

Ten of My Writing Commandments

JULIA ALVAREZ

I love the scene from *Exodus*—celebrated in so many famous paintings and blockbuster films—of Moses coming down from the mountain with his stone tablets chiseled with the ten commandments. I feel a rush of affirmation to know that even God uses written language to get his points across. *In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God.* ■ I, too, have my set of commandments that have come down to me from godlike mentors. It surprises me that I'm using a religious framework to talk about my craft—as if writing were a moral force, an ethical practice, a politically correct exercise. In fact, I've always been

skittish when invited to panels that make more of writing than just writing. I feel particularly skittish when I've found myself on panels on political writing or when I ask for questions at a reading and someone in an audience asks, "Would you call yourself a political writer?" ("Shh!" I want to say. "Don't lift my cover!") I am asked that question a lot, I think, because I am a Latina, and readers often assume that if you are a writer of a certain ethnicity or color, you are going to grind your ax right up there in front of everyone. Most serious writers, no matter their color, ethnicity, or background, know better than to try that.

I believe with Saint John that the word is with God. I think storytelling is a moral force. So yes, I am a political writer, but—writer that I am, always revising and fussing for exactitude—I have to explain what I *don't* mean by that statement. I don't have a certain agenda that I want to get across. A message I coat with sweet passages of description and saucy dialogue in order to get my readers to swallow my opinion. In fact, I think such structures can come between a writer and what

she sees, and the point is—as my Nebraskan father-in-law reminds me about driving at night—to keep a clean windshield. Seeing, and seeing accurately, is the first commandment of a writer. In a passage I admire so much, I copy it on the inside cover of my journals, Conrad defines the task of a writer:

Art itself may be defined as the single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.

How can you see that way if you have an agenda in mind that might allow you to see one truth, but not the "manifold truth"? In fact, what I love about stories is that they work precisely by being multifaceted, by exploring paradox and contradiction, by allowing competing claims of many truths. If there is a God, this is the way He or She sees a world.

Which leads me to my second commandment as a writer. Stories are not answers to questions. They are themselves questions. Writers,

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contrary to conventional wisdom, do *not* know the truth, do *not* have the answers. The obligation of the artist, Chekhov explained, is not to solve the problem but to state the problem correctly. Writers are always looking at the other side. (Ibsen's supposed last words were very writerly, "On the other hand . . .")

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What's the good in this, you might ask? It sounds wishy-washy, sounds like a bad case of negative capability, as Keats called the artistic ability to enter and become other identities, other objects. Terence, the Latin poet who lived from 190–159 B.C., put it another way, "I am a human being. Nothing human is alien to me." All are welcomed at the artist's table. This inclusiveness, which literature provides, is a profoundly moral force.

Imagine if we were really able to see and experience life in this way, not just on paper. The Jew becomes the Arab becomes the Kurd becomes the Bosnian becomes the Armenian becomes the Turk becomes the Greek becomes the Afro-American becomes the Latino becomes the Korean becomes you and me. Oh, if I could have been King Lear as I was growing up with my strict papi or if he could have been Ophelia, we would have had an easier time of it. It is the most difficult journey: out of ourselves into the mystery of somebody else. In fact my third commandment as a writer is a one word rallying cry, ¡COURAGE!

It does take courage to sit and hope and wait and work, revising and fussing for exactitude. Inspiration is—as Hemingway claimed—one percent talent, ninety-nine percent applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair. Being a writer requires nothing less than the patience of Job. As James Dickey once explained to an audience, "I work on the process of refining low-grade ore. I get maybe a couple of nuggets of gold out of fifty tons of dirt. It is tough for me. No, I am not inspired."

But we must do this hard work of mining for gold and cultivating our talents. For me, this amounts to a moral imperative. As Saint Thomas reminds us in a passage from the Gnostic gospels that serves as my fourth commandment:

If you bring forth what is inside you
what you bring forth will save you
If you do not bring forth what is inside you
what is inside you will destroy you

How do we release this winged life within us? Saint Thomas tells us, by using our talents. And if yours comes in the form of writing talent, then a good place to start is with the smallest unit of narrative structure, the detail. It is by details that we coax and convince our readers to enter into our narrative dream. García Márquez, the great master of magical realism, says that if the fantastic events in his books seem real, it's because he describes them in minute detail. "It's a technique my grandmother used," he explained. "When I was very small there was an electrician who came to the house. My grandmother used to say that every time this man came, he would leave the house full of butterflies. But when I was writing a story about the electrician, I discovered that if I didn't say the butterflies were yellow, people would not believe me. The same was true when I was a child and used to say that I had seen elephants flying in the sky. No one believed me. But when I said I had seen four-hundred-and-twenty-seven elephants, people would always sneak a look up at the sky." Stories convince us by their details.

I'm sure all of us who have taught writing courses would agree on my fifth commandment, show me, don't tell me. This writing rule, by the way, wasn't recently invented by writing teachers but has been around since at least the fifth century B.C., when the Chinese poet and philosopher Wei T'ai gave this advice to his poetry students:

Poetry presents the thing rather than the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling. For as soon as the mind responds and connects with the thing, the feeling shows in the words. This is how poetry enters deeply into us. If the poet presents directly the feelings which overwhelm him and keeps nothing back to linger as an aftertaste, he stirs us superficially. He cannot start the hands and feet involuntarily waving and tapping in time, far less strengthen morality, refine culture, set heaven and earth in motion and call up the spirits.

Wow! That's quite a claim for poetry as a moral force. "To strengthen morality, refine culture, set heaven and earth in motion and call up the spirits!"

Recognizing the universal in the specific, and vice versa, shouldn't be a ground rule just for writers; it's a rule useful to anyone having to make a moral choice. In doing research on women freedom-fighters for my novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, I remember being struck by the testimonials of women who hid Jews in their homes in France during the Nazi occupation. Again and again they were asked where they summoned the courage to defy the regime and risk their own and their family's extermination. Many of these women shrugged and said, they weren't really thinking about ideology or politics or courage. They were thinking, this is Madame Rosen, from whom they used to buy their eggs and who once sewed a tear on their daughter's first communion dress; or this is little Natalie, who used to tie bibs on baby birds and feed them with an eye dropper and had a head of glossy, brown curls. It is often through details that we are reminded of our connection and responsibility to other people.

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My sixth commandment reminds me as a writer to always keep the larger picture in mind even as I muck around with the little details. This commandment is in the form of a poem, a short haiku I found years ago and jotted on an index card I tacked above my writing desk. Unfortunately, I did not write down the name of the author of the poem, so I can't tell you who wrote it. But it is wonderful advice for anyone who practices the craft of writing:

One must write a poem
the way one rules an empire
the way one cooks a small fish

I've already dealt with the importance of small fish—the details, the divine details. Now I want to

talk about ruling the empire. We storytellers are helping to create the culture we live in, and so, in a very real sense, we are helping to rule the empire. Sometimes, we are helping to rightly rule the empire by undermining those in power. For although we writers serve the people, we are not for hire; no one should be able to buy us. We are not advocates for any group; our job is to state the problem correctly, to keep a clean windshield, to tell the truth, manifold and one.

In part this job amounts to keeping the language clear and honest and fresh and vibrant. In our litigious, politically-overcorrected, dizzily spin-doctored age, it's not an easy job. We are bombarded with language that doesn't say what it means. Here are a few examples:

liar: sufferer of fictitious disorder syndrome

failed: sub-optimal

stolen: temporarily displaced inventory

lower test scores: negative gain in test scores

death: substantive negative outcome

This doublespeak, which Ken Macrorie calls "Eng-fish" in his wonderful book, *Telling Writing*, is a disease that infects our language. I get passages like this all the time from my students: "He made eye contact with me." "They were a dysfunctional family." "He needed positive reinforcement." Or lazy word choices like "his eyes were glued to the TV." What's wrong with this language?

George Orwell tells us what's wrong with using lazy language in a wonderful essay, "Politics and the English Language," written in 1946 but still applicable today. The decay in language, Orwell argues, is directly connected to the decay of spirit. "Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*." Given this kind of world, the struggle to keep language from making "lies sound truthful and murder respectable" is a moral struggle. Where does one start? Orwell argues that "one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end."

Misusing the language is something that dictatorships and totalitarian governments know all about. One of the first things such a regime does is to seize control of the media, to censor the stories of the people, to silence dissenting opinions. I grew up where there was only one story—the official story. In the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, 1930–1961, books were rewritten to tell his truth, and his truth only on pain of death. In a school not far away from where I attended classes, a young teacher corrected a student's essay on Trujillo by suggesting that there had been other “liberators” of the country. That night, the teacher, his wife, and two children disappeared. At the torture prison of La Cuarenta, the inscription above the door read, *No Flies Can Fly Into a Closed Mouth*. In other words, *Keep Your Mouth Shut*.

Censorship can exist even in countries that profess themselves democracies, perhaps in more subtle forms. When the voices of those with darker skins, less money, funny accents, and different religious affiliations or sexual preferences are excluded from our curriculums, when they are not on the shelves in libraries, when they are refused entry into our canons or our understanding of ourselves as a nation, then we have less than the full story of who we really are. If this seems to you a moot issue, one that does not apply to our country of free speech and inalienable rights, I remind you that there are still libraries fighting to keep *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* on their shelves. There are still teachers who have to fight battles to teach multicultural courses so that their young, racially and ethnically diverse students can feel that they, too, sing America.

My seventh commandment reminds me that by means of storytelling we can do important political and moral work. Again this is not really a commandment at all, but a story that has meant a lot to me since I was a little girl growing up in the dictatorship of Trujillo, the story of Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Night after night, for one thousand and one nights, this young woman kept herself alive by telling stories to the cruel Sultan. And night after night, for one thousand and one nights, the Sultan listened as slowly these stories began to work changes in his mind and heart. By the end of her storytelling marathon, Scheherazade had managed not just to transform the Sultan from a dangerous tyrant to a penitent,

wise ruler but also to save herself and the women in her kingdom. That's quite a testament to the political power and moral force of storytelling!

We must not let ourselves be censored by our sultans or by our fears. I think of the Mirabal sisters who refused to accept the official story of the regime in the Dominican Republic, but who spread a dissenting version through the underground they helped establish. I think of Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, of how she begins her memoir with a more personal mandate of silence: “My mother told me never ever to repeat this story.” And then Maxine dares personal and familial demons in order to tell us what has been repressed, the story of an aunt who killed herself. Battling personal and social demons is part of the job of a writer. Salman Rushdie, who has certainly paid heavy dues for his soothsaying, explains, “The success and cultural importance of good literature derives from its telling us things about ourselves that we hear from no other quarter.”

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and two children disappeared.

Which leads me to my eighth commandment, which—like most of my other commandments—is not really a commandment but a poem. In Rilke's “Archaic Torso Of Apollo,” the speaker, a sort of museum guide, describes in detail a great statue of Apollo, the translucent cascade of the shoulders, the marble breast, the smiling curve of the hips, and so on. When he is finished, he turns to us, readers and arts lovers, and says, “here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life.”

You must change your life! That is the challenge all great literature makes of us. “You must not go back to sleep,” the Sufi poet Rumi advises us. Literature reminds us of those things we need to be reminded of. There is an old Yiddish tale about a rabbi who goes out walking at night in a rich neighborhood and meets a watchman who is doing his rounds. “For whom are you working?” the rabbi asks. The watchman tells him, and then in his turn, he asks the rabbi, “And whom are you working for,

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1

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—Joseph Conrad

2

The obligation of the artist is not to solve the problem but to state the problem correctly.

—Anton Chekhov

3

¡COURAGE!

4

If you bring forth what is inside you
what you bring forth will save you
If you do not bring forth what is inside you
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—Saint Thomas, Gnostic Gospels

5

Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling.

—Wei T'ai

6

One must write a poem
the way one rules an empire
the way one cooks a small fish

—author unknown

7

My dear Scheherazade, tell me, I beg you, before the sun rises, one of your charming stories.

—*The Thousand and One Nights*

8

You must change your life.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

9

The function of freedom is to free someone else.

—Toni Morrison

10

If you want to be a writer, then write. Write every day!

—Samuel Johnson

rabbi?" The words strike the rabbi like a shaft. "I am not working for anybody just yet," he barely manages to reply. Then he walks up and down beside the man for a long time and finally asks him, "Will you be my servant?" The watchman says, "I should like to, but what would be my duties?"

"To remind me," the rabbi says.

This is precisely what great books do for us, they remind us. They feed—like nothing else can—the deep, mysterious springs of our being.

But stopping with our own self-development, while tempting, is not enough. Robert Desnos, the French poet who died in a concentration camp in World War II, once wrote that the challenge of being a humane as well as a human being was: "not only to be oneself but to become each one." The liberation we experience while reading and writing must be spread. "The function of freedom," Toni Morrison has said, "is to free someone else." This is my ninth commandment, the one that for me makes literature not just a moral force but the seed of moral action.

And yet, though we claim such grand things for writing, for working the language into brilliance and clarity, into saying what cannot be said in words, writing is plain and simple hard work, nothing to write home about. Remember poor Dickey with his fifty tons of dirt searching for that nugget of gold. In fact, I have to admit to you that all of these commandments boil down to one commandment, my tenth and last and most mundane and most important commandment: "If you want to be a writer, then write," Samuel Johnson once said. "Write all the time."

I agree with Mr. Johnson. Think of what happens to a dancer if she stays away from her bar exercises even for one day: Her muscles cramp, she doesn't have the stamina and flexibility to execute the fine moves that constitute great dancing. The same is true for writing, although different muscles are in use. That's why I try to write something every day, even if it's just the entry in a journal, a letter to a friend, a note at the end of a student paper. Any writing is an opportunity for good writing, for *creative* writing. (What other kind is there?) For me this is my daily prayer, my way of affirming my commitment to all the commandments I've listed. As I tell my students in workshop, writing and reading and using this special feature of our species, our language, is probably what being human and becoming more humane is all about.

And here I am at the end, and you might notice that if I now gave you a catechism quiz and asked you to list my ten commandments of writing, you'd all flunk. What were they exactly? You might remember that there was talk of Chekhov and of cooking small fish and four-hundred-and-twenty-seven elephants thrown in for good measure. In other words, each commandment came on the wings of some story or image or poem, and so you were not counting commandments, you were listening (hopefully) to stories, poems, anecdotes, details. That's what I wanted. "The best knowledge

we learn in order to forget it," Donald Hall once said, "like riding a bike." It becomes part of our intuitive knowing and imbues us with that special radiance which supposedly surrounded Moses as he came down the mountain carrying his ten commandments.

JULIA ALVAREZ is a poet, essayist, and fiction writer. Her novels *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *¡Yo!* have won numerous awards. She lives in Vermont, where she is working on a new novel.

English Education Programs Meet NCATE and NCTE Teacher Preparation Guidelines

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has adopted the NCTE curriculum guidelines for undergraduate programs for teacher education in English Language Arts for middle/junior and senior high schools. These guidelines were derived from NCTE's *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts*. Institutions seeking NCATE accreditation are required to submit curriculum folios showing how their programs meet the NCTE guidelines. The Council's folio review process is carried out by over 100 reviewers. All are members of NCTE and CEE (Conference on English Education) who have attended folio review training workshops. The NCTE folio review program is directed by Charles Duke, Appalachian State University, with Sandra E. Gibbs as the staff liaison. **Since our last listing, the nineteen institutions below have submitted curriculum folios which show their English education programs to be in compliance with the NCTE/NCATE Guidelines.**

Delaware: Delaware State University-Dover; **Illinois:** Augustana College-Rock Island, Northeastern Illinois University-Chicago (MAT-Language Arts), Roosevelt University-Chicago (English-Undergraduate), Western Illinois University-Macomb; **Louisiana:** Grambling State University; **Ohio:** Ashland University (Combined 7-12 English Language Arts), Ohio State University-Columbus, University of Cincinnati (Middle School/Junior High); **South Carolina:** Coastal Carolina University-Conway, Francis Marion University-Florence, Lander University-Greenwood, South Carolina State University-Orangeburg (MAT), University of South Carolina-Spartanburg, Winthrop University-Rock Hill (MAT); **Virginia:** Longwood College-Farmville; **West Virginia:** Fairmont State College, Marshall University-Huntington (English Language Arts 5-8, English Language Arts 5-12), West Virginia Wesleyan College-Buckhannon.

For more information on NCTE's participation in the folio review process write to Sandra E. Gibbs, Director of Special Programs, NCTE, 1111 West Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.