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**WRITING
WITHOUT
TEACHERS**

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**NEW
EDITION**

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His most recent book is *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2012). In it he explores spoken and written language and shows how even casual careless spoken language has many linguistic and rhetorical virtues that are needed even for careful writing.

He has other books about writing including *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*, and *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. He also wrote *Oppositions in Chaucer; Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*; and *What is English?* With Pat Belanoff, he wrote a textbook, *A Community of Writers* and a shorter version *Being a Writer*. A short section is published separately, *Sharing and Responding*, as a pamphlet to help students with peer feedback.

The National Council of Teachers gave him the James Squire Award "for his transforming influence and lasting intellectual contribution" to the profession. The Conference on College Composition and Communication gave him the Exemplar Award for "representing the highest ideals of scholarship, teaching, and service."

The Process of Writing— Growing

MOST people's relationship to the process of writing is one of helplessness. First, they can't write satisfactorily or even at all. Worse yet, their efforts to improve don't seem to help. It always seems that the amount of effort and energy put into a piece of writing has no relation to the results. People without education say, "If only I had education I could write." People with education say, "If only I had talent I could write." People with education and talent say, "If only I had self-discipline I could write." People with education, talent, and self-discipline—and there are plenty of them who can't write—say, "If only . . ." and don't know what to say next. Yet *some* people who aren't educated, self-disciplined, smart, imaginative, witty (or even verbal, some of them) nevertheless have this peculiar quality most of us lack: when they want to say something or figure something out they can get their thoughts onto paper in a readable form.

My starting point, then, is that the ability to write is unusually mysterious to most people. After all, life is full of difficult tasks: getting up in the morning, playing the piano, learning to play baseball, learning history. But few of them seem so acutely unrelated to effort or talent.

THE PROCESS OF WRITING—GROWING

We could solve this mystery like the old "faculty" psychologists and say there is a special "writing faculty" and some people have it and some don't. Or like some linguists, explain what is difficult to explain by saying it's a matter of wiring in the head. Or fall back on the oldest and most popular idea: *inspiration*—some god or muse comes down and breathes into you. Or pretend we don't believe in gods and translate this into some suitably fuzzy equivalent, for example "having something to say": as though certain people at certain times were lucky enough to find "something to say" inside which forced its way out of them onto paper. (And as though people who *can* write are especially distinguished by always having something to say!) In short, we are back to where almost everyone starts: helpless before the process of writing because it obeys inscrutable laws. We are in its power. It is not in ours.

Once there was a land where people felt helpless about trying to touch the floor without bending their knees. Most of them couldn't do it because the accepted doctrine about touching the floor was that you did it by stretching upwards as high as you could. They were confused about the relationship between up and down. The more they tried to touch the floor, reaching up, the more they couldn't do it. But a few people learned accidentally to touch the floor: if they didn't think too much about it they could do it whenever they wanted. But they couldn't explain it to other people because whatever they said didn't make sense. The reaching-up idea of how to touch the floor was so ingrained that even they thought they were reaching up, but in some special way. Also there were a few teachers who got good results: not by telling people how to do it, since that always made things worse, but by getting people to do certain exercises such as tying your

shoes without sitting down and shaking your hands around at the same time.

This is the situation with writing. We suffer from such a basic misconception about the process of writing that we are as bad off as the people in the parable.

The commonsense, conventional understanding of writing is as follows. Writing is a two-step process. First you figure out your meaning, then you put it into language. Most advice we get either from others or from ourselves follows this model: first try to figure out what you want to say; don't start writing till you do; make a plan; use an outline; begin writing only afterward. Central to this model is the idea of keeping control, keeping things in hand. Don't let things wander into a mess. The commonest criticism directed at the *process* of writing is that you didn't clarify your thinking ahead of time; you allowed yourself to go ahead with fuzzy thinking; you allowed yourself to wander; you didn't make an outline.

Here is a classic statement of this idea. I copied it from somewhere a long time ago and put it on my wall as something admirable. It was an important day when I finally recognized it as the enemy:

In order to form a good style, the primary rule and condition is, not to attempt to express ourselves in language before we thoroughly know our meaning; when a man perfectly understands himself, appropriate diction will generally be at his command either in writing or speaking.

I contend that virtually all of us carry this model of the writing process around in our heads and that it sabotages our efforts to write. Our knowledge of this model might take the following form if it were put into conscious words: "Of

course I can't expect my mess of a mind to follow those two steps perfectly. I'm no writer. But it will help my writing to try: by holding off writing and taking time to sit, think, make little jottings, try to figure out what I want to say, and make an outline. In the second step I certainly won't be able to find appropriate diction right at my command but I should try for the best diction I can get: by noticing as often as I can when the diction isn't appropriate, crossing it out, correcting, and trying to write it better."

This idea of writing is backwards. That's why it causes so much trouble. Instead of a two-step transaction of meaning-into-language, think of writing as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the very beginning—before you know your meaning at all—and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve. Only at the end will you know what you want to say or the words you want to say it with. You should expect yourself to end up somewhere different from where you started. Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with. Control, coherence, and knowing your mind are not what you start out with but what you end up with. Think of writing then not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message. Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking. Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you *free* yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive. You make available to yourself something better than what you'd be stuck with if you'd actually succeeded in making your meaning clear at the start. What looks inefficient—a rambling process with lots of writing and lots of throwing away—is really efficient since it's the best way you can work up to what you really want to say and how

to say it. The real inefficiency is to beat your head against the brick wall of trying to say what you mean or trying to say it well before you are ready.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DIGRESSION

Though much or all of this may be in other books—some of which I have probably read—it seems to me my main source is my own experience. I admit to making universal generalizations upon a sample of one. Consider yourself warned. I am only asking you to *try on* this way of looking at the writing process to see if it helps your writing. That's the only valid way you can judge it. And you will try it on better if you sense how it grows out of my experience.

In high school I wrote relatively easily and—according to those standards—satisfactorily. In college I began to have difficulty writing. Sometimes I wrote badly, sometimes I wrote easily and sometimes with excruciating difficulty. Starting early and planning carefully didn't seem to be the answer: sometimes it seemed to help, sometimes it seemed to make things worse.

Whether or not I succeeded in getting something written seemed related only to whether I screwed myself up into some state of frantic emotional intensity: sometimes about the subject I was writing about; occasionally about some extraneous matter in my life; usually about how overdue the paper was and how frightened I was of turning in nothing at all. There was one term in my junior year when by mistake I signed up for a combination of courses requiring me to write two substantial papers a week. After the first two weeks' crisis, I found I wrote fluently and with relatively little difficulty for the

rest of the term. But next term, reality returned. The gods of writing turned their back again.

The saving factor in college was that I wasn't sure whether I cared more about skiing or about studies. But then I went to graduate school and committed myself to studies. This involved deciding to try *very hard* and plan my writing *very carefully*. Writing became more and more impossible. I finally reached the point where I could not write at all. I had to quit graduate school and go into a line of work that didn't require any writing. Teaching English in college wasn't what I had in mind, but it was the only job I could get so it had to do.

After five years I found myself thinking I knew some important things about teaching (not writing!) and wanting badly to get other people to know and believe them. I decided I wanted to write them down and get them published; and also to return to graduate school and get my degree. This time I managed to get myself to write things. I always wondered when the curtain might fall again. I hit on the technique of simply insisting on getting *something* written a week before the real deadline, so I could try to patch it up and make it readable. This worked. But as I watched myself trying to write, it became clear I was going through fantastically inefficient processes. The price I was having to pay for those words was all out of proportion to any real value.

My difficulties in writing, my years as an illiterate English teacher, and a recent habit of trying to keep a stream of consciousness diary whenever life in general got to be too much for me—all combined to make me notice what was happening as I tried to write. I kept a kind of almost-diary. There were two main themes—what I called “stuckpoints” and “breakthroughs.” Stuckpoints were when I couldn't get anything written at all no matter how hard I tried: out of pure des-

peration and rage I would finally stop trying to write the thing and take a fresh sheet of paper and simply try to collect evidence: babble everything I felt, when it started, and what kind of writing and mood and weather had been going on. Breakthroughs were when the log-jam broke and something good happened: I would often stop and try to say afterwards what I thought happened. I recommend this practice. If you keep your own data, you may be able to build your own theory of how *you* can succeed in writing since my theory of how I can succeed may not work for you. This chapter and the next one grow to some extent out of these jottings. Occasionally I will quote from them.

IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN PRACTICE

In a sense I have nothing to offer but two metaphors: *growing* and *cooking*. They are my model for the writing process. But models and metaphors make a big difference—most of all, those models and metaphors we take for granted.

Before going on to describe the model in detail, therefore, I would like to give a concrete example, and contrast the way you might normally go about a typical writing task and how you might go about doing it if you adopted the developmental model.

Imagine writing something three to five pages long and fairly difficult. It's not something you have to research (or else you've already done the research), but you haven't really worked out what you want to say. Perhaps it is a school essay. Or perhaps it is a short story for which you have an idea but no sense yet of how to work it out. To make the clearest contrast between the two ways of writing, let's say that you can only give one evening to the job.

If you wrote this normally, you would probably write it more or less once, but as carefully as possible. That is, you would probably spend anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour on planning: thinking, jotting, making an outline, or all three. And you would try hard to leave yourself at least half an hour at the end to go back over it and make clarifications and changes: usually while copying it over. Thus, though there may be a lot of "getting ready" beforehand, and "fixing" afterwards, you are essentially writing it *once*. And while you are doing the writing itself you probably do a lot of stopping, thinking, crossing out, going back, rewriting: everything that's involved in trying to write it as well as you can.

If on the other hand you adopt the developmental model of the writing process, you might well try to write it four times, not once, and try to help the piece evolve through these four versions. This sounds crazy and impossible because the writing process is usually so slow and tortured, but it needn't be. You simply have to force yourself to write. Of course the first "version" won't really be a version. It will simply be a writing down in the allotted time of everything on your mind concerning the subject.

Suppose you have four hours. Divide it into four units of an hour. For the first 45 minutes, simply write as quickly as you can, as though you were talking to someone. All the things that come to mind about the matter. You may not be able to write everything you know in that time, or you may have written everything you know in the first 10 minutes. Simply keep writing in either case—thinking things out as the words go down onto paper, following your train of thought where it leads, following the words where they lead. But stop at the end of 45 minutes.

Take the last 15 minutes for the opposite process. Think

back or read over what you have written and try to see what important things emerged. What does it add up to? What was the most important or central thing in it? *Make* it add up to something, try to guess what it's *trying* to add up to; try to figure out what it *would* add up to if the missing parts were there. Sum up this main point, this incipient center of gravity, in a sentence. Write it down. It's got to stick its neck out, not just hedge or wonder. Something that can be quarreled with. (If you are writing a story or poem stress the term "center of gravity": it may be an assertion, but it could also be a mood, an image, a central detail or event or object—as long as it somehow sums up everything.) This summing-up process should be difficult: it should tell you more than you already know.

Of course you probably can't come up at this point with an assertion that is true or pleasing. You probably can't even make an assertion that really fits everything you wrote for 45 minutes. Don't worry. Your job, as with the writing, is not to do the task well, it is to do the task. The essence of this approach is to change your notion of what it means to *try* or *attempt* or *work on* a piece of writing. To most people it means pushing as hard as they can against a weight that is heavier than they can budge—hoping eventually to move it. Whereas of course you merely get tired. You must create mechanical advantage so that "trying" means pushing against a weight that you *can* move even if that only moves the main weight a small distance.

So now you have used up the first of your four units of time. You have written your first "version." In the next hour, simply do the same thing. Start writing again. *Start from* your previous summing up assertion. That doesn't mean you must stick to it—you probably consider it false. Merely write your

next version "in the light of" or "from the perspective of" your fifteen-minute standing back and surveying of the terrain.

Write quickly without much stopping and correcting for 45 minutes again. And again use the final 15 minutes to stand back and try to see what emerged, what one thing is now uppermost or is trying to be uppermost. Sum it up again. Perhaps this assertion will seem solider and more useful, but perhaps not. In any event, you must come up with a single, sticking-its-neck-out assertion by the end of 15 minutes.

Now in your third hour do the same thing a third time. By now you may have a sense of which direction your final version will go—a sense of an emerging center of gravity that you trust. Try to develop and exploit it. If not, try to find it during this third version. Try to coax some coherence, yet still allow things to bubble. You are not editing yet.

The job of editing and turning out a final copy is next. It occupies the last 15 minutes of your third period, and the whole of the fourth period. It turns out to be exactly what the conventional idea of writing is: start with 15 minutes to make your meaning clear to yourself. Now at last you should be in a position to do this. You might want to make an outline or plan. But one thing is essential: you must really force yourself to sum up into a genuine *single* assertion what your meaning is. Remember the crucial thing about this task: it must be an assertion that actually asserts something, that could be quarreled with; not "here are some things I think" or "here are some things that relate to X."

Once you have gradually grown your meaning and specified it to yourself clearly, you *will* have an easier time finding the best language for it. But even in this final writing, don't go too slowly and carefully. For you should use the final 15 min-

utes for going over it: cleaning and strengthening the wording; throwing away as many words, phrases, and even sections as can be dispensed with; and perhaps rearranging some parts.

This method of writing means more words written and thrown away. Perhaps even more work. But less banging your head against a stone wall—pushing with all your might against something that won't budge. So though you are tired, you are less frustrated. The process tends to create a transaction that helps you expend more of your energy more productively.

The time-lengths can be stretched or squeezed or ignored. I am merely trying to insist that you can write much more and not take longer. But most of us must resort to a clock to *make* ourselves write more and not waste time.

GROWING

Growing is certainly a proper word for what people and other living organisms do to arrive at a "grown" or "mature" state. They go through a series of changes and end up more complex and organized than when they started. It is no metaphor to speak of a person in the following way: "He really grew. Of course he's the same person he was, but he's also very different. Now he thinks, behaves, and sees things differently from the way he used to. I never would have expected him to end up this way."

I wish to speak of groups of *words* growing in the same way. Consider this example. You believe X. You write out your belief or perception or argument that X is the case. By the time you have finished you see something you didn't see before: X is incorrect or you see you no longer believe X. Now you keep writing about your perplexity and uncertainty.

Then you begin to see Y. You start to write about Y. You finally see that Y is correct or you believe Y. And then finally you write out Y as fully as you can and you are satisfied with it.

What has happened here? Strictly speaking, only *you* have grown, your words have not. You are a living organism. Your words are just dead marks on a piece of paper. No word has *moved* or *changed*, they all just lie there where you set them. But there's a sense in which they have changed. A sense in which they are not one long string of words but rather three shorter strings of words which are three "versions" of something: versions of an organism-like thing—something that has gone through three stages and ended up in a way that seems completed. "It no longer believes X, it believes Y; it's very different, yet it's still the same piece of writing. I never would have expected it to end up this way."

It is my experience that when I write something that is good or which satisfies me, almost invariably it is a product of just such a process. And when I struggle hard and fail to produce something good or pleasing, it seems almost invariably because I couldn't get this kind of process to occur. (There are exceptions which I will deal with towards the end of the chapter on cooking.)

It is also my experience that I can best help this process occur when I think of it as trying to "help words grow." It is true, of course, that an initial set of words does not, like a young live organism, contain within each cell a *plan* for the final mature stage and all the intervening stages that must be gone through. Perhaps, therefore, the final higher organization in the words should only be called a borrowed reflection of a higher organization that is really in me or my mind. I am only projecting. Yet nevertheless, when I can write down a

set of words and then write down some more and then go back and write down some more thoughts or perceptions on the topic, two odd things seem to be the case: 1. Often by looking back over them, I can find relationships and conclusions in the words that are far richer and more interesting than I could have "thought of by myself." 2. And sometimes it often feels as though these words were "going somewhere" such that when they "got there" best, it was because I succeeded in getting out of their way. It seems not entirely metaphorical, then, to say that at the end it is I who have borrowed some higher organization from the words.

In any event, I advise you to treat words as though they are potentially able to grow. Learn to stand out of the way and provide the energy or force the words need to find their growth process. The words cannot go against entropy and end up more highly organized than when they started unless fueled by energy you provide. You must send that energy or electricity through the words in order, as it were, to charge them or ionize them or give them juice or whatever so that they have the life to go through the growing process. I think of this growing process schematically, as follows. The words come together into one pile and interact with each other in that mess; then they come apart into small piles according to some emerging pattern. Then the small piles consolidate and shake down into their own best organization. Then together again into a big pile where everything interacts and bounces off everything else till a different pattern emerges. The big pile breaks up again into different parts according to this new pattern. Then the parts each consolidate themselves again. Then back into the big pile again for more interaction. And so forth and so on till it's "over"—till a pattern or configuration is attained that pleases you or that "it was trying to get to."

It takes a lot of energy for this process to go on. But you save the energy you normally waste trying to polish something that is essentially lousy and undeveloped.

Make the process of writing into atomic fission, setting off a chain reaction, putting things into a pot to percolate, getting words to take on a life of their own. Writing is like trying to ride a horse which is constantly changing beneath you, Proteus changing while you hang on to him. You have to hang on for dear life, but not hang on so hard that he can't change and finally tell you the truth.

In the following sections I try to describe the growing process more concretely in four stages: start writing and keep writing; disorientation and chaos; emerging center of gravity; mopping up or editing.

START WRITING AND KEEP WRITING

It is one of the main functions of the ten-minute writing exercises to give you practice in writing quickly without editing, for if you are not used to it you will find it difficult. Your editorial instinct is often much better developed than your producing instinct, so that as each phrase starts to roll off your pencil, you hear seventeen reasons why it is unsatisfactory. The paper remains blank. Or else there are a series of crossed out half-sentences and half-paragraphs.

When you realize you have to write a lot, you stop worrying because you write badly much of the time—at first, perhaps all the time. Don't worry. "Trying to write well" for most people means constantly stopping, pondering, and searching for better words. If this is true of you, then stop "trying to write well." Otherwise you will never write well.

It's at the beginnings of things that you most need to get yourself to write a lot and fast. Beginnings are hardest: the beginning of a sentence, of a paragraph, of a section, of a stanza, of a whole piece. This is when you spend the most time not-writing: sitting, staring off into space, chewing the pencil, furrowing your brow, feeling stuck. How can you write the beginning of something till you know what it's the beginning of? Till you know what it's leading up to? But how can you know that till you get your beginnings?

Writing is founded on these impossible double-binds. It is simply a fact that most of the time you can't find the right words till you know exactly what you are saying, but that you can't know exactly what you are saying till you find just the right words. The consequence is that you must *start by writing the wrong meanings in the wrong words*; but keep writing till you get to the right meanings in the right words. Only at the end will you know what you are saying. Here is a diary entry:

Noticing it again: in the middle of writing a memo to X about the course: that the good ideas and good phrases—especially the good ideas—come only while in the process of writing—after the juices have started to flow. It's what Macrorie¹ is talking about when he says you have to let words talk to words—let words—as they come out—call up and suggest other words and concepts and analogies. There's a very practical moral for me. I've got to *not* expect my best or even structurally important ideas to come before I start writing. Got to stop worrying that I have nothing to write about before I start writing. Start to write and let things happen. A model: pretend I am a famous writer—an acknowledged genius who has already produced a brilliant book a year and an article a month for the last 20 years. Someone who simply knows that when he sits down to write, good stuff will be the final

¹. Ken Macrorie, *Telling Writing*, Hayden Press, 1970.

product even though at any given moment he is liable to be writing absolute crap. Good writers and good athletes don't get really good till they stop worrying and hang loose and trust that good stuff will come. Good musicians.

Writing a lot at the beginning is also important because that's when you are least warmed up and most anxious. Anxiety keeps you from writing. You don't know what you will end up writing. Will it be enough? Will it be any good? You begin to think of critical readers and how they will react. You get worried and your mind begins to cloud. You start trying to clench your mind around what pitiful little lumps of material you have in your head so as not to lose them. But as you try to clarify one thought, all the rest seem to fall apart. It's like trying to play monopoly on a hillside in a fresh breeze and trying to keep a hand on all your piles of money. You begin to wonder whether you are coming down with a brain tumor. Anxiety is trying to get you so stuck and disgusted that you stop writing altogether. It is writing that causes all the anxiety. (When you have dreams of glory and imagine how famous your writing will make you, it is just a sneakier trick to keep you from writing: anything you actually write will seem disappointing to you.)

Again, the only cure is to damn the torpedoes and write:

Getting into the teacher business in my "Model for Higher Education" essay. Beginning to turn on. Lesson: two conditions seem to have led to this more gutsy writing. 1. Write a lot for enough time just to get tired and get into it—get past stiffness and awkwardness—like in a cross-country race where your technique doesn't get good till you're genuinely tired. The mechanism there is clear: you've got to be tired enough so that unnecessary (and inhibitory) muscles let go and stop clenching. Relax. Use only necessary muscles. Reach 100% efficiency of body. Equals grace. I

think you can translate this directly into writing: get extra and inhibitory muscles to let go by writing a lot. Thus the success of some late-night writing. 2. I've found or fallen into a topic that I have a strong emotional relation to. It's got my dander up. I can feel it in my stomach and arms and jaw—which in this case doesn't feel like unnecessary and inhibitory muscle tension. You have to write long enough, get tired enough, and drift and wander and *digress* enough simply to fall into an area of high concern. *The whole thing started out as a digression: one parenthesis for one sentence in a section talking about something entirely different.* Give your feelings and instincts their head.

Trying to begin is like being a little child who cannot write on unlined paper. I cannot write anything decent or interesting until after I have written something at least as long as the thing I want to end up with. I go back over it and cross it all out or throw it all away, but it operates as a set of lines that hold me up when I write, something to warm up the paper so my ink will "take," a security blanket. Producing writing, then, is not so much like filling a basin or pool once, but rather getting water to keep flowing *through* till finally it runs clear. What follows is a diary entry that starts out illustrating the need to write beginnings and get on with it, but ends up showing that the problem of anxiety tends to lurk underneath everything else:

I've stopped in mid sentence. I'm starting off this long section; and I realize that exactly what I need at this point is a clear and concise summary statement of precisely what it is I'm going to say. And with that realization comes a trickier one: I cannot say clearly and concisely what it all amounts to. The best I can do is write in something vague or fuzzy or unsatisfactory—to fake it like a musician who comes to a passage that is too hard but wants to keep time with the other players and not lose his place in the music—and go on to the substance of the sec-

tion to work out exactly what it is I *am* saying. I cannot write the sentence I need at the beginning till after I get to the end.

The lesson, then, is to try to treat writing not exclusively as linear but as wholistic: not starting in at one end and writing till you get to the other; but rather as successive sketches of the same picture—the first sketches very rough and vague—each one getting clearer, more detailed, more accurate, and better organized as well.

And different parts of the writing must have a mutually interactive effect on each other. I can't write a good first sentence till I work through the body of the piece; yet once I work through the body and get myself in a position of elevation so I can write a good first sentence summarizing things, that very sentence will permit me to go back to the body of the piece and see that some bits are not really central and can be cut out or shortened or stuck into a quick aside; and bring the main outlines into better focus.

But. Now after writing the above, I went back to my piece of writing, and succeeded pretty well in putting my finger on what it was I was wanting to say. Somehow the stopping and making self-conscious the process outlined above, served to free me from the hangup of it. I don't know how to translate that into advice or a general principle. Wait a minute, maybe I do. I think it means this: *I was stuck and frustrated*, couldn't go on. Became conscious of it and what the problem was. Stopped to make a note analyzing the problem and the solution. And that produced confidence that the problem did indeed have a solution—reduced the frustration—know that if I just forged on bravely, it would eventually come to me. That reduction of frustration and incipient hopelessness reduced the static in my mind that was preventing me from getting my hands on words and thoughts that were potentially there.

Another reason for starting writing and keeping writing: If you stop too much and worry and correct and edit, you'll invest yourself too much in these words on the page. You'll care too much about them; you'll make some phrases you really love; you won't be able to throw them away. But you *should*

throw lots away because by the end you'll have a different focus or angle on what you are writing, if not a whole new subject. To keep these earlier words would ruin your final product. It's like scaffolding. There is no shortcut by which you can avoid building it, even though it can't be part of your final building. It's like the famous recipe for sturgeon: soak it in vinegar, nail it to a two-inch plank, put it in a slow oven for three days, take it out, throw away the fish, and eat the plank.

It's just happened again. For the umteenth time. I struggled at huge and agonizing length to try to get rid of an unwieldy, ugly, and awkward phrasing. No matter how much I struggled, I couldn't get anything either clear, concise, or even exactly what I meant. But still to no avail. The hell with it. I took the best alternative—a lousy one—and went on. Only the *next day—after typing the final draft—while proofreading it*—I finally got the perfect phrasing: just what I want; elegant, concise, direct. Cognitively, I couldn't work it out till I had the whole thing clear enough so that I could then see this tiny part clearly. Affectionately, I couldn't get the cobwebs out of my head till I actually had confidence that I had something actually completed and that I could turn in. Moral: it was a waste of time to try for the exact phrase back then; wait till later—last stage.

CHAOS AND DISORIENTATION

If the main advice people need to help make their writing grow is to start writing and keep writing, their main experience in trying to follow this advice is the feeling of chaos and disorientation. Here is a diary entry from an early stage of working on this book:

I just realized why I'm going crazy. Why I'm starting and stopping in despair. Over and over again. It's so terrible. Finally realize

what I'm feeling. *I can't stand writing when I don't know what I'm writing about!* It feels so insecure. Such a mess. Don't know where it's going or coming from. Just writing off into the blue. I'm wanting a center of gravity. But I'm just starting. Can't know what the center of gravity is yet. Got to put up with it. It won't come till the end.

Or here's another one where, like the last one, I know perfectly well the *theory* that I should write a lot and I'm trying to follow it, but I'm discovering how threatening it is in practice. Here I start out, as it were, whistling in the dark by telling myself the theory very confidently; finally I build up the courage to speak to myself of my insecurity:

My main wholistic advice. Process. Write a lot and throw a lot away. Start writing early so you can have time to discard a lot and have it metamorphose a lot and bubble and percolate. If you have 3 hours for a 3-page thing, write it three times instead of one page an hour.

Yet. Yet. I find this hard. I keep trying to hold off actual writing till everything is *perfectly* prepared and totally under control so that I know what I'm going to write. It makes me so nervous to start in writing. I keep putting it off, more and more preparation. It feels like having to jump into cold water.

Whereas when I *do* get writing, I discover that much of the preparation time was a *waste of time*. The important things happen *during* writing; after a first draft; trying to clean it up or reconcile contradictions; or on the way from the third to the fourth draft. I know this from my past experience and from my theory of the writing process. But still I stand here on the edge and don't want to start writing; I prefer to sit here and ponder and think and look through jottings I've made—even write out a diary entry.

The reason it feels like chaos and disorientation to write freely is because you are giving up a good deal of control. You

are allowing yourself to proceed without a full plan—or allowing yourself to depart from whatever plan you have. You are trying to let the words, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions try to find some of their own order, logic, coherence. You're trying to get your material to do some of the steering instead of doing it all yourself.

Growth in writing is not just producing masses of words and then throwing the rejects away. That could be a simplified two-step version for getting your feet wet, perhaps, but it misses out on the essential process. If all you have at the end is a subset of the words you started with, you have missed real growth. Things have actually got to *change*, and you will experience this as chaos even if your material, while going through changes, happens at every moment to be completely coherent—like a fetus in a mother's belly. The words are not going through stages *you* planned or that *you* control.

There is a paradox about control which this kind of writing brings into the open. The common model of writing I grew up with preaches control. It tells me to think first, make up my mind what I really mean, figure out ahead of time where I am going, have a plan, an outline, don't dither, don't be ambiguous, be stern with myself, don't let things get out of hand. As I begin to try to follow this advice, I experience a sense of satisfaction and control: "I'm going to be in charge of this thing and keep out of any swamps!" Yet almost always my main experience ends up one of *not* being in control, feeling stuck, feeling lost, trying to write something and never succeeding. Helplessness and passivity.

The developmental model, on the other hand, preaches, in a sense, *lack* of control: don't worry about knowing what you mean or what you intend ahead of time; you don't need a plan or an outline, let things get out of hand, let things wan-

der and digress. Though this approach makes for initial panic, my overall experience with it is increased control. Not that I always know what I am doing, not that I don't feel lost, baffled, and frustrated. But the overall process is one that doesn't leave me so helpless. I can get something written when I want to. There isn't such a sense of mystery, of randomness.

This paradox of increased overall control through letting go a bit seems paradoxical only because our normal way of thinking about control is mistakenly static: it is not developmental or process-oriented because it leaves out the dimension of time. Our static way of thinking makes us feel we must make a *single* choice as to whether to be a controlled person or an out-of-control person. The feeling goes like this: "Ugh. If I just write words as they come, allow myself to write without a plan or an outline, allow myself to digress or wander, I'll turn into a blithering idiot. I'll degenerate. I'll lose the control I've struggled so hard to get. First I'll dangle participles, then I'll split infinitives, then I'll misspell words, then I'll slide into disagreement of subject and verb. Soon I'll be unable to think straight. Unable to find flaws in an argument. Unable to tell a good argument from a bad one. Unable to tell sound evidence from phony evidence. My mind will grow soft and limp, it will atrophy; it will finally fall off. No! I'll be tough. I won't be wishy-washy. I'll have high standards. I'll be rigorous. I'll make every argument really stand up. I won't be a second-rate mind. I'm going to be a *discriminating* person. I'm going to keep my mind *sharp* at all times."

But this static model isn't accurate. Most processes engaged in by live organisms are cyclic, developmental processes that run through time and end up different from how they began. The fact is that most people find they *improve* their ability to think carefully and discriminately if they allow them-

selves to be sloppy and relinquish control at other times. You usually cannot excel at being toughminded and discriminating unless it is the final stage in an organic process that allowed you to be truly open, accepting—even at times blithering.

You can encourage richness and chaos by encouraging digressions. We often see digressions as a waste of time and break them off when we catch ourselves starting one. But do the opposite. Give it its head. It may turn out to be an integral part of what you are trying to write. Even if it turns out to be an excrescence to be gotten rid of, if it came to you while you were thinking about X it must be related and a source of leverage. And you may not be able to *get rid of it* completely unless you see more of it. Almost always you cannot disentangle the good insight from the excrescence until *after* you have allowed the digression to develop. At the early stage the two are so intertwined that you can't tell one from the other. That's why it feels both interesting and wrong. There are concepts in there that you haven't yet learned to discriminate.

If you allow yourself to get genuinely off the subject you can see it differently when you come back. Even if the digression doesn't turn out to be valuable to what you are writing, it may be valuable in itself. You often have your best ideas about Y when you are thinking about X. If you have to write two things, don't finish one and then start the other: get them both started and work on one for a while and then work on the other. Let them reflect heat on each other like logs in a fireplace.

Using diary entries for this book showed me how chaos can be less chaotic than it seems. I was struck by how much easier it was to fix these carelessly written diary entries than to fix

many troublesome passages that I'd written with more effort and care. At first glance the diary entries seemed much more chaotic: often hard to decipher, full of mistakes and changes of gear in mid-sentence. But a few slight changes—usually a matter of breaking each longer structure up into two or three sentences—and they came out simple and clear if not elegant. In contrast, the more careful passages seemed more coherent: though too muddy, heavy, or wordy, they were correct and decipherable. But when I try to make them simple and clear it is much much harder. In short the stream-of-consciousness diary entries, though they look on the surface like more of a mess, are really closer to strong coherence than the more carefully written sentences.

Insisting on control, having a plan or outline, and always sticking to it is a prophylactic against organic growth, development, change. But it is also a prophylactic against the experience of chaos and disorientation which are very frightening.

EMERGING CENTER OF GRAVITY

The turning point in the whole cycle of growing is the emergence of a focus or a theme. It is also the most mysterious and difficult kind of cognitive event to analyze. It is the moment when what was chaos is now seen as having a center of gravity. There is a shape where a moment ago there was none.

If you are having difficulty getting a center of gravity to emerge, the cure is to force yourself to make lots of summings-up even if they don't fit your material or seem to be right. In effect these early summings-up *are* centers of gravity but because they are so bad they don't feel like centers of gravity.

Getting order to appear in chaos takes practice. First you do it badly, gradually you do it better. If you refrain from doing it badly, you will never learn to do it at all.

What this means in practice is that in a piece of writing you must force yourself to keep getting *some* center of gravity or summing-up to occur. Let the early ones be terrible. They will distort your material by exaggerating some aspects and ignoring others. Fine. If possible, try for contrasting exaggerations. Exaggerating helps you think of things you wouldn't think of if you tried to be judicious. If you keep doing this you will finally evolve toward the more satisfactory position which earlier you couldn't get hold of. Finally you will have a center of gravity that satisfies you. Moderate views limit your horizons; trying to compromise muddles your head. Work gradually toward moderation from extreme positions. If a poem or story has no focus, try giving it exaggerated ones.

It may help if I list some ways in which a center of gravity emerged for me:

1. Simple reversal: starting to write X and seeing, through development of X, that Y is right. I couldn't get there directly. I remember I had even considered Y first, but I hadn't believed it. I had to go through X first before I could really understand Y.
2. Struggling back and forth between X and Y and coming up with Z. Not possible by a shorter cut.
3. Writing along and suddenly saying, "Ah! Now I see what I've been getting at."
4. Not seeing the point of what I had written till much later. Wrote the whole thing. Only after it was completely finished—or at least I thought it was all finished—and after putting it aside for some time, could I finally see that it

implied something I hadn't yet understood. It was so obvious then, but I couldn't see it earlier.

5. Having what seems like a good idea. Being very fond of it. But then seeing it as crap. Having nothing left, it seemed. Then finally seeing that there are some *parts* of the "good idea" that are good (or some senses in which it is true) and some parts bad. But I couldn't sort it out earlier. It had looked like only one idea. I didn't see it had parts. I felt I had either to throw it all away or endorse it completely. But by interaction with other, conflicting ideas, I was finally able to discriminate parts of the original idea and salvage the good parts and discard the others. Once I could make this discrimination, it seemed so natural: those good parts were so much better than that original "favorite idea."
6. Scaffolding. Writing X. It seems great. But then I find next day that it seems mediocre. But further writing produces an extension of it. That's better. The original was scaffolding that I had to use to get to the second one. Then throw it away.
7. Parentheses, digression, subset. Some little detail in what I was writing, perhaps just an image or phrase or parenthesis, seems to have a spark to it. I let it go and it ends up being the main point, the center of gravity. And what I had thought was the center of gravity turns out to be only a subsidiary part. The whole thing drastically changes its orientation. Even though most of the same elements are still there, it feels very different.

EDITING

You can't edit till you have something to edit. If you have written a lot, if you have digressed and wandered into some interesting areas and accumulated some interesting material (more than you can see any unity in), and if, at last, a center of gravity has emerged and you find yourself finally saying to yourself, "Yes, now I see what I'm driving at, now I see what I've been stumbling around trying to say," you are finally in a position to start mopping up—to start editing.

Editing means figuring out what you really mean to say, getting it clear in your head, getting it unified, getting it into an organized structure, and then getting it into the best words and throwing away the rest. It is crucial, but it is only the last step in the complete growth cycle.

Sometimes you can get a piece of writing to go through the whole cycle so naturally that even this last stage performs itself: you have written it, written it, and written it some more, and finally you find yourself writing it right. You simply throw away the first fifteen pages and keep the last three because they are just what you want.

This rarely happens with a whole piece of writing, but it often happens with sections: paragraphs or stanzas can come right off the end of your pencil just the way you want them. Look for it and want it. But usually you are writing something for tomorrow or next week and a completely natural growth cycle often takes longer.

Editing is almost invariably manipulative, intrusive, artificial, and compromising: red-pencil, cutting up, throwing away, rewriting. And mostly throwing away. For this process, follow all the standard advice about writing: be vigilant,

ruthless; be orderly, planned; keep control, don't lose your head. At last it is appropriate to sit, ponder, furrow your brow, not write, try to think of a better word, struggle for the exact phrase, try to cut out "dead wood," make up your mind what you really mean: all the activities which ruin your writing if engaged in too soon.

Sometimes I don't need to use an outline to do a good job of editing. But if I get the least bit stuck—knowing that it's not right but not sure what's wrong—then I find an outline indispensable: but only at this last stage of writing, not at early stages.

I used to think outlines were made of single words and phrases. But I found that's not good enough. I found the only effective outline to be a list of full assertions—one for each paragraph. Each must assert something definite, not just point in a general direction. Then the *progression* of assertions must make sense and say something so you can finally force that list of assertions into a *single assertion* that really says something. And now, having worked your way up, you can work your way down again to clean and tighten things up: with this single assertion, you can now reorder your list of paragraph assertions into a tighter order (probably leaving some out); and only now can you finally rewrite your actual paragraphs so they all reflect in their texture—at the cellular level—the single coherence of the whole piece.

The essence of editing is *easy come easy go*. Unless you can really say to yourself, "What the hell. There's plenty more where that came from, let's throw it away," you can't really edit. You have to be a big spender. Not tightass.

I am the first to admit how hard it is to practice this preaching. I know perfectly well I can write an infinite number of meaningful utterances in my native tongue in spite of my

finite knowledge of that language. I *know* perfectly well that the more I utter, the more I'll be able to utter and—other things being equal—the *better* I'll be able to utter. I know I can. Noam Chomsky knows I can. But it doesn't *feel* that way. It feels like the more I utter, especially the more I write, the more I'll use up my supply of meaningful utterances, and as the source dries up, they will get worse.

What is illustrated here is the essence of the developmental growth cycle for living cells. A difficulty in a later stage (editing) reveals a hitherto unnoticed difficulty at an earlier stage (producing). Progress is liable to require regression: experiencing the earlier stage difficulty more fully so it can be worked on. Or at least this is how it worked for me. I had figured out perfectly well the importance of writing a lot and producing a lot, but not until I began to see more clearly my difficulties with editing did I realize that I was being held up because I hadn't *really* inhabited fully my difficulties with producing. A relatively recent diary entry:

I'm reading over something I wrote a couple of days ago. Trying to turn it into a final draft. I was working on the phrase, "There is no principle of right or wrong, and no guidelines for trying to sort it out or bring consistency to it." I could feel immediately that it was wordy and mushy; fog for the reader. Next I find myself rewriting it as follows: "There's no right or wrong for sorting it out; no guidelines for bringing consistency." Yes, that's better, I start to say to myself, when I suddenly realize what I'm really doing. I'm working out a recombination of the words *in order not to have to throw any of them away*. I've done it a million times, but this is the first time I can feel the psychic principle in it: "How can I rearrange those words in order not to throw any of them away? I made those words. All by myself. They came out of me. And it was hell. I really suffered. I gave them my everything. For each word there were 17 traps and pitfalls that I just

barely avoided by my sharp-eyed vigilance, 17 agonizing choices, 17 near-misses. I struggled. I ain't getting rid of any of them. Get out of here with that knife."

Now that I have stressed the developmental fact that learning to throw away more ruthlessly comes from learning to generate more prolifically—that learning how to impose higher degrees of organization comes from allowing more disorder—I can go on to stress the fierceness of editing. For that's the difficulty of most advice about writing: because it doesn't do justice to the earlier, nonediting stages in the writing process, it doesn't *really* do justice to editing.

Editing must be cut-throat. You must wade in with teeth gritted. Cut away flesh and leave only bone. Learn to say things with a relationship instead of words. If you have to make introductions or transitions, you have things in the wrong order. If they were in the right order they wouldn't need introductions or transitions. Force yourself to leave out all subsidiaries and then, by brute force, you will have to rearrange the essentials into their proper order.

Every word omitted keeps another reader with you. Every word retained saps strength from the others. Think of throwing away not as negative—not as crumpling up sheets of paper in helplessness and rage—but as a positive, creative, generative act. Learn to play the role of the sculptor pulling off layers of stone with his chisel to reveal a figure beneath. Leaving things out makes the backbone or structure show better.

Try to *feel* the act of strength in the act of cutting: as you draw the pencil through the line or paragraph or whole page, it is a clenching of teeth to make a point stick out more, hit home harder. Conversely, try to feel that when you write in a mushy, foggy, wordy way, you must be trying to cover something up: message-emasculation or self-emasculation. You

must be afraid of your strength. Taking away words lets a loud voice stick out. Does it scare you? More words will cover it up with static. It is no accident that timid people are often wordy. Saying nothing takes guts. If you want to say nothing and not be noticed, you have to be wordy.

Editing means being tough enough to make sure someone will actually read it:

Don't look on throwing words away as something having gone wrong. To write ten pages and throw them away but end up with *one paragraph* that someone actually reads—*one paragraph that is actually worth sixty seconds of someone's time*—is a huge and magical and efficient process. The alternative which is much more common is to write (more carefully) five pages that *avoid the errors or egregious shit* of the above ten pages—but not *one single paragraph worth reading!* So though it seems that one has done better when one has five whole pages of non-shit, really it is utterly worthless since it's not worth reading.

In all three previous stages of growth, the emphasis is upon a transaction with yourself and with your words. In editing, you must finally deal with the hard reality of readers.

GROWING AS A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

If you want to adopt this approach to writing, there is no easy set of rules to follow. At different stages in the writing process you should be doing opposite things. And it is not always easy to know what stage you are at. No two pieces of writing, no two pieces of organic growth, will be exactly alike. And of course I may have some of it wrong here—or my growth cycle may be somewhat different from yours. Thus the main thing you must do if you want to help growing happen in your writ-

ing is to try to get a feel for the organic, developmental process. This means trying to get the feeling of a shape in the dimension of time—the shape of a set of changes occurring in a structure.

I first got the feeling for this model a few years ago when I was writing something that was very important to me. I had a lot of notes for it that contained everything I wanted to say. But these notes were jotted down over a period of weeks and were a random mess. I had to work hard for a full week or so trying to write these ideas up into something coherent. At the end I looked back at my original notes to see if I'd forgotten anything important. What struck me was how different and inferior they were. I had thought that everything in the paper was in the notes. But now as I looked back at the notes I saw they had a limited, different, and amazingly unuseful point of view. I suddenly realized that it was like looking back on something I'd written a couple of years ago: yes those were my ideas and my present ideas are related, but they've grown. In short I realized that in this intensive period of writing and throwing away and writing, it was as though I had succeeded in accelerating the passage of time and hastening the growth process.

It is the characteristic of living organisms, cell creatures, to unfold according to a set of stages that must come in order. The paradigm is the fetus going through all its stages. Freud's contribution is a developmental model for psychic unfolding: the organism must go through oral, anal, and genital stages of development. Erik Erikson makes a seven-stage model. Piaget makes a developmental model for cognitive growth.²

2. William Perry and his associates have a good book on the developmental process in college students: *Intellectual and Emotional Development in the College Years*, 1970.

The developmental model explains a lot about human affairs and makes many paradoxes come clear. The main thing is that these stages must all be gone through in order. None may be skipped. A person is held back from attaining a certain stage if he hasn't completed or done justice to some previous stage (even though it may not show on the surface). This means that if you are having difficulty becoming something, you ought to look to see if there isn't something you used to be that you haven't really finished being; or something you tried to skip. Have you been pretending or trying from the neck up to live at a later stage than you are really at? You probably have to allow yourself to *be* or *inhabit* this earlier stage more genuinely—without hedging or crossing your fingers behind your back. I think of the advice of Krishnamurti to a school child troubled by laziness: he says maybe the child isn't lazy *enough*.

Thus in writing, your words must go through stages. There are no shortcuts. (Though not every stage is necessarily overt: more about this under *Cooking*.) The stages may be gone through more quickly if you can muster the energy to have more experience per hour.

You will be tired, of course. But you will save some of the other kinds of energy that are so often wasted in writing. For from here we can see one of the main sources of frustration and despair in writing: trying to make the first version any good. One struggles to improve it and fix it. But really it can't be any good. It's got to be abandoned and moved past. Probably the second one too. And so the point is not to waste more time on it than is needed. Sketch it in roughly; move fast; not too much investment or commitment.

But there is a tricky line here. For you must spend *enough* time and effort to actually have it be a kind of version. You

can't actually *skip* it. Otherwise you are back in the original dead end: fooling around a little at the start but essentially trying to beat the development process and make your first version your last one—trying to skip adolescence again.

The developmental model gives an understanding of my main stuckpoint: again and again I start to move toward X; but then I feel it is no good; stop; try to see what a new idea or center of gravity is; I see Y; try that for a while, but then feel that there's something really bad about it; then the same for Z. And then here I am at my main stuckpoint. I feel caught in a great swamp. The moment I try to move toward X, Y, or Z, I see that each is no good. But I can't think of any more. I keep trying them and abandoning them over and over again. Get more and more tired, discouraged, head-swimming.

The problem is that I'm not taking any of them far enough. I let myself get stopped by feelings of wrongness. My critical and editorial instinct has rumbled into action too soon. For I've discovered that when I force myself to take one of those paths—it doesn't much matter whether I choose X, Y, or Z—and really develop that train of thought fully towards its end, it gets me out of the swamp. I have to *force* myself to do it against the horrible feeling that it is a waste of time. And usually it is indeed wrong. But I was caught in the swamp because I didn't allow it to *be* fully X, Y, or Z. And once I do—not of course writing out a fully polished draft—perhaps following it in a very sketchy way, roughly, hurriedly, *but to its end*—then I see a whole new direction to go in that I couldn't see before. (Or see how X, Y, or Z is indeed right.) I couldn't see it till I'd let the writing *be* one of its earlier stages.

Getting out of this swamp illustrates a crucial element in a piece of growth: a person grows more often by means of let-

ting something go than by taking something in. Growth usually *looks* as though it is a matter of taking something in, that is, "Hey, now he has a new idea, feeling, or perception he didn't have before—he's grown." But in most cases, the new element was already there waiting. We are usually faced all day with material and data which would enable us to grow at least two or three steps. If we get a "new" idea, or perception, almost invariably it's the third or seventeenth time we've encountered it. This time it *took*. This time growth occurred. What is really *new* is the letting go of an old perception, thought, or feeling which was really preventing assimilation of the "new" thing already waiting in the wings. Thus the crucial event in growing is often the beginning of a relinquishing: seeing the shabby side of an old idea or perception for the first time, seeing around it to its limits, seeing it in perspective, seeing it as a subsidiary of something else—and thus letting go a bit. Only this permits the restructuring necessary for taking in the new perception, idea, or feeling.

Here is where writing things down can accelerate growth. When you write things down—as long as you don't write them down with too much commitment—you are able to see them in perspective. It is as though holding onto that thought or perception were a burden for your mind. Writing is a setting down of that burden and it lets the mind take a rest from it. Now the mind can better see what is limited about it and take up a new thought or perception.

The main thing about a perception or thought that prevents growth is that you don't see it, you only see "through" it like a lens. It's not so much a thought as a way of thinking. You can see most of the thoughts you think or sights you see. But it's hard to see the *way* you think and see. But if you will get yourself to write freely and uncarefully you have a much bet-

ter chance of seeing these thoughts or perceptions that prevent growth.

In your effort to become sensitive to how writing develops through stages, try to feel how it operates on different time scales. I have been speaking of a short time scale and saying you must accept bad writing in order to end up with something better at the end of four hours or four days; that if you don't, you freeze the development of your words at a premature stage.

But you must develop a feel for the larger growth cycles too. Certain kinds of growth take longer. One has to be open and accept bad writing now—meaning *this year, this decade*—in order to get to good writing. I can now see that a lot of my stuck situations in writing come from trying to write something that I won't be able to write for another ten years: trying to avoid the voice and self I now have.

The Process of Writing—Cooking

GROWING is the overall larger process, the evolution of whole organisms. Cooking is the smaller process: bubbling, percolating, fermenting, chemical interaction, atomic fission. Cooking drives the engine that makes growing happen. It's because of cooking that a piece of writing can start out X and end up Y, that a writer can start out after supper seeing, feeling, and knowing one set of things and end up at midnight seeing, feeling, and knowing things he hadn't thought of before. Cooking is the smallest unit of generative action, the smallest piece of anti-entropy whereby a person spends his energy to buy new perceptions and insights from himself.

At first I thought that writing freely was the secret of cooking. If someone who has always written in a controlled way takes off the editorial lid, he tends to produce a burst of cooking. Yet often this is not enough in itself to produce cooking. Sometimes it just makes a barren mess.

Then I thought the heart of cooking was energy. It's true that it takes energy to cook. And sometimes a big burst of energy seems to be what makes cooking happen. But as everyone knows who has tried to write, sometimes no amount of energy suffices to get something written.

I think I've finally figured it out. Cooking is the interaction of contrasting or conflicting material. I try in what follows to specify various *kinds* of interaction that are important in writing. But in any of them cooking consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other.

COOKING AS INTERACTION BETWEEN PEOPLE

The original, commonest, easiest-to-produce kind of interaction is that between people. If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to. If they don't agree or have trouble understanding, so much the better—so long as their minds are not closed. This explains what happens to me and many others countless times: I write a paper; it's not very good; I discuss it with someone; after fifteen minutes of back-and-forth I say something in response to a question or argument of his and he says, "But why didn't you *say* that? That's good. That's clear." I want to shout, "But I *did* say that. The whole paper is saying that." But in truth the whole paper is merely implying or leading up to or circumnavigating that. Until I could see my words and thoughts refracted through his consciousness, I *couldn't* say it directly that way.

Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It's why brain-storming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of

what I said. Then *I* see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so *I*, in turn, can restructure what *I* first said. The process provides a continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther. This is the process by which a discussion or argument "gets somewhere"—and it shows clearly why some discussions get nowhere. When people are stubborn and narrow-minded, they refuse to allow the material in their head to be restructured by what the other person says: they simply hang on to the orientations they have and are too afraid to relinquish any of them.

COOKING AS INTERACTION BETWEEN IDEAS

Just as two people, if they let their ideas interact, can produce ideas or points of view that neither could singly have produced, a lone person, if he learns to maximize the interaction among his own ideas or points of view, can produce new ones that didn't seem available to him.

The way to do this is to encourage conflicts or contradictions in your thinking. We are usually taught to avoid them; and we cooperate in this teaching because it is confusing or frustrating to hold two conflicting ideas at the same time. It feels like a dead end or a trap but really it is the most fruitful situation to be in. Unless you can get yourself into a contradiction, you may be stuck with no power to have any thoughts other than the ones you are already thinking.

It turns out that in your normal round of thinking and perceiving—especially if you are trying to write—you drift into conflicts and contradictions all the time. If you don't seem to,

it merely means you have trained yourself not to see them. Follow streams of thought, metaphors and associations better—drift better—and look for disagreements rather than agreements.

One easy way to produce contrasting and conflicting ideas is just to write along, as in a ten-minute exercise, and let yourself drift in different directions. Even if you are sticking more or less to the same material, what you are writing will shift its organizing principle. Look at all your material in terms of one idea or organizing principle and then in terms of the other. Don't worry about the contradictions.

COOKING AS INTERACTION BETWEEN WORDS AND IDEAS, BETWEEN IMMERSION AND PERSPECTIVE

I've spent a lot of time in a debate with myself about whether it's better to work things out in the medium of words or in the medium of ideas and meanings.

When I first discovered the virtues of writing a lot I thought I had discovered that it was always a bad thing to work at the idea level, to make outlines, or to work in terms of "points" or meanings. And that it was always better just to keep on writing at the word level. I clung to this idea for a long time. Even in the face of huge word-swamps I got into and could scarcely get out of. "I haven't written things out in words *enough*," I said to myself. But finally I had to admit to myself that working in thoughts could be a good thing. Here is a diary entry from a time when this lesson was being driven home to me:

I'm stuck with a bad article. I'm trying to rewrite it and can't. It doesn't work; and I can't get anyone to publish it; I finally have

to admit that I can feel something weak and wrong or fishy about it. But I can't seem to improve it. Finally a breakthrough from translating my *words* into *thoughts*—forcing myself to restate in *simple brief* form the thoughts that exist in the thing—usually by paragraph: find plus-or-minus one thought in each paragraph. But only genuine thoughts. Be tough about admitting there's no thought in some paragraphs.

It's remarkably liberating. I realize I'd been hypnotized by the words, phrases and sentences I'd worked out with such pain—and I really like them and value them.

And so I came to decide they were both good, but for different purposes: perspective and immersion. Working in ideas gives you perspective, structure, and clarity; working in words gives you fecundity, novelty, richness. Two passages from one entry:

I was hung up in words, enmeshed in them and not seeing around them or with perspective. I cured it by getting *out from under* words and saying “but what *idea* is this really asserting?” . . . What is bad about this process of being mired up in the mess of words is what is good about it: when you are writing along, riding on the rhythms of speech and the energies of syntax, you often wander off the track. Even if you are writing from an outline, you still wander off the track. But this is precisely the process by which I come up with new ideas I could never have known to put in an outline.

But even that view of the two processes didn't always hold true. One day I was forced to notice that sometimes word-writing leads you to just the summing-up you were looking for and couldn't get by trying to “sum-up.” And sometimes idea-thinking produces fecundity by giving you a new angle where writing-out was keeping you stuck in one potato patch.

It wasn't till I figured out cooking as interaction that I

could finally understand the relationship between working in words and working in ideas: it's not that one is better than the other; not even that each has a different function. It's the interaction between the two that yields both clarity and richness—cooking. Start with whichever you prefer. But make sure you use both and move back and forth between them. For when you sum up a long set of words into a single thought (even if you do it badly), you always find new things in the words: new implications, relationships, and places where they don't make sense. And when you take a single thought and turn it into a full set of words—put it into someone's mouth—you also find things in that thought you hadn't seen before. Each time you switch modes, you get a new view and more leverage.

COOKING AS INTERACTION BETWEEN METAPHORS

Interaction between metaphors is interaction of the most fine-grained, generative sort. Make as many metaphors as you can. And analogies, comparisons, examples. Encourage them. Let them roll off your pencil freely. Too much. They produce interaction and cooking just as in the interaction between people or ideas. When you make a metaphor, you call something by a wrong name. If you make a comparison, an analogy, or an example, you are thinking of something in terms of something else. There is always a contradiction. You are not just calling a house a house, but rather a playground, a jungle, a curse, a wound, a paradise. Each throws into relief aspects of the house you might otherwise miss. You are seeing one thought or perception through the lens of another. Here

again is the essence of cooking. As in all cooking, new ideas and perceptions result. Connections are loosened so that something may develop or grow in whatever its potential directions are.

Don't make the mistake of thinking you are a "literal-minded person" who doesn't make metaphors: such people don't exist. It is well demonstrated that everyone dreams, and dreams are nothing but metaphors, comparisons, analogies, and examples. If you find it hard to use them, it merely means you are out of the habit of listening to them. Make the ones you can and keep trying to hold your mind open to register the others that are there.

Perhaps you've listened too much to warnings of mixed metaphors. A mixed metaphor is never bad because it's mixed, only because it's badly mixed. (This is only a consideration for final drafts: for earlier drafts, the more "bad" mixing, the better.) Anyone who is against mixed metaphors because they are mixed is like someone who is against kissing twice: he probably doesn't really like kissing once. He's entitled to his taste but he mustn't be taken as a judge of kisses.

COOKING AS INTERACTION BETWEEN MODES

Try to encourage the same thing with different modes or textures of writing. Allow your writing to fall into poetry and then back into prose; from informal to formal; from personal to impersonal; first-person to third-person; fiction, nonfiction; empirical, *a priori*. When it starts to change modes on you, don't shrink back and stop it. Let it go and develop itself in that mode. Even if it seems crazy. It will show you things about your material and help it to cook, develop, and grow.

First you are writing about a dog you had; then you are writing about sadness; then you are writing about personalities of dogs; then about the effect of the past; then a poem about names; then an autobiographical self-analysis; then a story about your family. Each way of writing will bring out different aspects of the material.

COOKING AS INTERACTION BETWEEN YOU AND SYMBOLS ON PAPER

Language is the principal medium that allows you to interact with yourself. (Painters do it with shapes and colors, composers with musical sounds.) Without a symbol system such as language, it is difficult if not impossible to think about more than one thing at a time, and thus to allow two thoughts to interact and cook. Putting a thought into symbols means setting it down and letting the mind take a rest from it. With language you can put an idea or feeling or perception into words—put it in your cud or put it in the freezer—and then go on to have a different one and not lose the first. In this way, you can entertain two thoughts or feelings at the same time or think about the relationship between two thoughts or feelings. A principle value of language, therefore, is that it permits you to *distance* yourself from your own perceptions, feelings, and thoughts.

Try, then, to write words on paper so as to permit an interaction between you and not-you. You are building someone to talk to. This means two stages: first put out words on paper as freely as possible, trying to be so fully involved that you don't even think about it and don't experience any gap between you and the words: just talk onto the paper. But then,

in the second stage, stand back and make as large a gap as you can between you and the words: set them aside and then pick them up and try to read them as though they came out of someone else. Learn to interact with them, react to them. Learn to let them produce a new reaction or response in you.

One of the functions of a diary is to create interaction between you and symbols on paper. If you have strong feelings and then write them down freely, it gives you on the one hand some distance and control, but on the other hand it often makes you feel those feelings *more*. For you can often allow yourself to feel something more if you are not so helpless and lost in the middle of it. So the writing helps you feel the feeling and then go on to feel the next feelings. Not be stuck.

NONCOOKING

You can help cooking happen by making it more overt. For this it helps to understand why cooking sometimes doesn't happen.

There are two kinds of noncooking. The first is when there aren't any contrasting or conflicting elements to interact. This is the situation when you know what you have to say, you say it, and it is perfectly straightforward. If you already have brilliant fully-cooked material lying around in your head, you are fine. But usually what you have isn't very interesting, satisfactory, or sufficient. You need better material, you need some good ideas, you need some good things to say. This can usually be cured by writing a lot, lifting the editorial lid, babbling or doing ten-minute exercises.

The first kind of noncooking is illustrated by a group of people who all agree with each other. No one can do anything

but nod his head or else say, "And here's another reason I agree with you." Sometimes you have the same effect when everyone is excessively "nice" and there is nothing but agreement in the room: no energy, no ideas, no different perceptions.

But there is a different kind of noncooking where there is plenty of conflicting material but it won't interact. This kind of noncooking can also be vividly illustrated by a group of people. This time the group is full of disagreement, but whenever someone starts to say something, he is immediately interrupted by someone else starting to say why he disagrees with what (he thinks) the person was starting to say. There is no fruitful interaction, there is none of the productive phenomenon of one idea or perception refracted or seen through the lens of another. There is only deadlock and stalemate. Two strong men arm-wrestling: great energy expended, muscles bulging, sweat popping out on the foreheads, but no movement.

I warm to this second sort of noncooking: being caught in irons between a lot of contrasting material but being unable to cook it. Instead of interacting, the material just locks horns. You start to follow one idea or train of thought or way of writing but then you see it's no good; then another, but you see it, too, doesn't work; then another and the same thing. You try the first one again, but don't get any farther. Frustration.

The problem of the argumentative group illustrates how to get cooking going. They need to stop all the interrupting and make sure each speaker finishes what he is saying before someone else speaks. In this way they can maximize the chance of one person's view actually getting inside the head of the other people and being transmuted or reoriented there.

So, too, if you are stuck because your ideas won't interact.

Take each idea singly. Pretend to espouse each one wholeheartedly. See everything in terms of it. Pretend you are a person who is convinced of it. This amounts to giving each idea a full hearing and insures that the interaction happens—that the other material is seen through its lens.

You get a similar kind of noncooking when there is no interaction between writing-out and summing-up—working in words and working in meanings. You start writing but before you get very far you stop writing because you sense something wrong. This happens again and again. I can only break out of this sort of noncooking—which is perhaps my major stuckpoint—if I quite consciously force myself to make the interaction overt in two painfully separated steps. This means that if I am writing I must consciously prevent myself from switching to the sitting-back-wondering-whether-it-makes-sense cycle. If I see it doesn't make sense I must keep writing—perhaps about *why* it doesn't make sense or if possible start saying things that do make sense. But not stop.

Only after a full cycle of writing—ten or twenty minutes at least—can I let myself stand back and think in perspective. And when I start this contrasting mode, I must also force myself to keep at it till it too completes its cycle. For example, I would *not* have brought the perspective cycle to completion if I simply ended up with "Causes of the French Revolution" or "Things I felt Monday afternoon when I walked along the river" or "Contrasts between this candidate and that candidate." None of those phrases has a verb. None says anything, asserts anything. I haven't yet finished sitting back and thinking what things add up to.

If you want to insure cooking you have to make more than one interaction: if you start with words, it's not good enough just to translate into assertions; it's the movement

from immersion to perspective and *then back to immersion*—or vice versa—that really strengthens and refines what you are producing. And the more transitions, the more strengthening, the more refining.

A stuckpoint:

All these ideas rolling around in my head about motives for teaching and reasons why my plan is good. I can find words for them separately but I am going crazy spending tons of time, because I can't write them down—can't figure out where to begin. It's like a tangled ball of string and I can't find the end. I can only find loops. If I were in a conversation or argument, I would express all these points—I could bring them out when they were needed in response to the words of the other person. But here I've got no other person. I feel like I'm in a terrible vacuum, in a sensory-deprivation room, trying to fight my way out of a wet paper bag when there are endless folds of wet paper and though I fight through each fold, there's still more soggy, dank, sodden, smelly paper hanging all over me.

Here was a situation where I let myself remain stuck at the same intermediate distance from my words: I allowed myself to remain halfway between dealing with my words as me and as not-me, instead of forcing an interaction between the two modes. I needed to get closer—write faster and make the words merely me; and then move back and treat them as not-me. By building someone to argue with, I would have managed to get all my ideas into words. Admittedly, they would have been a great mess—as in an argument—but eventually I would have seen some workable shape for what I was trying to say and finally would have found somewhere to start. (Or—if you want to see this as a problem in starting—I couldn't find a place to *start* until I started anywhere and wrote a great deal first.)

If you are having difficulty with a poem or story perhaps it

is a problem of noncooking. Perhaps you are not letting it go all the way toward being sad or happy or expressing some particular theme, because you feel that would be going too far: you don't want it to be that extreme. But you may not be able to cook it unless you allow each of the elements or themes or impulses to have its day. Let it go through two or three conflicting versions, or let it be grossly inconsistent from part to part. That's the way to maximize the interaction that will finally cook it down to what you want.

Out of this strategy for dealing with noncooking we can see a more universal piece of advice for all cooking and growing. Almost always it is good to use extremes and let moderation arrive eventually. Being in the middle is being stuck, barren, held between opposites. When there are cycles to be gone through, do each one to the extreme—keep yourself from being caught in the middle. You can't be a good, ruthless editor unless you are a messy, rich producer. But you can't be really fecund as a producer unless you know you'll be able to go at it with a ruthless knife.

DESPERATION WRITING

I know I am not alone in my recurring twinges of panic that I won't be able to write something when I need to, I won't be able to produce coherent speech or thought. And that lingering doubt is a great hinderance to writing. It's a constant fog or static that clouds the mind. I never got out of its clutches till I discovered that it was possible to write something—not something great or pleasing but at least something usable, workable—when my mind is out of commission. The trick is that you have to do all your cooking out on the table:

your mind is incapable of doing any inside. It means using symbols and pieces of paper not as a crutch but as a wheelchair.

The first thing is to admit your condition: because of some mood or event or whatever, your mind is incapable of anything that could be called thought. It can put out a babbling kind of speech utterance, it can put a simple feeling, perception, or sort-of-thought into understandable (though terrible) words. But it is incapable of considering anything in relation to anything else. The moment you try to hold that thought or feeling up against some other to see the relationship, you simply lose the picture—you get nothing but buzzing lines or waving colors.

So admit this. Avoid anything more than one feeling, perception, or thought. Simply write as much as possible. Try simply to steer your mind in the direction or general vicinity of the thing you are trying to write about and start writing and keep writing.

Just write and keep writing. (Probably best to write on only one side of the paper in case you should want to cut parts out with scissors—but you probably won't.) Just write and keep writing. It will probably come in waves. After a flurry, stop and take a brief rest. But don't stop too long. Don't think about what you are writing or what you have written or else you will overload the circuit again. Keep writing as though you are drugged or drunk. Keep doing this till you feel you have a lot of material that might be useful; or, if necessary, till you can't stand it any more—even if you doubt that there's anything useful there.

Then take a pad of little pieces of paper—or perhaps 3x5 cards—and simply start at the beginning of what you were writing, and as you read over what you wrote, every time you

come to any thought, feeling, perception, or image that could be gathered up into one sentence or one assertion, do so and write it by itself on a little sheet of paper. In short, you are trying to turn, say, ten or twenty pages of wandering mush into twenty or thirty hard little crab apples. Sometimes there won't be many on a page. But if it seems to you that there are none on a page, you are making a serious error—the same serious error that put you in this comatose state to start with. You are mistaking lousy, stupid, second-rate, wrong, childish, foolish, worthless ideas for no ideas at all. Your job is not to pick out *good* ideas but to pick out ideas. As long as you were conscious, your words will be full of things that could be called feelings, utterances, ideas—things that can be squeezed into one simple sentence. This is your job. Don't ask for too much.

After you have done this, take those little slips or cards, read through them a number of times—not struggling with them, simply wandering and mulling through them; perhaps shifting them around and looking through them in various sequences. In a sense these are cards you are playing solitaire with, and the rules of this particular game permit shuffling the unused pile.

The goal of this procedure with the cards is to get them to distribute themselves in two or three or ten or fifteen different piles on your desk. You can get them to do this almost by themselves if you simply keep reading through them in different orders; certain cards will begin to feel like they go with other cards. I emphasize this passive, thoughtless mode because I want to talk about desperation writing in its pure state. In practice, almost invariably at some point in the procedure, your sanity begins to return. It is often at this point. You actually are moved to have thoughts or—and the difference between active and passive is crucial here—to *exert*

thought: to hold two cards together and *build* or *assert* a relationship. It is a matter of bringing energy to bear.

So you may start to be able to do something active with these cards, and begin actually to think. But if not, just allow the cards to find their own piles with each other by feel, by drift, by intuition, by mindlessness.

You have now engaged in the two main activities that will permit you to get something cooked out on the table rather than in your brain: writing out into messy words, summing up into single assertions, and even sensing relationships between assertions. You can simply continue to deploy these two activities.

If, for example, after that first round of writing, assertion-making, and pile-making, your piles feel as though they are useful and satisfactory for what you are writing—paragraphs or sections or trains of thought—then you can carry on from there. See if you can gather each pile up into a single assertion. When you can, then put the subsidiary assertions of that pile into their best order to fit with that single unifying one. If you *can't* get the pile into one assertion, then take the pile as the basis for doing some more writing out into words. In the course of this writing, you may produce for yourself the single unifying assertion you were looking for; or you may have to go through the cycle of turning the writing into assertions and piles and so forth. Perhaps more than once. The pile may turn out to want to be two or more piles itself; or it may want to become part of a pile you already have. This is natural. This kind of meshing into one configuration, then coming apart, then coming together and meshing into a different configuration—this is growing and cooking. It makes a terrible mess, but if you *can't* do it in your head, you have to put up with a cluttered desk and a lot of confusion.

If, on the other hand, all that writing *didn't* have useful material in it, it means that your writing wasn't loose, drifting, quirky, jerky, associative enough. This time try especially to let things simply remind you of things that are seemingly crazy or unrelated. Follow these odd associations. Make as many metaphors as you can—be as nutty as possible—and explore the metaphors themselves—open them out. You may have all your energy tied up in some area of your experience that you are leaving out. Don't refrain from writing about whatever else is on your mind: how you feel at the moment, what you are losing your mind over, randomness that intrudes itself on your consciousness, the pattern on the wallpaper, what those people you see out the window have on their minds—though keep coming back to the whateveritis you are supposed to be writing about. Treat it, in short, like ten-minute writing exercises. Your best perceptions and thoughts are always going to be tied up in whatever is really occupying you, and that is also where your energy is. You may end up writing a love poem—or a hate poem—in one of those little piles while the other piles will finally turn into a lab report on data processing or whatever you have to write about. But you couldn't, in your present state of having your head shot off, have written that report without also writing the poem. And the report will have some of the juice of the poem in it and vice versa.

THE GOAL IS COOKING

Desperation writing seemed magic. As though I had found secret powers and was getting something for nothing: new ideas where formerly I was barren; structure where formerly I re-

mained stuck in chaos. Gradually I began to fear there must be some catch—I would be punished for violating nature, my own powers would be cut off:

It's scary. I think I'm developing a dependency on this prosthesis for the mind. My mind is turning to slush. I can no longer seem to hold three ideas in my mouth at the same time like I used to. I'm always resorting to prosthesis. And I can't seem to make myself write well any more. I just write flabby, mushy, soupy. No backbone in my head. I'll go blind and insane if I indulge myself in this easiness—if I continue to use this crutch, my organs will dry up and atrophy.

Is it really true? I think I'm able to do more complicated things now—work at a higher level—but is this wishful thinking to disguise the fact that I'm writing badly and slowly and something seems screwed up about my attempts to write this book?

As far as I can tell I still have all my powers. But I was right to sense something was fishy. It is possible to abuse this approach and I was tending to do so. The mistake hinged on failing to distinguish between *cooking* and *external cooking*. Since external cooking got me out my bind, I mistook it for the goal. Finally I began to distinguish the two.

I may be falling in love with the process, the externalizing of the organic process outside the organism. But it's only the means to an end: cooking. If you're not cooking, externalize it to make it happen; but once you get yourself cooking, don't make the mistake of thinking that it's better to have it external; the truth is that it's better to have it *internal*: things cook at a hotter temperature and you get a more permanent, magical, fine-grained, extensive transmutation of elements than you could ever get externally.

The extreme of external cooking is “desperation writing,” which I have just described. The extreme of internal cooking is what I call “magic writing”: cooking which is wholly internal, hidden, and sometimes instantaneous. I think of Mo-

zart writing out a completed symphony as fast as he could write; or A. E. Housman ending up with a perfectly polished poem after a lunch of beer and a sleepy walk in the sun.

External cooking is like mixing up dry ingredients in a bowl, whereas internal cooking is like dissolving them in water so they integrate at the molecular level. Internal cooking produces more force and voice in the words: this integrated texture is more clear and powerful; every cell of the final product contains a plan or microcosm (gene) of the whole. This is why freewriting can produce writing that is better than most slow careful writing.

Also, internal cooking is in fact quicker and takes less energy. External cooking is like low gear on a bicycle. When you first discover low gear, it seems as though you are getting something for nothing: you now easily conquer a hill you couldn't get up before. But in actual fact, if you had been able to *stay* in high gear, you would have gotten up the hill with less energy. It was wasteful to take all those strokes in that lower gear. But you would have had to be *much* stronger to save this energy. (Only the rich can afford to economize.) Similarly, internal cooking means getting the whole pot boiling at once and having it go through changes as a whole. Whereas external cooking means taking it into separate little pots and cooking each one with less fuel—but the total fuel bill is greater. You save energy if you cook the whole thing at once—and spill less, too—but you need a bigger burst of energy or strength. And you need to endure a hotter temperature.

Moral: use external cooking when you need it. Be good at using it. Use it especially to get cooking going. But don't think you can use it to beat the system and avoid cooking. If you want to write, you must cook. There is always a *crunch* in

writing. The crunch feels to me like lifting the Empire State building; like folding up a ten-acre parachute on a windy field. You can't avoid the crunch. It takes heat, electricity, acid to cook. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. If you don't like the excitement or energy that is building up in your guts, your head, your forearms, it is possible to abuse external cooking and use it to dissipate this heat, acid, electricity.

The important thing, then, is not these specific practices I have described which are usually ways to produce external cooking. Cooking is the goal. Concentrate on trying to get a feel for cooking—for words and ideas interacting into a higher, more organized state. Govern your behavior according to the principle that whatever makes it happen is right for you and whatever gets in its way is wrong.

But I would stress that for most people—that majority of people who have trouble writing—external cooking usually increases cooking. It gets you cooking at last. It sets higher but reachable standards for you: you insist on cooking whatever you write. If you get to the point where you are abusing it—where you are cooking too many things in thimbles with matches when you could actually throw it all into a pressure cooker and put the heat on high—you will know it and move in that direction.

COOKING AND ENERGY

This model helps you understand the relationship of energy or exertion to writing. It takes energy to make material end up more organized than it started—to go against the grain of things or swim upstream. But it also takes energy to sit around

trying to cook and not succeed. It is important to begin to get the feel for different kinds of energy expenditure in your writing so you can grow wiser about when you are wasting your time.

—There is the energy of being stuck: trying to cook when you can't. Perhaps you are at the early stage where you can't find words at all; or later when there are many words and much material, but you are stuck and unable to bring any shape or coherence to them. This is wasted energy. Get cooking going.

—The energy of trying to make a lousy first draft good: trying to avoid cooking. You are not willing to put out energy, to build up the heat. You might as well get up and stop writing till you are willing.

—The energy of internal or magic cooking. It is somewhat mysterious but you are sitting on heat or acid and it is working on the material. You are writing and it is coming out well. Or you are not writing—sitting or walking around—but you can feel it bubbling inside. Things are going well. You can feel it's not wasted energy even if you are not writing.

—The energy of external cooking. Getting yourself to write a lot. Whenever you bog down, getting yourself either to start writing things out or summing them up. Using lots of paper. Producing a lot you know isn't good which you know you will have to throw away. It's inefficient compared to perfect internal cooking. But it's very efficient compared to not cooking. And you can make it lead to internal cooking.

Many people have what is almost an inverse relationship between energy and results. A writing session either "goes well" or it doesn't: either they write something relatively

quickly and relatively easily and it comes out well; or else it's no good, and it gets no better no matter how hard they work on it. What this means is that they can cook *only* internally, otherwise they are stuck. But if you can feel better how energy relates to various kinds of cooking, you can avoid this situation, make writing less mysterious, and make your results more proportional to the energy you put in.

ADVERTISEMENT: I used to find writing exhausting. Then I figured out how to grow and cook it. I still find writing exhausting. But now I write more and better and even finish things.

GOODNESS AND BADNESS

Some readers feel I am asking them to write as badly as possible. I am not. Your goal is good writing. The mind is magic. It can cook things instantaneously and perfectly when it gets going. You should expect yourself at times to write straight onto the paper words and thoughts far better than you knew were in you. You should look for it and want it. To expect anything less is to consider yourself brain-damaged.

But a person's best writing is often all mixed up together with his worst. It all feels lousy to him as he's writing, but if he will let himself write it and come back later he will find some parts of it are excellent. It is as though one's best words come wrapped in one's worst. For most people, some of their strongest sounds, rhythms, and textures—and some of their best insights—only occur when they stop censoring and write carelessly. Yet when they stop censoring, of course, they will produce some of their worst.

We all tend to believe in word-magic: if I think words, my mind will be tricked into believing them; if I speak those words, I'll believe them more strongly; and if I actually write them down, I am somehow secretly committed to them and my behavior is determined by them. It is crucial to learn to write words and not believe them or feel hypnotized at all. It can even be good practice to write as badly or as foolishly as you can. If you can't write anything at all, it is probably because you are too squeamish to let yourself write badly.

WHY THE OLD, WRONG MODEL OF WRITING PERSISTS

If the picture I am giving of the writing process is correct and the one I am fighting is wrong, this fact itself needs explaining. Is it possible that people can persist for such a long time believing that you reach up to touch the floor? There are various reasons.

For one thing, the old two-step model—the meaning-into-words model—is not really wrong, it's simply not complete. For in almost any piece of writing, the last stage of the growth process—the mopping up or editorial stage—is just what the old model describes: get your meaning straight and then find the best words. Of all the steps in the growth cycle, this one is the most obvious because it is the most conscious and manipulative. Thus people easily mistake it for the writing process itself.

For another thing, instead of recognizing cooking and growing as a coherent process, most people simply experience them as some kind of *absence* of coherent process: as inspiration, as a lucky mess, or as a disaster. When you start out try-

ing to write X and it comes out Y—and it happens quickly and you like Y—you are apt to call it inspiration. We call it inspiration and feel an external source of enlightenment because it is an extreme case of the words, thoughts, and images cooking and growing according to their own plan. People try to heighten inspiration by procedures which inhibit the conscious, manipulative, and planning parts of the self (that is, by taking drugs, being drunk, or writing while half-asleep).

When you start out trying to write X and it comes out Y—and you like Y, but it took a long, chaotic, wandering, swampy path to get there—you tend to call it a lucky mess. You say to yourself, "Isn't it amazing that I came up with something good when I'm so disorganized and careless. I didn't follow my outline at all. (Or I'm so sloppy I didn't even make an outline.) I guess I'm naturally unfitted for writing. Next time I better be careful and write the way you're supposed to."

The most frequent result of cooking and growing, however, is that they are mistaken for disaster and stamped out. On the level of the sentence, it is the familiar case of a sentence starting out one way, slipping in the middle, and starting to come out different. Familiar enough: cross it out, wrench it back into line. At the level of a whole piece or section, you are writing X, you are well along the way, you have struggled hard to figure out what you are trying to say, and struggled hard to make all those sentences say it. And now you are in the middle of some sentence which suddenly starts to imply Y. What's worse is that this sentence makes you suspect it is right and X is wrong! But you've invested so much in all those sentences. You either call yourself an idiot and rip it up in disgust and go to bed saying the hell with it. Or else, since you need the piece tomorrow, you try to pretend you didn't

hear that sentence whispering Y. You try to tuck everything Y under the rug and hope the reader won't notice.

And so, because cooking and growing are not recognized as good when they *do* occur, they don't occur enough. Millions of people simply don't write: they find it too frustrating or unrewarding simply because they cannot make cooking happen. Also there are many people who succeed in following the old model. They patch up, mop up, neaten up the half-cooked and unsatisfactory ideas they find lying around in their head. What they write is boring and obvious. Schools often reward boring obvious writing. Then there are the tiny minority of cases in which someone finds already lying around in his head something brilliant and interesting. And so he too can write according to the old model.

One other reason for the persistence of the old model: it promises structure and control and that's just what you yearn for when you're having trouble with writing.

CONCLUSION

If you have a way of writing that works well for you, keep it (and teach it to others). But if you have difficulty with writing, try this model and try to understand your difficulty as a problem in cooking or growing.

Make writing a global task, not a piecemeal one. All parts of a piece of writing are interdependent. No part is done till all parts are done. If you think there are four sections in what you have to write, the worst thing you can do is write them separately so you finish one before going on to the next. This prevents interaction, cooking, growing. Make yourself sketch in all four parts quickly and lightly; then work some more on

each part, letting it go where it needs to; continue improving all the parts; and only finish one part when you are also ready to finish the others. The thing may grow into five parts or two parts (and it's got to grow, also, into a unity). Or even if it stays in four parts, your working out of part four is necessary before you can really work out the first part right.

You don't have to give up the satisfaction that comes from getting a task partly done. But change the model: get that satisfaction from finishing a run-through of the *whole thing*, not finishing the first section.

If this long story of writing-as-growing-and-cooking seems complicated, there are really only two main points:

1. Cooking means getting material to interact. The interaction that is most important to me is the interaction between writing out and summing up (working in words and working in meanings). If you are having trouble with your writing, try to increase the interaction of these two processes. Avoid doing all writing or doing all sitting-back-thinking. And above all avoid being caught in the middle where you write only a couple of sentences and stop and wonder and worry. Make each cycle complete: at least ten minutes of involved writing; then stop completely to see what it all adds up to or is trying to add up to.
2. Growing means getting words to evolve through stages. The growing stage I find most important is writing a lot. If you can get yourself writing a lot, this will spur the other growing processes (encouraging chaos, finding a center of gravity, and editing). Here are some concrete suggestions if you have difficulty writing a lot:
 - a) Simply stop and do a strict ten-minute writing exercise. Because these exercises are governed by rigid rules, last only ten minutes, and ask you to write absolutely any-

thing, they make it easier for you to deal with whatever static in your head is tying your tongue.

- b) Talk to yourself in your writing. If you stop involuntarily in the middle of a sentence when you suddenly see it's turning out stupid or wrong, force yourself to keep writing and write to yourself whatever it is you have to say about that sentence: why it is stupid or wrong, how you noticed it, whatever. This activity helps more than any other to keep me from bogging down. It frees my voice and my writing. It breaks down the barrier that says I keep my real words to myself and only write "prepared" words for my audience.
- c) Don't let beginnings be a problem. Write through them by brute force. I often have to use all-purpose beginnings: "And another thing . . ."; "The thing of it is . . ."; "What I want to talk about is . . ."; "You want to know something?" At the end you can write better beginnings.
- d) If you are stuck badly, pretend you are with a person or an audience and you only have a half-hour to tell them what you have to say. Of course you *should* have it perfectly prepared, but since you don't, you've simply got to start somewhere, anywhere, and keep writing, hemming and hawing, getting it out somehow. You may have to force yourself by using a watch and really only giving yourself that half-hour. It's the sort of process in which after you've been going for fifteen or twenty minutes it often happens that you write, "Yes, now I see what it is that I'm trying to tell you; now I see the point of all this." This is just what you are trying to make happen, but it won't happen unless you plunge in and just write.

- e) If you are even more stuck and you think that the act of writing itself is causing more static than is worth fighting, you can do the same thing talking. But you must be strict or it doesn't work. You must set out the clock, talk *out loud*, and keep talking as though there were someone listening and no place to hide.
- f) If, no matter what you try, you still can't write, then don't call it writing. Get up and do something else. Don't sit down with pencil and paper till you are prepared to write. A part of you is refusing to write, and if that part of you is so strong that it is calling the shots, you had better start listening to it. Find out why it refuses. That "it" is you.