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Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence

As a boy I never wanted to grow up to be a writer, or—God forbid—an author. I wanted to be a newspaperman, and the newspaper I wanted to be a man on was the *New York Herald Tribune*. Reading it every morning, I loved the sense of enjoyment it conveyed. Everyone who worked on the paper—editors, writers, photographers, make-up men—was having a wonderful time. The articles usually had an extra touch of gracefulness, or humanity, or humor—some gift of themselves that the writers and editors enjoyed making to their readers. I thought they were putting out the paper just for me. To be one of those editors and writers was my idea of the ultimate American dream.

That dream came true when I returned home from World War II and got a job on the *Herald Tribune* staff. I brought with me my belief that a sense of enjoyment is a priceless attribute for a writer or for a publication, and I was now in the same room with the men and women who had first put that idea in my head. The great reporters wrote with warmth and gusto, and the great critics and columnists like Virgil Thomson and Red Smith wrote with elegance and with a mirthful confidence in their opinions. On the "split page"—as the first page of the second section was called, when papers only had two sections—the political column of Walter Lippmann, America's most venerated pundit, ran above the one-panel cartoon by H. T. Webster, creator of "The Timid Soul," who was also an American institution. I liked the insouciance that presented on the same page two features so different in gravity. Nobody thought of hustling Webster off to the comics section. Both men were giants, part of the same equation.

Among those blithe souls a city-desk reporter named John O'Reilly, who was admired for his deadpan coverage of human-interest and animal-interest stories, managed to make whimsy a serious beat. I remember his annual article about the woolly bear, the caterpillar whose brown and black stripes are said to foretell by their width whether the coming winter will be harsh or mild. Every fall O'Reilly would drive to Bear Mountain Park with the photographer Nat Fein, best known for his Pulitzer Prize–winning shot of Babe Ruth's farewell at Yankee Stadium, to observe a sample of woolly bears crossing the road, and his article was written in mock-scientific museum-expedition style, duly portentous. The paper always ran

the story at the bottom of page one under a three-column head, along with a cut of a woolly bear, its stripes none too distinct. In the spring O'Reilly would write a follow-up piece telling his readers whether the woolly bears had been right, and nobody blamed him—or them—if they hadn't. The point was to give everybody a good time.

Since then I've made that sense of enjoyment my credo as a writer and an editor. Writing is such lonely work that I try to keep myself cheered up. If something strikes me as funny in the act of writing, I throw it in just to amuse myself. If I think it's funny I assume a few other people will find it funny, and that seems to me to be a good day's work. It doesn't bother me that a certain number of readers will not be amused; I know that a fair chunk of the population has no sense of humor—no idea that there are people in the world trying to entertain them.

When I was teaching at Yale I invited the humorist S. J. Perelman to talk to my students, and one of them asked him, "What does it take to be a comic writer?" He said, "It takes audacity and exuberance and gaiety, and the most important one is audacity." Then he said: "The reader has to feel that the writer is feeling good." The sentence went off in my head like a Roman candle: it stated the entire case for enjoyment. Then he added: "Even if he isn't." That sentence hit me almost as hard, because I knew that Perelman's life contained more than the usual share of depression and travail. Yet he went to his typewriter every day and made the English language dance. How could he not be feeling good? He cranked it up.

Writers have to jump-start themselves at the moment of performance, no less than actors and dancers and painters and musicians. There are some writers who sweep us along so strongly in the current of their energy—Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Toni Morrison, William F. Buckley, Jr., Hunter Thompson, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers—that we assume that when they go to work the words just flow. Nobody thinks of the effort they made every morning to turn on the switch.

You also have to turn on the switch. Nobody is going to do it for you.

Unfortunately, an equally strong negative current—fear—is at work. Fear of writing gets planted in most Americans at an early age, usually at school, and it never entirely goes away. The blank piece of paper or the blank computer screen, waiting to be filled with our wonderful words, can freeze us into not writing any words at all, or writing words that are less than wonderful. I'm often dismayed by the sludge I see appearing on my screen if I approach writing as a task—the day's work—and not with some enjoyment. My only consolation is that I'll get another shot at those dismal sentences tomorrow and the next day and the day after. With each rewrite I try to force my personality onto the material.

Probably the biggest fear for nonfiction writers is the fear of not being able to bring off their assignment. With fiction it's a different situation. Because

authors of fiction are writing about a world of their own invention, often in an allusive style that they have also invented (Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo), we have no right to tell them, "That's wrong." We can only say, "It doesn't work for me." Nonfiction writers get no such break. They are infinitely accountable: to the facts, to the people they interviewed, to the locale of their story and to the events that happened there. They are also accountable to their craft and all its perils of excess and disorder: losing the reader, confusing the reader, boring the reader, not keeping the reader engaged from beginning to end. With every inaccuracy of reporting and every misstep of craft we can say, "That's wrong."

How can you fight off all those fears of disapproval and failure? One way to generate confidence is to write about subjects that interest you and that you care about. The poet Allen Ginsberg, another writer who came to Yale to talk to my students, was asked if there was a moment when he consciously decided to become a poet. Ginsberg said, "It wasn't quite a choice—it was a realization. I was twenty-eight and I had a job as a market researcher. One day I told my psychiatrist that what I really wanted to do was to quit my job and just write poetry. And the psychiatrist said, 'Why not?' And I said, 'What would the American Psychoanalytical Association say?' And he said, 'There's no party line.' So I did."

We'll never know how big a loss that was for the field of market research. But it was a big moment for poetry. There's no party line: good advice for writers. You can be your own party line. Red Smith, delivering the eulogy at the funeral of a fellow sports-writer, said, "Dying is no big deal. Living is the trick." One of the reasons I admired Red Smith was that he wrote about sports for 55 years, with grace and humor, without succumbing to the pressure, which was the ruin of many sportswriters, that he ought to be writing about something "serious." He found in sportswriting what he wanted to do and what he loved doing, and because it was right for him he said more important things about American values than many writers who wrote about serious subjects—so seriously that nobody could read them.

Living is the trick. Writers who write interestingly tend to be men and women who keep themselves interested. That's almost the whole point of becoming a writer. I've used writing to give myself an interesting life and a continuing education. If you write about subjects you think you would enjoy knowing about, your enjoyment will show in what you write. Learning is a tonic.

That doesn't mean you won't be nervous when you go forth into unfamiliar terrain. As a nonfiction writer you'll be thrown again and again into specialized worlds, and you'll worry that you're not qualified to bring the story back. I feel that anxiety every time I embark on a new project. I felt it when I went to Bradenton to write my baseball book, *Spring Training*. Although I've been a baseball fan all my life, I had never done any sports reporting, never interviewed a professional athlete. Strictly, I had no credentials; any of the men I approached with my notebook—managers, coaches, players, umpires, scouts—could have

asked, “What else have you written about baseball?” But nobody did. They didn’t ask because I had another kind of credential: sincerity. It was obvious to those men that I really wanted to know how they did their work. Remember this when you enter new territory and need a shot of confidence. Your best credential is yourself.

Also remember that your assignment may not be as narrow as you think. Often it will turn out to touch some unexpected corner of your experience or your education, enabling you to broaden the story with strengths of your own. Every such reduction of the unfamiliar will reduce your fear.

That lesson was brought home to me in 1992 when I got a call from an editor at *Audubon* asking if I would write an article for the magazine. I said I wouldn’t. I’m a fourth-generation New Yorker, my roots deep in the cement. “That wouldn’t be right for me, or for you, or for *Audubon,”* I told the editor. I’ve never accepted an assignment I didn’t think I was suited for, and I’m quick to tell editors that they should look for someone else. The *Audubon* editor replied—as good editors should—that he was sure we could come up with something, and a few weeks later he called to say that the magazine had decided it was time for a new article on Roger Tory Peterson, the man who made America a nation of birdwatchers, his *Field Guide to the Birds* a best-seller since 1934. Was I interested? I said I didn’t know enough about birds. The only one I can identify for sure is the pigeon, a frequent caller at my Manhattan windowsill.

I need to feel a certain rapport with the person I’ll be writing about. The Peterson assignment wasn’t one that I originated; it came looking for me. Almost every profile I’ve written has been of someone whose work I knew and had an affection for: such creative souls as the cartoonist Chic Young *(Blondie)*, the songwriter Harold Arlen, the British actor Peter Sellers, the pianist Dick Hyman and the British travel writer Norman Lewis. My gratitude for the pleasure of their company over the years was a source of energy when I sat down to write. If you want your writing to convey enjoyment, write about people you respect. Writing to destroy and to scandalize can be as destructive to the writer as it is to the subject.

Something came up, however, that changed my mind about the *Audubon* offer. I happened to see a PBS television documentary called *A Celebration of Birds*, which summed up Roger Tory Peterson’s life and work. The film had so much beauty that I wanted to know more about him. What caught my attention was that Peterson was still going at full momentum at 84—painting four hours a day and photographing birds in habitats all over the world. That *did* interest me. Birds aren’t my subject, but survivors are: how old people keep going. I remembered that Peterson lived in a Connecticut town not far from where our family goes in the summer. I could just drive over and meet him; if the vibrations weren’t right, nothing would be lost except a gallon of gas. I told the *Audubon* editor I would try something informal—“a visit with Roger Tory Peterson,” not a major profile.

Of course it did turn into a major profile, 4,000 words long, because as soon as I saw Peterson's studio I realized that to think of him as an ornithologist, as I always had, was to miss the point of his life. He was above all an artist. It was his skill as a painter that had made his knowledge of birds accessible to millions and had given him his authority as a writer, editor and conservationist. I asked him about his early teachers and mentors—major American artists like John Sloan and Edwin Dickinson—and about the influence of the great bird painters James Audubon and Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and my story became an art story and a teaching story as well as a bird story, engaging many of my interests. It was also a survivor story; in his mid-80s Peterson was on a schedule that would tax a man of 50.

The moral for nonfiction writers is: think broadly about your assignment. Don't assume that an article for *Audubon* has to be strictly about nature, or an article for *Car & Driver* strictly about cars. Push the boundaries of your subject and see where it takes you. Bring some part of your own life to it; it's not your version of the story until you write it.

As for *my* version of the Peterson story, not long after it ran in *Audubon* my wife found a message on our home answering machine that said, "Is this the William Zinsser who writes about nature?" She thought it was hilarious, and it was. But in fact my article was received by the birding community as a definitive portrait of Peterson. I mention this to give confidence to all nonfiction writers: a point of craft. If you master the tools of the trade—the fundamentals of interviewing and of orderly construction—and if you bring to the assignment your general intelligence and your humanity, you can write about *any* subject. That's your ticket to an interesting life.

Still, it's hard not to be intimidated by the expertise of the expert. You think, "This man knows so much about his field, I'm too dumb to interview him. He'll think I'm stupid." The reason he knows so much about his field is because it's his field; you're a generalist trying to make his work accessible to the public. That means prodding him to clarify statements that are so obvious to him that he assumes they are obvious to everyone else. Trust your common sense to figure out what you need to know, and don't be afraid to ask a dumb question. If the expert thinks you're dumb, that's his problem.

Your test should be: is the expert's first answer sufficient? Usually it's not. I learned that when I signed up for a second expedition into Peterson territory. An editor at Rizzoli, the publisher of art books, called to say that the firm was preparing a coffee-table volume on "The Art and Photography of Roger Tory Peterson," with hundreds of color plates. An 8,000-word text was needed, and as the new Peterson authority I was asked to write it. Talk about hilarious.

I told the editor that I made it a point never to write the same story twice. I had written my *Audubon* article as carefully as I could the first time and wouldn't be able to rework it. He would be welcome, however, to acquire and reprint my article in his book. He agreed to that if I would write an additional 4,000 words—

invisible weaving—that would deal mainly with Peterson's methods as an artist and a photographer.

That sounded interesting, and I went back to Peterson with a new set of questions, more technical than the ones I had put to him for *Audubon*. That audience had wanted to hear about a life. Now I was writing for readers who wanted to know how the artist created his art, and my questions got right down to process and technique. We began with painting.

"I call my work 'mixed media,'" Peterson told me, "because my main purpose is to instruct. I may start with transparent watercolors, then I go to gouache, then I give it a protective coat of acrylic, then I go over that with acrylics or a touch of pastel, or colored pencil, or pencil, or ink—anything that will do what I want."

I knew from my earlier interview that Peterson's first answer was seldom sufficient. He was a taciturn man, the son of Swedish immigrants, not given to amplitude. I asked him how his present technique differed from his previous methods.

"Right now I'm straddling," he said. "I'm trying to add more detail without losing the simplified effect." Then he stopped again.

But why did he feel that he needed more detail at this late point in his life?

"Over the years so many people have become familiar with the straight profile of my birds," he said, "that they've begun to want something more: the look of feathers, or a more three-dimensional feeling."

After we got through with painting we moved on to photography. Peterson recalled every bird-shooting camera he ever owned, starting at age 13 with a Primo #9, which used glass plates and had bellows, and ended with praise for such modern technology as auto-focus and the fill-in flash. Not being a photographer, I had never heard of auto-focus or the fill-in flash, but I only had to reveal my stupidity to learn why they are so helpful. Auto-focus: "If you can get the bird in your viewfinder the camera will do the rest." Fill-in flash: "Film never sees as much as you see. The human eye sees detail in the shadows, but the fill-in flash enables the camera to pick up that detail."

Technology, however, is only technology, Peterson reminded me. "Many people think good equipment makes it easy," he said. "They're deceived into thinking the camera does it all." He knew what he meant by that, but *I* needed to know why the camera doesn't do it all. When I pressed him with my "Why not?" and my "What else?" I got not just one answer but three:

"As a photographer, you bring your eye and a sense of composition to the process, and also warmth—you don't shoot pictures at high noon, for instance, or at the beginning or the end of the day. You're also mindful of the quality of light; a thin overcast can do nice things. Knowledge of the animal is also a tremendous help: anticipating what a bird will do. You can anticipate such activities as a feeding frenzy, when birds feed on fish traveling in small groups. Feeding frenzies are important to a photographer because one of the basic

things birds do is eat, and they'll put up with you a lot longer if they're eating. In fact, they'll often ignore you."

So we proceeded, Mr. Expert and Mr. Stupid, until I had extracted many ideas that I found interesting. "I go halfway back to Audubon," Peterson said —*that* was interesting—"so I have a feeling for the changes that have taken place because of the environmental movement." In his boyhood, he recalled, every kid with a slingshot would shoot birds, and many species had been killed off or brought close to extermination by hunters who slaughtered them for their plumes, or to sell to restaurants, or for sport. The good news, which he had lived long enough to see, was that many species had made a comeback from their narrow escape, helped by a citizenry that now takes an active role in protecting birds and their habitats. Then he said: "The attitude of people towards birds has changed the attitude of birds towards people."

That was interesting. I'm struck by how often as a writer I say to myself, "That's interesting." If you find yourself saying it, pay attention and follow your nose. Trust your curiosity to connect with the curiosity of your readers.

What did Peterson mean about birds changing their attitudes?

"Crows are becoming tamer," he said. "Gulls have increased—they're the cleanup crew at garbage dumps. The Least Tern has taken to nesting on top of shopping malls; a few years ago there were a thousand pair on the roof of the Singing River Mall in Gautier, Mississippi. Mockingbirds are particularly fond of malls—they like the planting, especially the multiflora rose; its tiny hips are small enough for them to swallow. They also enjoy the bustle of shopping malls—they sit there and direct the traffic."

We had been talking for several hours in Peterson's studio. The studio was a small outpost of the arts and sciences—easels, paints, paintbrushes, paintings, prints, maps, cameras, photographic equipment, tribal masks, and shelves of reference books and journals—and at the end of my visit, as he was walking me out, I said, "Have I seen everything?" Often you'll get your best material after you put your pencil away, in the chitchat of leave-taking. The person being interviewed, off the hook after the hard work of making his or her life presentable to a stranger, thinks of a few important afterthoughts.

When I asked whether I had seen everything, Peterson said, "Would you like to see my collection of birds?" I said I certainly would. He led me down an outside staircase to a cellar door, which he unlocked, ushering me into a basement full of cabinets and drawers—the familiar furniture of scientific storage, reminiscent of every small college museum that never got modernized. Darwin might have used such drawers.

"I've got two thousand specimens down here that I use for research," he told me. "Most of them are around a hundred years old, and they're still useful." He pulled open a drawer and took out a bird and showed me the tag, which said ACORN WOODPECKER, APRIL 10, 1882. "Think of it! This bird is 112 years old," he said. He opened some other drawers and gently held several other late Victorians for

me to ponder—a link to the presidency of Grover Cleveland.

The Rizzoli book, with its stunning paintings and photographs, was published in 1995, and Peterson died a year later, his quest finally over, having sighted "scarcely more than 4,500" of the world's 9,000 species of birds. Did I enjoy the time I spent on the two articles? I can't really say I did; Peterson was too dour for that, not much fun. But I enjoyed having brought off a complicated story that took me outside my normal experience. I also had bagged a rare bird of my own, and when I put Peterson away in a drawer with my other collected specimens, I thought: that was interesting.