Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

The Suspension of Belief: On Being a Practitioner & Teacher of the Essay in the Age of Skepticism

Jerald Walker

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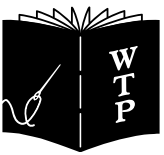

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The Suspension of Belief: On Being a Practitioner & Teacher of the Essay in the Age of Skepticism

Jerald Walker

Not long ago I had an essay accepted by one of my favorite magazines. When the editor contacted me with the news, I was thrilled, so much so that my response was a mere double take when she noted that, before going to press, she would have to speak with my mother. The essay, you see, included a great deal about the Walkers' seventy-three-year-old matriarch, specifically her youth as a sharecropper in rural Arkansas, her migration to Chicago, and her thoughts on race relations in the North and South. I had worked very hard on this essay, and was pleased with the result. Now, in order for it to be immortalized in high gloss, my mother would simply have to convince the editor that every word of it was true. I instantly recognized this moment for what it was: one of those poignant occasions in life when we must choose between an object of intense desire and pride. "My mother is a very busy woman," I explained to the editor. "But I am certain she'll find the time to speak with you."

As it turns out, this was an easy choice for me, since pride and I had parted company many years ago. All subsequent attempts at reconciliation have been unsuccessful, for the breech in our union, caused by countless rejection letters and returned manuscripts, remains irreconcilable. This isn't to say that I will do anything for a coveted publication, but it is to say that I recognize a distinction between pride and principle. While I will not falsify events in order to make my way into print, for instance, I will not take offense at an editor's desire to confirm that the events are accurate. And the desire for accuracy, coming from this particular editor, whose magazine had been the victim of literary fraud that caused their name and reputation tremendous harm, could be viewed as completely reasonable. So I was okay with her request. My mother, however, whose relationship with pride remains intact and robust, was not. The whole enterprise struck her as insulting and silly. She refused to speak with the editor.

This moment, too, was instantly recognizable: it was the prelude to my nervous breakdown. I attempted to stave it off by explaining to my mother the fraud perpetrated against the magazine, and when that failed to soften her stance, I reminded her that some of the essay's contents were a bit unusual. There was the part about the enjoyment gained by some rural blacks from eating the sweet Arkansas soil, for instance—not something you hear about every day. And then there was the white landlord who raped a black tenant, only to be killed by her husband, who later, with a posse on his heels, fled the region. "That," my mother interjected, "happened all the time and should be common knowledge." She had a point. It was a poor example. I shifted my focus from the essay's contents to my only remaining argument. "If you don't speak with her," I said, "I am likely to harm myself."

"On a scale of one to ten," she responded, "with ten being the highest, how likely?"

My relationship with my mother, as you may have noted, is complicated. At its core, however, her love for me abounds: It is for this reason, I tell myself, and not my score of ten on the harm scale, that she consented to speak with the editor. Afterward, she phoned me and announced that it was painless.

"I'm sure it was," I replied.

"She was very kind," my mother continued.

"Good," I said. "I'm glad it went well."

"And she was thoughtful," my mother added. "We had a really nice conversation."

"Splendid!" I answered. "What sorts of things did she ask you?"

There was a long pause, after which my mother said, "If you'd like to hear what she asked me, I'll play the tape for you."

"Pardon me?" I responded.

"I'll play the tape for you," she repeated.

"You…you recorded the conversation?"

"Well, of course I did."

"Without her knowledge?"

"Absolutely."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to make sure she wouldn't later claim I said something that I didn't say."

Now I matched her long pause with one of my own. And then I hesitantly asked, "Are you recording this conversation?"

To which she replied, "You'd better believe I am."

This moment was not one I recognized. My mother had always given people the full benefit of the doubt, and now she was channeling Ronald Regan, trusting but verifying. In retrospect, I should have seen this change in her coming. She, like most of us, is constantly inundated with media reports of celebrity and political scandals, each one traceable to a breech of trust, a fudging of the truth, a betrayal of confidence. The public has been taught to have its antennae high and twitching in anticipation of falsehoods. We are governed by skepticism.

The essay, of course, has not been spared, and nor have any of the other forms that compose the genre of literary nonfiction. To the contrary, this genre seems to have been targeted, and for good reason. Much of its power is built on the premise that this is the one sure place where lies do not tread. But tread they have. Just glance over the vast landscape of memoir and you'll see them, stampeding like a herd of wildebeest, trampling the land where Rousseau, Equiano, Angelou and McCourt nourished. To corral the offenders, truth squads have sprung up. Fact finders have been deployed. Lawyers vet manuscripts prior to publication. Editors speak with moms. All of this has put many nonfiction writers on edge, memoirists in particular, a claim for which, as Exhibit A, I present myself. Since the recent publication of my memoir, I have been haunted by a recurrent dream in which an exhaustive investigation uncovers that I am not a forty-six-year-old black male who was raised in Chicago's inner-city, but rather an eighty-three-year-old white woman from Hot Springs, Montana. So, yes, for writers of literary nonfiction in general, and of the essay in particular, these are hostile times. This is a sad reality that, as a teacher of the form, I see as my solemn responsibility to exploit.

On the first day of my essay-writing workshops, I tell my students that in the eyes of not a few of their potential readers, they are liars. Writing the word *essay* next to their titles will not automatically make their works believable. Nor, as one of my students insisted on doing, by adding the phrase "a totally true story." Believability must be earned. And the best way to earn it is through the mastery of craft, which in its most basic form I define as the consistent use of precise and unambiguous language, graceful transitions, and a logical sequence of events. Essays should have beginnings, middles, and ends, though not necessarily in that order, and the world being presented to the reader must make sense.

The mastery of craft, then, is really the mastery of clarity. Here is where I invoke the name of Frank Conroy, the late director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and one of my mentors, because my philosophy of teaching and writing is a direct descendant of his. I distribute a copy of his essay titled "The Writers' Workshop," in which he states the following:

> The struggle to maintain clarity… is the primary activity of any writer. It turns out to be quite hard to do, demanding constant concentration at high levels, constant self-editing and a continuous preconscious awareness of the ghostly presence of a mind on the other side of the zone. Many enthusiastic inexperienced writers (and even some experienced ones) would like to skip this struggle, or evade it while maintaining that of course it has importance but the real action occurs at higher levels, up where the fancy stuff is, the stuff that so moves them as readers. I maintain that any attempt to write from the top down will likely fail.

I maintain this also. Achieving clarity in their essays, then, and reinforcing in students a vigorous respect for its importance, is at the top of my agenda. It is the starting point and, once we move on to examine what Conroy called "the fancy stuff," it is the place to which we will frequently return. For when an essay is unsuccessful, which may mean that the skeptical reader continues to suspend belief about its contents, the reason can often be traced to a failure of language, some loosely written paragraph, an inexact phrase, a single wrong word that led the writer, the reader, or both, astray. Line-by-line edits will flush out the culprits and position the writer to make sound revisions.

But make no mistake about it: reaching the fancy stuff is our goal. We are not striving to produce instruction manuals, after all, but rather art, and art in the essay is achieved through the use of tone, dialogue, a sense of place, scenes, plot, metaphor, and subtext. It is achieved by the intense examination of an expanding mind, sometimes the narrator's, sometimes not, but invariably with the goal of uncovering universal truths about the human condition. The greater the obstacles to these truths, the better, since one of the joys of reading a good essay is watching someone think on the page, seeing his or her struggle to maintain a long-held view, for example, in the face of compelling evidence to abandon it. That compelling evidence is often supplied by a writer who, in lesser moments, would have pushed such evidence

aside. But lesser moments are of little interest to readers, and they offer little opportunity for growth to the writer.

A common lesser moment that students like to present in their essays is a treatise against a fallen hero—an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend, occasionally a former best friend, often a parent. Students excel at these types of narratives. By the end of one, there can be no doubt that the subject in question is a scoundrel. I, too, have known many scoundrels, and early in my writing career I took great delight in exposing them. These days I take great delight in seeking their redemption, or at least exploring its possibility. Where I once removed doubt that a view contrary to mine existed, I welcome that doubt in the role of protagonist. Now my motives, integrity and character are under scrutiny. I am the scoundrel; or so we shall see. This is what Phillip Lopate calls "thinking against oneself," the practice of writing essays that challenge your own ideas and beliefs until they strengthen or crumble. When one of these resolutions has been reached, so too has a new level of honesty and vulnerability. A mask has been removed. A disrobing has occurred. The essayist is naked, bruised, wiser, and the reader is too.

This is, of course, provided that all goes as planned. Usually it does not, particularly for students making their first tentative forays into the field. Their point missed, their conclusions illogical, unfocused, or uncontested, the essayists stand naked alone. Such an outcome for novices is a terrifying proposition, one that produces high anxiety and the determination to express it during every moment of my office hours. Because some of this anxiety, if not most, is related less to their fear of humiliation than to the grade such work may receive, I remove the latter from the equation. I do not grade the essays. I want my students to be free to try difficult things and to risk failure, to strive for honesty, and to consume my office hours discussing the work itself.

What I grade instead are the critiques that students write for their peers' works. Even students who are having tremendous difficulty with their own essays can, through multiple close readings of someone else's text, produce a thoughtful analysis of its pros and cons, and offer helpful advice to the author. I am a staunch believer that the best readers make the best writers; my essay-writing courses are designed to prove that maxim. And students have ample opportunity to do so, because while they typically produce two works of their own over the course of the semester, they on average write forty critiques.

I also have students give close readings to published works. In an essay-writing workshop, I typically assign one anthology, usually the most recent volume of Robert Atwan's *Best American Essays* or Lee Gutkind's *Best Creative Nonfiction*. Additionally, I often supplement these anthologies with single essays that address a problem or topic that was presented during class. If, for instance, a student writes a piece that explores father-son bonds, especially if it involves the death of a father, I'll distribute copies of E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" or James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son." Occasionally, if for no other reason than to stress the point that the exploration of the self is on some level the exploration of everyone, I'll pass out a piece by Montaigne.

Gradually, but without fail, the students become better readers. They make good use of this sharpened skill as editors of their own essays, and an added benefit of their close readings is that they come to class prepared to engage in rich, energetic discussions of the form.

Every once in a while, however, during one of these rich, energetic discussions, things go awry. Someone will lean forward, clear his or her throat, and say, "The writer is lying." It is always a tense moment when this occurs, for the charge is a serious one. Young reputations are at stake. Honor is involved. And classroom etiquette, which I establish on day one, specifically the insistence that we do not call one another liars, but instead say that the text was unconvincing, has been violated. In the strained silence that follows, I think, *yes, these are indeed hostile times for essayists*. But when essayists have done the necessary work to achieve clarity, when they have been truthful, honest, and fair, they need not be concerned by such an accusation. They need not take offense. This will be the fault of the reader. She will have refused to suspend disbelief, and nothing will convince her to do so without external corroboration of the essay's contents, a written document of some sort, perhaps, or, maybe, a talk with the writer's mother.