Occasional Papers
([on])
Practice & Form

How to Be a Great Writer

Marita Golden

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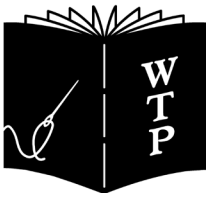

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The Welcome Table Press *Occasional Papers on Practice & Form* is a periodical pamphlet series featuring spoken essays that originated as talks delivered at symposia, conferences, and other gatherings where friends of the essay might be found.

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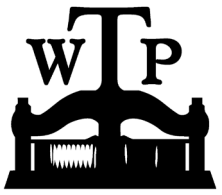
Marita Golden is an award-winning author of over a dozen works of fiction and nonfiction, the most recent of which is a collection of essays, *Living Out Loud. A Writer's Journey*. Other books include the novels *After* and *The Edge of Heaven* and the memoirs *Migrations of the Heart, Saving Our Sons,* and *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex.* She compiled the collection of interviews *THE WORD: Black Writers Talk About the Transformative Power of Reading and Writing.* She is the recipient of many awards, including the Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award presented through *Poets & Writers* and the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Fiction Award for her novel *After*. Golden is cofounder and President Emeritus of the Hurston/Wright Foundation. She has taught creative writing at many institutions and venues, including George Mason University and Virginia Commonwealth University. She is currently a faculty member at Fairfield University's MFA program and the John Hopkins University writing program.

This essay is derived from the third keynote address delivered on July 19, 2012, at Fairfield University's MFA in Creative Writing Program, Enders Island, Connecticut. For more information about this low-residency Master of Fine Arts program, please visit: www.fairfield.edu/cas/mfa_index.



How to Be a Great Writer

Writing is a defense, artistic and intellectual, of human values. A novel is the life of the people.
—Alaa Al Aswany

Each time I begin a writing project, it is my intention to be a great writer. I intend to speak in and with a voice that the world has never heard before, a voice that on a good and blessed day of writing shatters the known and assumed in me and opens up a soft, bleeding space where a new perception can take root. I will admit that some days I spend much of my writing time frustrated and astonished by my apparently boundless vanity and delusion. How could I have ever thought I could write this story? Yes, I've written perfectly fine stories before, but this embryonic narrative has no knowledge of that, and even if it did, it would clearly be stoically unimpressed. The patience and skill I utilize to ride out those swelling waves of doubt that thunder across my desk, writing pad, or computer screen (leaving me drenched but undaunted) are embedded in my *intention.* Because I have launched the project with only the highest goals, along the way I develop the spiritual and emotional muscles of the best writing athletes. These are writers who constantly pump, prime, and shape the ability to dream, dare, think, and *envision* their way through the tsunamis of apprehension that are inevitable in the creative process.

Write the truest sentence that you know.
—Ernest Hemingway

In *A Moveable Feast,* Ernest Hemingway reflects on his state of mind in the aftermath of the theft of a suitcase containing a manuscript of his in-progress short stories. He asks himself what he knew best that he had not written about and lost, and what he knew about truly and cared for most.

Take yourself seriously: Recognize that we live in a world dominated by big lies masquerading as truth. Ours is a world largely defined by infotainment and its values—speed, superficiality, and the need for the rush of the quick fleeting "high." Infotainment has invaded and subverted the classroom and even our most sacred intellectual and creative endeavors. Against this backdrop, our mission as writers is to remember that writing—the kind that matters and lasts—is the antithesis of infotainment. Great writing is, in fact, infotainment's antidote.

Take yourself seriously as a writer: Those who write with the intention of offering the reader an encounter with the profundity and broken beauty of life are a shrinking, endangered group. Yet we are a group that the world needs as urgently as ever. Take yourself seriously because calling upon the power of imagination and memory and diving willingly into the unknown is a hallowed, terrifying act of magic and conjuring. Great writers take themselves seriously enough to create and stumble into a way to write through divorce, debt, the death of loved ones, job loss, and watching their most cherished dreams perish. For in the red-hot, fading embers of tragedy, great writers see the beginning blaze of the bonfire of their next narrative. For great writers, writing isn't a choice; it is a necessity and a way of living in the world, like breathing. The stories they create are the oxygen that enhances their lives and sometimes make their lives possible and expand the lives of their readers.

We are writing because we love the world. Carry the poem away from the desk and into the kitchen—that is how we will survive as writers. We are trying to become sane along with our poems and stories.
—Natalie Goldberg

No, a poem could not have halted the Middle Passage, during which fifty million Africans either lost their lives or lived to become enslaved. No short story could have stopped the Holocaust, during which twelve million—Jews, Gypsies, Catholics, Protestants, homosexuals, and dissidents—were sent to the gas chambers in Nazi Germany. No novel could have spared the lives of the hundreds of black and white known and unknown martyrs of this country's civil rights movement. Antiwar poems read in front of the White House did not stop our cynical invasion of Iraq. And even a poem by Amiri Baraka could not stop a drone attack. Yet, when writers willingly

bear witness to these types of acts in their writing, because they have defined their work as a *calling* and not just a profession, those of us standing in the debris of history's love affair with destruction can at least *stand still and stand tall and affirm life.*

These historical backdrops may sound completely overwhelming as a source of inspiration, but when we as writers witness these acts, we explore their impact on one woman, one man, or one family, and affirm our unity as wayward, needy souls. *The Diary of Anne Frank; Beloved; All Quiet on the Western Front; Catch-22; 1984; The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, all narratives of the individual caught in the chokehold of history at its worst, each one a narrative in different ways about the triumph of the *individual* human spirit.

As humans we are more often than not quite primitive; we need and require writers to remind us that we are so much more than our darkest impulses. That we give our lives for one another (Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*), that we can even learn to love the selves we have been taught to despise (Kathryn Harrison's memoir of incest, *The Kiss*). That we can grow in spite of ourselves into contentment and a kind of happiness in the end (Elizabeth Strout's story collection, *Olive Kittredge*). This is why literature matters and why great writers matter.

Love the process of creating great writing. Trust your instincts. If the thought of the story you are writing frightens you because of how much you will have to stretch yourself and grow in order to write it, that story has your name on it. You want to write, not really to be famous, rich, loved by the masses. You only think that's why you write. You write in order to live and dream and exist inside a larger space in your heart and in the world. We don't write as much as we crack ourselves open to allow stories to write us. You want to write precisely because you don't know how to write. The question is the answer.

> *If you go deep enough in writing it will take you every place.*
> —Zen Master Diana Katagari Roshin

To create a finely crafted sentence that is precise, poetic, and soulful requires not just familiarity with a dictionary and thesaurus, but an unerring understanding of *the sentence* as a reflection of the interior life of your story and characters. Occupying this particular country often requires multiple drafts of multiple drafts. We often berate ourselves for taking too long to write our stories, but savoring the time spent on each rung of the ladder one must climb guarantees mastery of a narrative. Much of our time as writers is spent *not* knowing, living with uncertainty and mystery. The great writers know that uncertainty is the sumptuous, fluid space where *anything* is possible, where anything can happen. There is no knowledge of what you are writing, there is no transformation of you or the reader, without uncertainty and the humility it imposes. Uncertainty is sublime, tortuous, delicious, depressing, and inevitable.

Imagine how much Captain Ahab and the white whale Moby Dick enlarged Herman Melville. Before writing *Moby Dick,* Melville had sailed on scores of whaling ships, crossed the world's great oceans, met people deemed savage by *his* tribe, and brought back tales of astonishing adventure to an American audience hungering for such stories. Yet Melville could not know that he would write what some have called the American literary Bible. Though Melville knew many things, *Moby Dick* is mostly about what Melville did not have answers for, whale-sized questions that frame our existence and for which we never find quite satisfactory answers: How does one person lead others to disaster? What is the meaning of brotherhood and sacrifice? Why does the threat or the promise of violence thrill us? What is our relationship to the species with whom we share the planet? Is man a god? How can we conclude that God lives in man?

Great writers make friends with all the questions stories inspire. Uncertainty is usually a by-product of a major effort, such as a commitment to an adventure, or the decision to soar rather than to glide. How did Robert Rauschenberg or Mark Rothko fill their initially blank canvases? How does Jay-Z take the echo of the beat from his head and give it life in words and rhythm? By settling into and seeing through and living with uncertainty.

> *Accept your genius and say what you think.*
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson

In an age when the illusions of geographic or global separation have been blasted apart by the Internet, the

disastrous interconnectedness of global financial markets, and the ability of cell phones to topple governments and connect us in flash mobs dedicated to riots or revolution, the idea that there is one preeminent cultural narrative is fading fast into extinction.

Great writers embrace their global literary legacy. Great writers know that they are not French, Nigerian, Spanish, or Chinese writers, but that they are members of a universal, mongrel, multiracial, and multiethnic tribe of storytellers, thinkers, and visionaries who are fluent in Farsi, Arabic, Swahili, English, and all the other recognized and unrecognized, formal and informal languages. English may be the lingua franca of modernity and commerce, but as Americans living on a continent that has historically been defined as a universe unto itself, we know too little about the other 95 percent of the world. Yet the American writers who have made an indelible imprint on our collective consciousness have *always* engaged in a continuous conversation with that 95 percent. Hemingway not only covered the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, he became an antifascist activist, rallying support for the Loyalist cause. Black America's poet laureate Langston Hughes traveled across Europe and parts of Asia, from Uzbekistan to Paris during that same period, meeting writers from other cultures, using his poems and his curiosity and huge heart to break down the brittle, easily scaled barriers of language and custom. Zora Neale Hurston's groundbreaking work as an anthropologist took her from Haiti to Jamaica to everywhere in the American South, her ears and eyes wide open. And PEN/International is an organization that not only works to free writers who are imprisoned for their writing, but honors them for their courage with awards, grants, and fellowships. Great writers are willing to stand up for something, and they read eagerly the work of other writers working in other mother tongues.

The life of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda exemplifies how one man can write some of the world's most lush, evocative, and enduring love poems, while simultaneously dedicating himself to a life of progressive political activism. You do not know how to say *I love you* until you have read a love poem by Neruda. By now you know that I do not subscribe to the belief that there is some magical Maginot Line separating art and politics. Politics is bread and butter and life and death and art and poems and stories.

Several years ago, while visiting Israel, I met an Israeli writer; her short story about a soldier who returns from the Six Day War, shattered and unrecognizable to the wife he loves, told me everything that I needed to know about the history of that tiny nation. And when I read the poetry of a Palestinian writer I had met, I, too, became an occupied country and could feel in my bones and blood the wretched taste of exile and statelessness. And I was able to call both writers my sisters.

The stories we write are history and sociology, scrawled across the broken hearts of our characters. The beauty of literature is that a powerful poem or story breaks down barriers, erases walls, and gives us immediate fluency in the universal language of yearning for freedom, love, peace, family. Whether we are veiled or wear a miniskirt, live under a dictatorship or in a democracy, there are only a couple of stories writers tell, a couple of stories that again and again inform us of who we are and how much we are alike—how we are born, how we live, how we die.

I was a seventeen-year-old high-school junior when I discovered the work of Leo Tolstoy. How did this wealthy Russian count, an owner of slaves (they called them serfs), a member of the aristocracy, who by the time of his death at eighty-two was a pacifist, spiritualist, and philosopher beloved the world over, speak to me, an African American teenager growing up 140 years after his birth, with so much passion? Why did I proceed, after reading *War and Peace,* to then voraciously read everything Tolstoy wrote and the major biographies about him? Simply because everything he wrote felt in some way like my experience. Family, friendships, marriage, father-son and mother-daughter conflicts, love lost and found, bastard sons, wayward daughters, the threat of death, the promise of life. Tolstoy's characters' lives unfolded in high-ceilinged drawing rooms in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but I knew those people. Tolstoy made me a participant in their lives and forced me to see my own vanity, cowardice, and courage reflected in their actions. Every several years, I re-read *War and Peace,* all thirteen hundred pages of it, finding on its pages new sources of spiritual and emotional sustenance that are more evident as I grow older.

I have not been describing a roadmap that one must follow in order to live in that magic circle of writers defined by the literary establishment as Great. You know the ones I mean, many of whom I have cited: Revered dead writers. Nobel-Prize-winning writers whom you may have never heard of. Writers who are stamped with the label genius, but whose work requires an aesthetic roadmap. Writers who publish a book and then win every possible award in every possible category. Writers whose address is the best-seller list. Writers whose books are explored in a ten-page essay in the *New York Review of Books* or in a five-page essay in the *Atlantic Monthly.* Some of my favorite writers fit into those categories. But as emerging writers—and in truth I think all great writers are always emerging, or should be, into some unexplored realm of imagination and story—we need to remember that in this endeavor that we have chosen, an endeavor that has chosen us, we define for ourselves our own idea of greatness and our own definition of success. The kind of greatness I have offered for consideration is much more *inclusive* than *exclusive* and allows for many more of us to be great writers than the literary gatekeepers often allow.

It is essential to define oneself and one's goals as a writer outside the realm and influence of the obsession with huge advances, great reviews, literary prizes, and notions of fame. I came into whatever real power I possess as a writer once I stopped viewing reviews of my work as a verdict on my self-worth. My work began winning awards when I decided, and the operative word is *decided,* that I could live happily without them. My advances got larger when I started a foundation to honor the work of other writers. Angst and anxiety are not required to be a writer. As the great philosopher Bobby McFerrin once said, "Don't worry, be happy." We are some of the luckiest people on earth and don't know it. We sit at our desks for hours on end and tell lies, live in a world of fantasy, or try to figure out how to make facts or personal experiences remarkable rather than mundane. Our sharpest tool is imagination. And all of these are activities that the larger society associates with childhood or adolescence or wasting time, and still when we do all this right, we experience a satisfaction that is priceless, sometimes get paid, and give our readers the amazing gift of story. Most of our friends are smart, witty, and aware of the world, and we are doing what millions of people wish they had the courage to do: *write.*

> *If you are not afraid of the voices inside you, you will not fear the critics outside of you.*
> —Natalie Goldberg

No one tells writers how much power we have. Literary agents and book editors and filmmakers would be unemployed and adrift without writers. We are part of a $3 billion publishing industry that is a mix of commerce, creativity, vision, and entertainment. And the writer is the engine that propels all of the action.

Greatness as we traditionally think of it is arbitrary; highly political; determined by the zeitgeist of the age, time, place, and people doing the defining; and requires insane amounts of luck. How many great stories of the past were never written by women born a century too soon, burdened by a marginalized sense of self reflected in the inability to vote, control their fertility, or even dream that their imagination was as fertile as a man's? How many great stories died in the minds of enslaved men and women in this country for whom literacy and independent thought were crimes? How many gay men and women in the past closeted not only their identities, but the stories they needed to write and we needed to hear? What are the stories that even now all over the world, in villages and big cities, in slums and skyscrapers, are muffled because this world we have made is still not big enough to welcome or to hold them in a sacred space?

As a teacher of creative writing, I have come to respect the enormous dedication and talent that so many creative-writing students possess. These students have reminded me of the essential characteristics of the best writers and their gifts, some of which we rarely speak. Gifts such as a big, wondering, generous heart; a bluesy genius for telling it like it is; a love of daring and surprise; a need to search for truth; the ability to honor memory and the families that give us memories; and a humble attitude in the face of one's talent.

I remind my students that writing is an assignment from God, which asks that they take themselves seriously; bear witness to the unfathomable; are not afraid to write about or imagine the inexplicable; love the craft of writing; accept and rest inside the beauty of uncertainty; honor and support their global writing tribe; decide for themselves what success means; and *use* their power as writers.