Write to Learn
Don Murray, 2005

Craft . . . not Magic

As you read these opening pages, try to imagine how I wrote them. Did I plan out each page? What problems did I encounter in writing them? How many drafts did it take to solve them?

You can't. Like the skillful criminal, the experienced writer knows how to remove fingerprints and footprints, to leave no trace at the crime scene. You can't know that I wrote more than a dozen beginnings, first finding what I wanted to say, and then rewriting to find out how best to say it.

And you certainly can't know that I felt no sense of failure when I wrote sentences that did not work, did not read clear, did not clarify and communicate what I had to say. It was a grand delight to write and rewrite, finally seeing and hearing these lines run clear. Each draft is an experiment, an exploration, and, if I am lucky, a discovery.

Most books on composition are written by readers who imagine writers know what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. But such texts may not help beginning writers who face a blank screen with a blank brain. This book is written by a writer who does not know what he is going to say or how to say it before the writing begins.

The writer's ignorance is essential. It leads us to new topics and new ways to make the topics clear to ourselves—and our readers. Even experienced writers feel a sense of emptiness and ignorance before the first draft, but beginning writers believe their panic is a lack of talent and of knowing. The experienced writer knows this *unknowing* is the beginning of all effective writing and they have developed a craft that allows them to discover what they didn't know they knew. This textbook reveals the secrets of the writer's craft so that students can develop the writer's ability of discovering and sharing what they know.

I am a student [fan with large lungs] of ice hockey and have played a little pond hockey and street hockey with roller skates. The University of New Hampshire—where I taught for 24 years—has nationally ranked women's and men's hockey teams, and when I talk to players and coaches about a game I have watched from the stands, I am struck by how different a game they have seen at ice level. I note how a player made a pass, but they comment on how another player, away from the puck, made an unexpected move to get where the pass would arrive. We do not agree on the most important plays, the turning points, even the strategies of each team. Sitting in the stands "reading" the game has little relationship to what a player "writes" when he or she has the puck on the stick and faces the speeding, ever-changing movement of offense and defense.

The same thing is true of my son-in-law, Michael, who is a composer, orchestrator, and conductor. We both listen to music but he hears it far differently than I do. He begins with silence and creates melody; I listen to the recorded melody but have little idea of the interplay of instruments that combine to create the melody.

I go sketching with my other son-in-law, Karl. We look across the same field that slopes down into dark woods with a glimpse of a river's edge, but our visions are different and what he sees as an experienced painter and I see as an amateur are greatly different. Studying a masterpiece in a museum to understand it and facing your own blank canvas to create a painting are two vastly different challenges. One is to know what the artist has done on the finished canvas, the other is to know what to do on an empty canvas.

When beginning writers study a piece of writing, they may not have an accurate idea of what the writer did to produce the final draft they are studying. Trying to figure out how a piece of writing is made is like trying to imagine a pig from a sausage.

Michael begins to make music with silence, Karl begins to paint on a blank canvas, I face the empty computer screen. This book looks at writing from the point of view of the writer when the screen is blank. We do not know what we will say or how we will say it. We write to learn, to discover, to find out what we didn't know we knew, to make readers think and feel in response to our writing.

Our tasks are not to imitate but to create what was not there before we began, to create what is, if we are lucky, far different than what we planned. Of course we want to produce work that communicates, but the first communication is to ourselves.

As far back as I remember, I wanted to be a storyteller. My Scottish grandmother, with whom we lived when I was growing up, made sense of her difficult life through narrative, and each story she told that bound her to the old country had a moral. Sunday mornings and evenings our Baptist preacher

delivered sermons that were documented with stories. Riding in an uncle's car—we never owned an auto ourselves—in the days before car radio, we sang songs like "I've Been Working on the Railroad," recited poetry like "Gunga Din" or told stories. I was read to by Uncle Will who lived with us. I only remember him reading to me, but Grandma, Mother, perhaps even Father on the rare evenings when he was home from work or church read to me—"The Little Engine That Could," "Billy Goat's Gruff," and "Winnie the Pooh."

Hearing stories, I began to tell myself private stories before falling off to sleep. The stories created a life better than mine. I was always the hero. I wanted to become a word magician who knew the trick of using words to transport readers into other lives where writer and reader could both be heroic.

I thought writing was magic and I was told that writers, like painters and actors and composers and singers and baseball players, had to have talent. What was easy for them was hard for me.

I knew it would never be easy for me. I believed I had been born without talent, but writing was what I wanted to do more than playing first base for the Red Sox, more than being a pirate, an Indian scout, a polar explorer.

Since my teachers confirmed my lack of talent, I decided to search for the magic formula that would turn my ordinary days into adventures. I began my search in elementary school, continued it in junior and senior high school, for three years in the Army, in college, and when I got a job as copy boy on a city newspaper. I studied the best writers on the newspaper for whom I was getting coffee, reading over their shoulder, reading their early drafts and their published stories. Asking them questions, I discovered they did not believe they practiced magic. They were simply workers who knew their craft. And I figured craft was something I could learn.

I invite you to join me as I continue my apprenticeship to the craft of writing. Come on in. Join me in the pool of language. You can make a belly flop, edge in a toe at a time, make a racing start, just dive off the edge. There is no right or wrong in beginning to use language to explore your world—what you know that you didn't know you knew, what you need to know, what you need to stand back and reconsider, what you need to share.

Of course writing the final draft is different—like the swim meet with rules and traditions—but now you should only be having fun. My way of writing is not usually to jump right into the pool but walk around it until a word, a phrase, an image makes me want to see where it will lead. Then I slide into the pool of language and write fast, my fingers getting ahead of my brain, until I see something that needs attention, focus, research or memory, development.

As I walked around the pool today, "sauerkraut" came to mind. I had dinner last night with our only friends who ever serve sauerkraut, and I recently heard from my high school friend who spent two days in a huge crock of sauerkraut hiding from German soldiers in World War II. He has never eaten sauerkraut

since. It is a favorite food of mine that came late in life. I see a pile of sauerkraut, smell it, taste it in my mind and then find myself writing.

> Sauerkraut. That's what was missing in my childhood. And pizza and Shitaki mushrooms, General Gao's chicken, corned beef, sushi, salads and yogurt and cheese—we never once had a smelly cheese in our kitchen. I had a childhood deprived of all that was strange, smelly even stinky and surprisingly tasty. We ate meat with ketchup and potatoes with butter and were proud of it. Nothing foreign for us. Of course my family was deprived of more than food. No ideas, no arguments, no disagreement. We didn't talk religion and politics, only appearance and behavior, my folks were strong on behavior, and dress and haircuts and . . .

This is going to be a fun piece to write. Of course it's only my way of writing and my subject. You will have to find your own sauerkraut, but that's part of writing to learn, so let's begin.