lots of interesting new ideas, it's usually the worst thing in the world if someone comes along and starts being critical. Thus, the power of brainstorming: no one is allowed to criticize *any* idea or suggestion that is offered—no matter how stupid, impractical, or useless it seems. You can't get the good ones and the fruitful interaction among the odd ones unless you welcome the terrible ones. Besides, you don't really know which ideas are good

or terrible till later. Similarly, if you are trying to be tough-mindedly critical and find the weaknesses in your own thinking, you will be impeded if someone comes along and makes you dream up lots of fresh new ideas. To be critical, you have to be doubting, detached, uninvested in the idea to be criticized; to come up with fresh new ideas you have to invest yourself and be believing.

No wonder writing is hard. And no wonder writing skills are distributed in the following pattern. At one extreme many people are tied in knots by trying to be creative and critical at the same time and so they write wretchedly or not at all. At the other extreme there are a few people who write extremely well—who manage gracefully to pat their heads and rub their bellies at the same time—but they give remarkably contradictory accounts of what they're doing. "It's all inspiration!" "It's all perspiration!" "It's all system!" "It's all magic and serendipity!" Just what you might expect if people were explaining a complex skill which they happened to have learned, but which violates normal patterns of explanation. And as for the rest in the middle—those who manage to write but don't write especially well—they don't write especially well *because* the two writing muscles operate at cross purposes: creativity is strong only if criticial thinking is weak, or vice versa. Thus, these ordinary writers fall into two camps. Either creativity has won out and produced writers who are rich but undisciplined, who can turn out lots of stuff with good bits in it, but who are poor at evaluating, pruning, and shaping. Or else critical thinking has won out and produced writers who are careful but cramped. They have great difficulty writing because they see faults in everything as they are trying to put it down on paper. What they end up with is disciplined and of good quality but it is thin and tight and it was purchased at disproportionate cost. And in addition it lacks the brilliance or excitement that comes from unhampered creativity.

But you don't have to give in to this dilemma of creativity versus critical thinking and submit to the dominance of one muscle and lose the benefits of the other. If you separate the writing process into two stages, you can exploit these opposing muscles one at a time: first be loose and accepting as you do fast early writing; then be critically toughminded as you revise what you have produced. What you'll discover is that these two skills used alternately don't undermine each other at all, they enhance each other.

For it turns out, paradoxically, that you increase your creativity

by working on critical thinking. What prevents most people from being inventive and creative is fear of looking foolish. After all, if you just let words and ideas come out without checking them first, some may indeed be stupid. But when you know that this is just the first of two stages, and that you are getting more and more critical in the second stage, you feel safer writing freely, tapping intuition, and going out on limbs. You will be more creative.

Similarly, you will increase critical revising skills by working on creativity. For what prevents most people from being really critical of their own writing is the fear of having to throw away *everything*. If I only have one and a half ideas in this draft and I must finish tonight, I'm not as hawkeyed at seeing the problems as I would be if I had eleven interesting ideas and had to pare them down to three or four. Most people start shaping and revising what they have written once they get one pretty good idea. "Yes that's it, now I've figured out what I want to say." That's terrible. You shouldn't start revising till you have more good stuff than you can use. (And it won't take long to get it if you make your early writing into a free brainstorming session.) That way you'll *have* to be critical and throw away genuinely good stuff just to trim your piece down to the right length.

The conflict between the opposing skills important in writing is really just an instance of the larger conflict between opposing temperaments important in most of living. It's a rare person who is, for example, both highly intuitive and highly organized. Most people have to settle for strength in one or the other—or mediocrity in both. If you follow the suggestions in this book for working on writing in two stages—being first creative and then critical—you will get practice in the larger skill of moving back and forth between conflicting temperaments so they enhance each other instead of fighting each other.

By saying that *you* should go through two stages when you write I don't mean to suggest that every scrap of *writing* must go through two stages. For if you get yourself to write freely during the first stage you will warm up *all* your faculties and some passages will come out just right the first time. You will achieve a kind of focus and concentration so that these passages—sometimes even entire pieces—will cook perfectly in your head. They grow out of that magic which some excellent writers can call on at will: simultaneous creativity and critical thinking. As I get more experienced

in my own writing, for example, I find that my raw writing (first stage writing) gets to be more of a mess, but that there are more passages scattered in it that need little or no revising. And the quality of these good bits gradually improves.

Creative Writing and the Other Kind

What is usually called "creative writing"—poems, stories, novels—feels very different to most people from what is usually called "nonfiction" or "expository writing"—essays, reports, memos, biography, and so on. Without trying to deny all differences between these two broad categories of writing I will nevertheless minimize the distinction in this book. I want to underline the fact that a good essay or biography requires just as much creativity as a good poem; and that a good poem requires just as much truth as a good essay. (See Chapter 28, "Breathing Experience into Expository Writing," for more about this.)

But because the distinction between these two kinds of writing is so widely felt, people have drifted into emphasizing a difference in the writing process used for each. People are apt to assume that when you write poems and stories it is appropriate to operate intuitively—and in particular to organize and revise in terms of an unconscious center of gravity or an intuitive sense of what feels right. Similarly, people are apt to assume that when you produce nonfiction or expository writing you should be completely conscious of what you are doing—and in particular that you should revise and organize your piece around an idea that is fully conscious, fully verbalized, fully worked out.

But it's no good giving creative writing a monopoly on the benefits of intuition or giving nonfiction writing a monopoly on the benefits of conscious awareness. That's why I stress the intuitive processes in the first half of the writing cycle and conscious awareness or critical discrimination in the second half.

It's true that some of my language in the book may seem to apply more obviously to expository or nonfiction writing than to creative writing: phrases like "figuring out your main idea" or "deciding what you want to say." I have more experience writing expository or nonfiction prose than anything else, and I assume that all my readers will have to do writing of that sort and only some of you will also write poetry and fiction. Yet because I put so

much emphasis on tapping intuitions and standing out of imagination's way in my approach to writing, readers and listeners sometimes think I am only talking about creative writing. In certain chapters in fact, especially those in the last section, the language will seem to apply more obviously to creative writing than to expository writing.

The important point is that you should exploit both intuition and conscious control, whichever kind of writing you are doing. Conscious control needn't undermine the intuition you may use in writing poems and stories: you can conclude with critical thinking that the poem you wrote last night hangs together beautifully (perhaps even according to a principle you can't yet articulate) and by all means leave it alone. Similarly intuition needn't blunt your conscious awareness as you revise your essay today, just because last night you wrote seven nonstop pages that came from feelings and perceptions you didn't know you had. You can consciously and critically build your essay today out of insights you could only arrive at by relinquishing critical thinking last night.

2

Freewriting

Freewriting is the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all-around practice in writing that I know. To do a freewriting exercise, simply force yourself to write without stopping for ten minutes. Sometimes you will produce good writing, but that's not the goal. Sometimes you will produce garbage, but that's not the goal either. You may stay on one topic, you may flip repeatedly from one to another: it doesn't matter. Sometimes you will produce a good record of your stream of consciousness, but often you can't keep up. Speed is not the goal, though sometimes the process revs you up. If you can't think of anything to write, write about how that feels or repeat over and over "I have nothing to write" or "Nonsense" or "No." If you get stuck in the middle of a sentence or thought, just repeat the last word or phrase till something comes along. The only point is to keep writing.

Or rather, that's the first point. For there are lots of goals of freewriting, but they are best served if, while you are doing it, you accept this single, simple, mechanical goal of simply not stopping. When you produce an exciting piece of writing, it doesn't mean you did it better than the time before when you wrote one sentence over and over for ten minutes. Both times you freewrote perfectly. The goal of freewriting is in the process, not the product.

Here is an example of freewriting—this one done in a group led by an experienced writer but not a writing teacher:

> The second class of no teacher and I'm finding it hard to see how anything will come of it without someone who *knows* something

being here. I really mean who knows *some*thing about writing. I know a little about writing, even that speed writing cramps the muscles just inside the thenar curve and I know the grip on my pen is too tight. I know what sounds right when I write right or when someone else writes right. But, is that right just because I hear it right or someone else's right writing listens right. If no one who knows what is right is here to right what we write rightly to our own ears, how will we know who's right really?

The sound of "-ite" and "-ight" and "r's" rolling around is pleasant or sibilant I believe is the right word to describe writing by rule rightly for right writers to hear or rule on. Does sibilant have to have "s's" hissing or are "r's" running rapidly reasonably rationale for sibilance without "s's". My cramp is gaining on me even though I remember my father writing my mother all "f's" in a letter from Frankfurt in the days when "f's" had other meaning than what my youngest son at eight called the "King of Swears."

"Dear Effie," he wrote from Frankfurt. "Four foolish fellows followed me from fearful . . ." I can't go on with it. To follow my original thought, "It doesn't sound right." And with the cramp now slowing me down and running off the paper, I'm hoping our non-leader tells us to stop. She did.

RUSSELL HOXSIE, M.D.

The Benefits of Freewriting

Freewriting makes writing easier by helping you with the root psychological or existential difficulty in writing: finding words in your head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper. So much writing time and energy is spent *not* writing: wondering, worrying, crossing out, having second, third, and fourth thoughts. And it's easy to get stopped even in the middle of a piece. (This is why Hemingway made a rule for himself never to end one sheet and start a new one except in the middle of a sentence.) Frequent freewriting exercises help you learn simply to *get on with it* and not be held back by worries about whether these words are good words or the right words.

Thus, freewriting is the best way to learn—in practice, not just in theory—to separate the producing process from the revising process. Freewriting exercises are push-ups in withholding judgment as you produce so that afterwards you can judge better.

Freewriting for ten minutes is a good way to warm up when you

sit down to write something. You won't waste so much time getting started when you turn to your real writing task and you won't have to struggle so hard to find words. Writing almost always goes better when you are already started: now you'll be able to start off already started.

Freewriting helps you learn to write when you don't feel like writing. It is practice in setting deadlines for yourself, taking charge of yourself, and learning gradually how to get that special energy that sometimes comes when you work fast under pressure.

Freewriting teaches you to write without thinking about writing. We can usually speak without thinking about speech—without thinking about how to form words in the mouth and pronounce them and the rules of syntax we unconsciously obey—and as a result we can give undivided attention to what we say. Not so writing. Or at least most people are considerably distracted from their meaning by considerations of spelling, grammar, rules, errors. Most people experience an awkward and sometimes paralyzing *translating* process in writing: "Let's see, how shall I say this." Freewriting helps you learn to *just say* it. Regular freewriting helps make the writing process *transparent*.

Freewriting is a useful outlet. We have lots in our heads that makes it hard to think straight and write clearly: we are mad at someone, sad about something, depressed about everything. Perhaps even inconveniently happy. "How can I think about this report when I'm so in love?" Freewriting is a quick outlet for these feelings so they don't get so much in your way when you are trying to write about something else. Sometimes your mind is marvelously clear after ten minutes of telling someone on paper everything you need to tell him. (In fact, if your feelings often keep you from functioning well in other areas of your life frequent freewriting can help: not only by providing a good arena for those feelings, but also by helping you understand them better and see them in perspective by seeing them on paper.)

Freewriting helps you to think of topics to write about. Just keep writing, follow threads where they lead and you will get to ideas, experiences, feelings, or people that are just asking to be written about.

Finally, and perhaps most important, freewriting improves your writing. It doesn't always produce powerful writing itself, but *it* leads to powerful writing. The process by which it does so is a

mysterious underground one. When people talk about the Zen of this or that I think they are referring to the peculiar increase in power and insight that comes from focusing your energy while at the same time putting aside your conscious controlling self. Freewriting gives practice in this special mode of focusing-but-not-trying; it helps you stand out of the way and let words be chosen by the sequence of the words themselves or the thought, not by the conscious self. In this way freewriting gradually puts a deeper resonance or voice into your writing.

But freewriting also brings a surface coherence to your writing and it does so immediately. You cannot write *really* incoherently if you write quickly. You may violate the rules of correctness, you may make mistakes in reasoning, you may write foolishness, you may change directions before you have said anything significant. That is, you may produce something like "Me and her we went down and saw the folks but wait that reminds me of the thing I was thinking about yester oh dam what am I really trying to say." But you won't produce syntactic chaos: language that is so jumbled that when you read it over you are frightened there is something the matter with you.

However, you wouldn't be frightened if you looked more closely at how you actually produced that verbal soup. If you had movies of yourself you would see yourself starting four or five times and throwing each start away and thereby getting more and more jumbled in your mind; finally starting; stopping part way through the sentence to wonder if you are on the wrong track and thereby losing your syntactic thread. You would see yourself start writing again on a slightly different piece of syntax from the one you started with, then notice something really wrong and fix it and lose the thread again; so when you finally conclude your sentence, you are actually writing the conclusion of a different sentence from the ones you had been writing. Thus, the resulting sentence—whether incorrect or just impossibly awkward—is really fragments of three different syntactic impulses or sentences-in-the-head tied together with baling wire. When you write quickly, however, as in freewriting, your syntactic units hang together. Even if you change your mind in mid-sentence, as above, you produce a clear break. You don't try to plaster over two or three syntactic units as one, as you so often do in painstaking writing. Freewriting produces syn-

tactic coherence and verbal energy which gradually transfer to your more careful writing.

What To Do with Freewriting

If you can view freewriting as an exercise to help you to grow in the long run rather than give you good writing in the short run, then you can use some of the good pieces that freewriting sometimes produces. But if you slip into freewriting for the sake of producing good pieces of writing, then you put a kind of short-run utilitarian pressure on the process and hinder yourself from getting all the other benefits.

I suspect there is some added benefit if you read freewriting over after you have written it (better yet out loud) and if you let someone else read it. I think it may help you integrate better into your conscious controlling mind the energies that are available to your innards. But don't get criticism or comment of any sort.

If reading over your freewriting or giving it to someone else gets in the way of future freewriting, as it may well do, then it's better just to throw it away or stash it somewhere unread. Reading it over may make you too self-conscious or make you feel "YEEEcchh, what garbage this is," or "Oh, dear, there must be something the matter with me to be so obsessed." This may start you censoring yourself as you engage in more freewriting. Don't read over your freewriting unless you can do so in a spirit of benign self-welcoming. I used to be fascinated with my freewritings and save them and read them periodically. Now I just throw them away.

A Hunch about Resistance

I remember agonizing over a particular section of something I hoped I would be able to publish. It seemed forever that I struggled and still couldn't get my thought right. I was knotted and incoherent. Finally I broke through into fluency. What a relief. For two days I hadn't been able to say what I wanted; then I could say it. But when I read the whole thing over a day or two later I noticed that the passage was particularly dead. It was limp, it was like a firehose after someone turns off the water.

This illustrates a kind of a myth I have come to believe without

quite knowing how to integrate it into the rest of my beliefs about writing. To write is to overcome a certain resistance: you are trying to wrestle a steer to the ground, to wrestle a snake into a bottle, to overcome a demon that sits in your head. To succeed in writing or making sense is to overpower that steer, that snake, that demon.

But if, in your struggles to write, you actually break its back, you are in trouble. Yes, now you have power over it, you can say what you need to say, but in transforming that resistant force into a limp noodle, somehow you turn your words into limp noodles, too. Somehow the force that is fighting you is also the force that gives life to your words. You must overpower that steer or snake or demon. But not kill it.

This myth explains why some people who write fluently and perhaps even clearly—they say just what they mean in adequate, errorless words—are really hopelessly boring to read. There is no resistance in their words; you cannot feel any force-being-overcome, any orneriness. No surprises. The language is too abjectly obedient. When writing is really good, on the other hand, the words themselves lend some of their own energy to the writer. The writer is controlling words which he can't turn his back on without danger of being scratched or bitten.

This explains why it is sometimes easier for a blocked and incoherent writer to break into powerful language than for someone who is fluent and verbal and can always write just what he wants. Picture the two of them: one has uneven, scrunched handwriting with pointy angles, the other has round, soft, even handwriting. When I make these two people freewrite, the incoherent scrunched one is often catapulted immediately into vivid, forceful language. The soft handwriting, on the other hand, just continues to yield what it has always yielded: language that is clear and perfectly obedient to the intentions of the writer, but lifeless. It will take this obedient writer much longer to get power. It will take the scrunched writer longer to get control.

The reason the scrunched writer is so incoherent and hates writing is that he is ruled by the steer, the snake, the demon. He is unable to take charge as he writes and make all those tiny decisions you must make second by second as you write. When I force him to do a freewriting exercise—or he forces himself to do one—he finally gets words on the page but of course he is still not completely in charge. He is not instantly transformed into some-

one who can make all the micro-decisions needed for writing. He gets words down on the page, but a lot of the decisions are still being made by the words themselves. Thus he has frequent bursts of power in his writing but little control.

The rounded fluent writer on the other hand is so good at making the quick decisions involved in writing—at steering, at being in charge—that even though he writes fast without stopping, his writing still lacks the vitality that comes from exploiting the resistant force.

The goal of freewriting, then, is not absolutely limpid fluency. If you are a blocked writer, freewriting will help you overcome resistance and move you gradually in the direction of more fluency and control (though your path will probably involve lots of writing where you feel totally out of control). But if you are a very controlled writer who can write anything you want, but without power—if you have killed the demon—freewriting will gradually bring it back to life. Forcing yourself to write regularly without stopping for ten minutes will put more *resistance* back into your language. The clay will fight you a bit in your hands as you try to work it into a bowl, but that bowl will end up more alive and powerful.

3

Sharing

Dialogue in my head

"Give it."
"No."
"You have to give it if you want to write."
"I don't want to give it.
I'll loan it
or disguise it
or sell it even.
I'll give it to certain people
if they promise to like it
—or if they promise to suffer.
But I won't just give it away."

Dialogue with a student

ME: That's good writing. You really looked it in the eye—what you were writing about.

STUDENT: I didn't used to respect writers. I thought they were just people who wrote things down easily. I didn't realize that writing took courage, took so much out of you. I don't like to give.

The essential human act at the heart of writing is the act of *giving*. There's something implacable and irreducible about it: handing something to someone because you want her to have it; not asking for anything in return; and if it is a gift of yourself—as writing always is—risking that she won't like it or even accept it. Yet though giving can sound rare and special if you rhapsodize about it, it is of course just a natural and spontaneous human impulse.