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English 600

November 20, 2002

Understanding the Life of the Writer: Analyzing the Writing Lives of Stephen King and Anne Lamott Depicted in their Celebrated Works on Writing

During the Spring of 1996, I had the opportunity to hear contemporary novelist, Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* among other novels, speak at an evening program at one of the local high schools in Indianapolis, where I was living at the time. An aspiring writer, I took copious notes as she described in detail how she goes about the writing process, even helping us to see bits of autobiography in each of her published works. Hearing a “real writer” speak about the process of writing just as I would have spoken about my own occupation suddenly made my dream of becoming a writer seem possible.

The problem, however, with the “dream becoming reality” theme of my experience hearing Tan speak about writing is that it has not actually turned out that way. In the six and a half years since that convocation, I’ve had two short non-fiction pieces published and have a plastic storage bin filled with short story, novel and article manuscripts in various stages of completeness. But not by even the furthest stretch of the novelist’s imagination could I see my life as having any similarity with the writing life of Amy Tan. But perhaps that is not even what she imagined when she scribbled, “To Charity—Joy in Writing. Amy Tan,” in my newly purchased paperback copy of *The Joy Luck Club*. If not, what does a popular author, like Tan, hope to accomplish by speaking or writing on the writing life? And just as important, what do readers, critics, or even aspiring writers like me hope to learn in listening to these writers?

Although many courses, articles, texts, lectures, videos, essays and other forms of media have been produced about the specific *craft* of writing—addressing issues of style, grammar, form, plot, theme, etc., writers have another way of talking about writing. This other way is how Tan talked about her writing in the lecture I attended and involves more than just the words that are written. This way of talking about writing is about the life that is lived, even written, in the process. It's the writing life. According to Jo Brans, writer and former college professor, in her book, *Listen to the Voices*, “In some mysterious but significant fashion, beyond style and craft, the writer and the work are one” (xiii). This mystifying union is the writing life. Bran defines this mystery further by quoting Leon Edel, a Henry James biographer. “A writer writes out of his whole physical as well as mental being” (Bran xiv). When writers write or talk about the craft of writing, they are helping others learn how to write. But when writers write or talk about the writing life, they are helping others learn how to live. Bran continues, “I share with many people the idea that great writers know something that I need to know to help me live more fully” (xxiii).¹

But to assume that all writers have such noble intentions when they sit down to write about the challenges of the writing life is to overlook the powerful influences of commercial interest and self-aggrandizement. And equally dangerous is the assumption that all readers who pick up such a book or who attend a lecture are looking for a “fuller” life. In fact, many readers who read a book about the writing life are probably looking for the secret to getting into the “club” of published writers. The idea of one struggling saint holding out a hand to help another struggling saint may actually be far from the reality of authors who publish books on the writing life and those who read them. By examining two such recent works by contemporary, popular American authors, Stephen King and Anne Lamott, I hope to arrive at some understanding of the

purposes writers have in authoring books about the writing life. Additionally, I hope to move a little closer in understanding how these intentions influence who reads these books and how the books should be interpreted.

King and Lamott both published their books on the writing life, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* and *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, respectively, in the last decade after several other successful works in their careers. Born in Maine in 1947, King, known primarily for his works in the horror and fantasy genres, is estimated to earn more than \$40 million a year from writing, a big leap from his first big paperback sell, \$400,000 for *Carrie*, in 1974 (Dubner n.p.). He has written more than 35 book-length works under his own name and the pseudonyms Richard Bachman and John Swithen. His books are regularly listed on *The New York Times* Bestseller List, and many of them also have been adapted into screenplays, including the recent *The Green Mile* and *Hearts in Atlantis*. *On Writing*, published in 2000, is his contribution to the growing collection of books on the writing life.

Seven years after the birth of King, Lamott was born in San Francisco, California. Her father, Kenneth Lamott, was a professional non-fiction writer (Pearlman 150). Although not as prolific as King—Lamott has written only five mainstream fiction novels and three book-length works of nonfiction, probably best classified as memoirs—she also has been listed on *The New York Times* Bestseller List. *Bird by Bird* was published in 1995.

Little connects these writers other than their efforts to capture the writing life in book form. Both writers did begin writing at a very young age: six for King, seven or eight for Lamott. Also, both writers struggled with alcoholism and drug use early in their adult lives and writing careers. But most importantly, both writers seem to have both a personal and professional interest in discussing the writing life, as indicated by the numerous interviews and articles on the

topic by both authors before and after their celebrated works were published. Defining this interest of each writer, however, becomes very complicated.

Books about the writing life necessarily attempt to do two things at once: talk about the writing lives of the authors themselves while applying the authors' lessons and insights to the writing life in general, providing a practical application for readers. While we see both of these dynamics at work in both Lamott's and King's celebrated works, by zooming out from these particular texts and examining the lives and other works of these authors in a larger context, each author actually fulfills one purpose better than the other.

King's *On Writing* is definitely a book more about the writing life of Stephen King than a guide to the writing life for would-be writers. King himself wrestles briefly with his purpose in the "First Foreword" of the book. He recalls a conversation he had with his author friend, Amy Tan, the same Amy Tan who inspired my interest in the writing life, about questions they never get asked by fans during Q-and-A sessions following writer's talks. "No one ever asks about the language," Tan lamented to her friend. In his foreword, King said hearing Tan say that helped clarify to him why he wanted to write a "little book about writing." "I had been playing with the idea of writing a little book about writing for a year or more at that time, but had held back because I didn't trust my own motivations—why did I want to write about writing? What made me think I had anything worth saying?" (King, *On* 8). He said the easy answer was that as a writer who had sold as many books as he had, he must have something worthwhile to say. But his popular success, according to King, was not enough to justify to himself why he should write a book on the writing life. But when he thought about the "language," apparently that was reason enough. "But Amy was right: nobody ever asks about the language. They ask the DeLillos and the Updikes and the Styrons, but they don't ask popular novelists. Yet many of us proles also

care about the language, in our humble way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper. What follows is an attempt to put down, briefly and simply, how I came to the craft, what I know about it now, and how it's done. It's about the day job; it's about the language" (King, *On* 9). One problem for King, however, is if no one is asking him about "the language," why does he feel the need to write an entire book about it? What is he trying to prove?

One thing that he proves unwittingly is that perhaps he has not been asked about "the language" for good reason. For the book that follows is much less about the language than about the man, Stephen King. He does seem sincere in his foreword; he seems actually to want to write about the questions people never ask him, about the craft he has devoted his life to. But what he does in *On Writing* is to address all the questions people have asked him, the questions (and answers) which have appeared in the numerous published articles, interviews, and speeches by and about Stephen King. The first section of the book is about his life, beginning with his childhood experiences, which has been written about extensively in biographies of King, such as Sharon Russell's "The Life of Stephen King," chapter one of *Stephen King: A Critical Companion*. He also talks about the early jobs he had supporting his family, the events leading up to the publication of *Carrie*, even the legendary story of his wife, Tabitha, finding the first four pages of *Carrie* crumpled up in the trash can, as the short story King initially abandoned. But books like George Beahm's *The Stephen King Companion* and King's own article, "On Becoming a Brand Name," published in *Adelina* in 1980, have already covered how he came to the craft. And as for what he knows about the craft and how it's done, in the sections of the book specifically devoted to writing, he often begins each chapter referring to the questions he is commonly asked, questions already answered in recorded interviews like "The Author Talks:

Stephen King” or “Author Luncheon: Stephen King,” which are available on audiocassette.

This book about *his* writing life seems to be King’s opportunity to defend the career that has been so variously received and has become larger than King himself. King says he wants to answer the questions no one ever asks, but then goes ahead and answers the ones that *have* been asked. But in reading between the lines, readers can find answers to unasked questions. They are the questions King himself wants to ask but never has, at least not outloud: Why can’t I be the one to tell my own story? Why can’t I be loved by the public and by the critics? Why can’t I write for the love of the craft and the money? For King, this is the writing life. When introducing King when he spoke at Princeton University in 1997, Joyce Carol Oates, a Princeton professor and writer, said there are three Stephen Kings. “There are Stephen King the individual, Stephen King the literary and cultural phenomenon, and Stephen King the writer” (Beahm, *Stephen* 165). And the three Stephen Kings seem to be fighting for a voice in *On Writing*.

To start, it seems “Stephen King the individual” just wants to be able to tell his own story of coming to fame, even though it has been told before by numerous biographers. But many of these biographies were not approved by King. In *Stephen King from A to Z: An Encyclopedia of His Life and Work*, author George Beahm, who has written many books about King, cites two instances of King’s distaste for others who try to tell his story. According to Beahm, when King learned that he was to be the subject of another book by Stephen Spignesi, who already had written several trivia books and articles about the author, King sent a note to Spignesi saying he was “less than thrilled to be on the market again not as a writer with a book but as the subject of a book—a commodity to be pawed over like used goods at a church rummage sale” (Beahm 24). Beahm also quotes King’s friend, Peter Straub, who commented on King’s feelings about Beahm himself: “It was my general impression that Steve King maintained a sensible abhorrence of

those useless and parasitic folks who tried to make money or a name for themselves by trailing after him, however idolatrously, and sorting out the crumbs he happened to drop. The books were what mattered, not trivia” (Beahm 19). King’s jealousy over his own life story seems to be more than a matter of privacy, however. Although the Straub quote does refer to King’s “Maine sense” of keeping to himself, the language from these two quotes above suggest that King is more concerned with financial gain certain biographers make off his life than with people actually knowing his story. Referring to his distaste at becoming a “commodity” at a “church rummage sale” and for having his “crumbs” picked over, King also seems to be troubled by a lack of control he no longer possesses over his own story when it is being told again and again in an unauthorized way. Perhaps King would have told the story differently if he could have told it first, but by the time he tells his own story in *On Writing*, readers were already familiar with it. Telling his own story any differently than it had already been told before would have made King seem like he was making a commodity of himself.

“Stephen King the literary and cultural phenomenon” seems to have his own agenda in composing *On Writing*. While enjoying great popular success, at least in terms of total revenues generated by his books and movies, King is less than satisfied with the critical reception he has had. The tongue-in-cheek reference to himself and other popular authors as “proles” in the previously mentioned foreword to *On Writing* make clear that King does not agree with what critics have had to say about his career. Beahm quotes King from a 1991 *Publisher’s Weekly* interview lamenting his lack of critical success:

I’d like to win the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, the Nobel Prize, I’d like to have someone write a *New York Times Book Review* piece that says, ‘Hey, wait a minute, guys, we made a mistake—this guy is one of the great writers of

the 20th century.’ But it’s not going to happen, for two reasons. One is I’m not the greatest writer of the 20th century, and the other is that once you sell a certain number of books, the people who think about ‘literature’ stop thinking about you and assume that any writer who is popular across a wide spectrum has nothing to say (Beahm 127).

In that interview, King also said he wants to “build a bridge between wide popularity and a critical acceptance” (Beahm 127). His desire to please two different audiences with two totally different sets of tastes seems ironic, however. Critical success for King would likely mean less power, less publicity, and less pocket change, all of which are important to his current career status. Without considering the alternative, King wants it all.

As early as 1980, just six years after the publication of his first novel, King was already becoming frustrated with the critical snubbing he was receiving. In his previously mentioned article, “On Becoming a Name Brand,” King says, “The idea that success in itself can hurt a writer is as ridiculous and as elitist as the commonly held belief that a popular book is a bad book—the former belief presumes that writers are even more corruptible than, say, politicians, and the latter belief presumes that the level of taste in the world’s most literate country is illogically low. I don’t—and perhaps can’t, as a direct result of what I’m doing—accept either idea” (King, “On Becoming” 69). Although this same defensive stance runs throughout *On Writing*, King comes right out and reveals his agenda in a short introduction to the third section of the book he calls “On Writing.” Here, he says,

Critics and scholars have always been suspicious of popular success. Often their suspicions are justified. In other cases, these suspicions are used as an excuse not to think . . . I expect to be accused by some of promoting a brainless and happy

Horatio Alger philosophy, defending my own less-than-spotless reputation while I'm at it, and of encouraging people who are 'just not our sort, old chap' to apply for membership at the country club. I guess I can live with that (King, *On* 143-144).

This class consciousness seems to have become a major theme in King's views of his own success. Although he himself grew up in a working class home and still seems to consider himself a "regular" guy, reaching an enormous, "everyday" public comprising people "like himself" but not also receiving attention from the elite literati seems very unsatisfactory to him.

King blames other factors, in addition to his popular success, in his being condemned by critics, including the genre he writes in—he refers to horror as “across the track on the poor side” in the “town” of American Literature (Grant 16)—and the length of his books—“I think very long books, one like this [*The Stand*] that weighs two pounds, are a personal affront to reviewers with all the other books they have to read” (Grant 10). But whatever excuses he gives, having only popular success and not critical success frustrates King. According to Peter Straub, in his introduction to King's *Secret Windows*, the Book-of-the-Month Club's companion volume to *On Writing*, “In the arts, commercial popularity has no direct bearing on quality, but neither, despite all evidence to the contrary, does it guarantee inferiority. This assumption, that success=meretriciousness, has dogged King all of his writing life and lies behind much of the AwShucks attitude he expresses here and there in this volume” (Straub xviii). King knows that critics think he cannot write, and that even for his efforts in *On Writing* he will be criticized: “Like the town whore trying to teach women how to behave” (Dubner n.p.). But as much as he condemns the critics for not liking his work, he still seems intent on earning their approval. A few years ago, he

and writing ally, John Grisham, “paid their own way to the National Book Awards, in sly protest of being perennially unconsidered” (Dubner n.p.).

The final question King seems to inadvertently answer in *On Writing*, the aspect that “Stephen King the writer” actually addresses, is why he can’t write for the love of the craft *and* the money. The issue of money seems to be one that constantly comes up for King, and over the years, he has spoken on the issue out of both sides of his mouth. In a 1977 introduction to a collection of short stories, *Night Shift*, King says, “I didn’t write any of the stories which follow for money, although some of them were sold to magazines before they appeared here and I never once returned a check uncashed” (King *Night* 26). In a 1979 interview, King says, “And you know, I’m not the only writer in the history of the world that wrote for money instead of the art but sometimes the two of them come together” (Wolinsky 23-24). And the ambivalence continues: in the 1980 “On Becoming a Brand Name,” he says, “I have written seriously since I was twelve, and to me that means that I always wrote in order to make money,” and then in 1987 in “The Author Talks,” King says, “Money is very handy, but you don’t do it for the money or you’re a monkey.” And there are other references to money in many other interviews and articles.

Obviously, King himself is not sure what he really thinks about the matter of money. But “Stephen King the writer” seems to want to make a final statement about the role money plays in his career in *On Writing*: “Yes, I’ve made a great deal of dough from my fiction, but I never set a single word down on paper with the thought of being paid for it. I have done some work as favors for friends—logrolling is the slang term for it—but at the very worst, you’d have to call that a crude kind of barter. I have written because it fulfilled me. Maybe it paid off the mortgage on the house and got the kids through college, but those things were on the side—I did it for the

buzz. I did it for the pure joy of the thing” (249). But though he tries to make a final statement on the matter, even as late as 1998, in an interview with Muriel Gray, he still went back and forth between writing because he loves the craft and writing because he loves the money. “It’s [writing] what I’m supposed to do and when I’m doing it, I’m delighted. And I’m very fortunate because, I shouldn’t say this, but I’d do it for free! Buy the book okay! [laughs] I have one kid in college and other kids that need things from time to time. And my wife has a huge family of relatives. But I would do it for free because it buzzes me. It gets me off. I like it” (Gray, “Night” 383). “I’d do it for free” but “Buy the book”? Still no easy answer.²

Whereas King’s *On Writing* might be better titled *On Being Stephen King*, Lamott’s celebrated book on writing seems to be less complicated in its intentions: to try to explain the writing life to aspiring writers. Ironically, Lamott weaves more of her own life throughout the book than King, who divides writing and living into sections, but in doing so, Lamott gives readers more of the sense that being a writer really is something they can do too rather than just something she has done. The primary difference between the two works is a sincerity that Lamott demonstrates through honest evaluation of her life and work. Unlike King, whose different selves seem to have subversive agendas in *On Writing*, for Lamott, there is a straightforward, “what you see is what you get” stance. Maybe it is because, also unlike King, her life has not been scrutinized so closely by fans sifting through her garbage, critics have generally admired her work (except for her third novel, *Joe Jones*, for which Lamott says she was critically “trashed” [Reichl n.p.]), and choosing between the love of writing and the money has not been much of an issue in her career. Or maybe it is because Lamott feels a sense of responsibility to her readers to let them know what the writing life is really all about, and she sees herself as a sort of “representative writer.”

Writing can help make sense of the world and give you direction and company and solace. Everyone who wants to write should get to. But many people are so burdened by perfectionism, and by this fantasy that published writers must know what they are doing every step of the way, that I wanted to sort of help them to find the crumbs that would bring them to that path of getting a little work done every day for the rest of their lives whether they get published or not,” she said. “I have this sick semi-Messianic thing inside of me that wants to try to save the world (Reichl n.p.).

She isn't a representative writer of any specific *type* of writer as much as she represents that part of *every* writer that struggles with the writing life. She herself has struggled to admit that even after publishing several books, writing still was not easy for her, and she wants other writers to be able to see this reality and move beyond it so that the rewards of writing will outweigh the difficulties.

Her *Bird by Bird* is written from material she first developed for writing workshops she led, which she calls “kind of a stand-up, performance art thing I do” (Fisk 56). After her first non-fiction book, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, reached the *New York Times Bestseller List*, she suddenly had a broader audience for her idiosyncratic presentation about writing. Although her publisher, Pantheon, had in mind to follow *Operating Instructions* with a work of fiction, the time seemed right for *Bird by Bird*, a good choice since it sold more than 200,000 copies, twice as many as *Operating Instructions* (Jones n.p.). According to *New York Times* reviewer Carol Muske Dukes, the years of teaching writing workshops helped Lamott to stockpile “a bag of tricks, which are not so much exercises as attitudes—the ‘short assignment’ epitomized by a one-inch picture frame (just fill that amount of space with

words), for example, or the use of index cards, both of which make writing less intimidating” (n.p.). But though she has the “tricks” to break down the writing life into manageable pieces, she does not sugarcoat it. “Writing, she makes clear, is not for the fainthearted, the easily bored, the fame-seeking. It is not for individuals who cannot face up to their own madness” (Dukes n.p.).

Because she wants to honestly portray the writing life, Lamott writes honestly about the negative and positive aspects of being a published author. One clear message she tries to get across to readers is that publication is not the only goal, maybe not even a reasonable goal at all, for writing. She begins part four of *Bird by Bird*, “Publication and Other Reasons to Write,” with this caution:

Publication is not going to change your life or solve your problems. Publication will not make you more confident or more beautiful, and it will probably not make you any richer. There will be a very long buildup to publication day, and then the festivities will usually be over rather quickly. We will talk about all of this at great length shortly. In the meantime, let’s discuss some of the other reasons to write that may surprise a writer, even a writer who hasn’t given up on getting published (Lamott 185).

This advice seems rather dubious, coming from a successful published author, until Lamott explains in an interview what the publication process does for her every time one of her books is scheduled for release. “Normally when I have a book coming out I become mentally ill about three months before—waiting for the pre-pub reviews and waiting to see if it’s going to do okay and whether I’m going to end up in a tenement or chained to the walls of a mental institution because the disappointment was too intense” (Fisk 62).

But the rewards, as Lamott describes them, are equally as intense. “Writing functions for

me in terms of helping me find out who we are, how to live, and why we're here," she said in a documentary film by Frieda Mock. "I have everything I ever wanted. I can't believe I turned out this well. I got to be a writer when I grew up" (Mock). She concludes *Bird by Bird* with similarly redeeming views of writing: "The best thing about being an artist, instead of a madman or someone who writes letters to the editor, is that you get to engage in satisfying work. Even if you never publish a word, you have something important to pour yourself into" (Lamott 236).

Although it is easy to see different intentions in King and Lamott in composing their works about the writing life, negotiating these differences for readers is more challenging. Since King does seem to be writing more of a defense of *his* writing life, *On Writing* may appeal more to readers and fans already familiar with his work. Whereas, Lamott seems to be speaking more universally about *the* writing life, reaching an audience much larger than would have previously been familiar with her work (she sold twice as many copies of her writing book than even her previous *New York Times* bestseller). But that's not to say each writer does not also hope to appeal to a different audience, and in doing so could not also benefit those readers. Personal acquaintances of mine who had never read any other of King's works were recommending the book because of some of his helpful advice to writers. And the lengthiest section of his book is about putting words on a page, with examples from well-known authors. And though I came to Lamott first through *Bird by Bird*, understanding more about her as a writer has helped me better appreciate her other works, both fiction and nonfiction.

But whether these writers are defending their own careers or are explaining sincerely the difficulties of the writing life, readers need to approach these works cautiously. If these two books teach readers nothing else, they should learn that the writing life is highly individual. No two writers come to the life or walk away from it in exactly the same way. Unless readers have

read more than one book on the writing life, however, the lesson may go unnoticed. For a significant amount of each book is written in the second person as imperatives. “You must tell the truth,” King commands (186), and “I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing?” Lamott asks. (99). Lamott sometimes mentions in her book that this is just how writing works for her, but it doesn’t seem to be as much of a warning that writing is an individual experience as it is an attempt to debunk the romantic myths of writing, like “For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous” (22). And occasionally Lamott points out to readers that they may experience the writing life differently than she does, but these seem to be more about goading readers to be honest with themselves rather than recognition that the process may vary: “I’m sure nothing like this [the urge to shoot in the head all of the ‘voices’ that criticize the writer during the process of composing] would ever occur to you” (27). But King, of the two writers, seems more conscientious that he is presenting just one perspective on the writing life, warning his readers occasionally that this is just what works for him: “You should realize that I’m only talking about my own personal mode of writing here; in actual practice, rewriting varies greatly from writer to writer” (King 209). The fact that King issues these warnings from time to time may indicate at least a partial awareness on his part that some readers will not understand the individualistic nature of writing.

Another reason readers should be cautious about buying all of King’s, Lamott’s, or any other writer’s advice on writing wholesale is that in the process of trying to capture the essence of the writing life, every author necessarily omits certain aspects. Autobiography becomes a type of fiction in its incompleteness. What may have seemed an insignificant or unrelated facet of their writing lives by the authors and was thus left out may have been the exact encouragement a reader was looking for in trying to discover the writing life for himself. Or perhaps the opposite

would be true. King himself struggles with this aspect of writing about his own life several years before he attempted his autobiographical *On Writing*. In an interview with Tony Magistrale, published in *Stephen King: The Second Decade, Danse Macabre to The Dark Half*, King says, “I don’t belong writing about myself or about things that have happened to me. I’ve written nonfiction, but I’ve never written nonfiction specifically about myself. I’ve written about everything from book censorship to my son’s championship Little League season. That’s fine. But to write specifically about my own life, even then I find myself fictionalizing. If I do touch on some person experience, I find myself making things up” (12). For a number of reasons, there is likely a fictional element to all nonfiction—every recollection of events and information in a specific format for a specific purpose is a re-creation, or a rewriting. But for novelists who are accustomed to finessing and embellishing for the sake of the story, the risk seems even greater. And so a deeper interpretation of these books on the writing life, beyond what has been written to what has not been written, is possible.

But not only *can* these authors’ intentions be interpreted in more than the obvious way, perhaps they *should be* reinterpreted in order to truly understand the contribution these writers are making. In the case of *On Writing*, to condemn King for taking the opportunity to defend his writing life to critics, readers, and himself is to plead guilty to the very accusation that King makes against the critics. His popular success does not preclude him from having important things to say about the writing life or the craft of writing. If he really cares about the language as he says he does, then writers and readers alike can learn something from *On Writing*, besides the details of his life and career. And perhaps because of Lamott’s sincerity, it is easy to overlook the fact that in order to get her publisher, Pantheon, to accept *Bird by Bird*, for publication, she wielded the offer she had received from another publisher to manipulate the negotiation. The

irony is that though she says publication is not a satisfying goal of writing, she herself was not satisfied just to teach workshops about the writing life; she wanted her thoughts to be published as well. Neither readers nor critics, nor even the authors themselves, may ever fully understand the intentions behind these works. Nor can they fully anticipate who may read these books.

For those who do read these works, however, a few things are a little clearer. Authorial intention in works on the writing life can be helpful in understanding how much of the advice or insight to rely on. Equally important for readers is to understand that the writing life is a complicated calling that requires different levels of intensity from each person who attempts to follow it. But while the writing methods and lifestyles of Lamott or King may not work for everyone, they have been “proven” as legitimate means for getting work done and supporting oneself as a writer. Readers may find that some of the advice *does* work for them too. Also, in every author’s attempt to describe the writing life, two versions must be negotiated: the narrative of *that author’s* life, and the principles that apply to *every author* attempting to do a little writing every day.

Weaving these principles into the theoretical and practical fabric of my own writing life has required great patience. Initially the works of Lamott and King were inspirational—much like my initial encounter with the subject at Amy Tan’s lecture. Their works on the writing life gave me the impression that it was a one-size fits all calling, only confirming the many strategic moves I had made throughout my life to position myself for eventual full-time writing. However, the more I analyzed the lives of these authors beyond their celebrated works on writing and the more I observed the role of writing in my own life, the less I thought of myself as a “real” writer. I don’t write everyday (as both writers strongly suggested); I don’t even want to write everyday. I have several other priorities that often consume my time. Also, as much as I want to think of

myself as a “creative writer” and as much as I enjoy reading novels and short stories, I have a really hard time writing fiction. Doing so doesn’t help me understand the world or myself any better. Personal essays do that for me. Also, writing inspirational articles, poems and journal entries provide a creative space for me to make sense of what is going on inside and around me, but not fiction of the sort Lamott or King write. I also have a difficult time imagining a situation in which I would ever be happy spending a large part of every day alone—as both of these writers seem to do. And so, I went from inspiration to desperation. I would never be a writer.

But then the real message of these books broke through, the message the writers themselves may have been unaware they were communicating. The writing life is a self-defined calling. My friend, Kathy, whose only writing project is her memoir gets to call herself a writer just as much as prolific novelists like King. And my friend Maurice, who writes everyday but so far has few publishing credits to his name, he’s a writer too. And I’m a writer—even if I never have another piece published, even if I don’t even write everyday, and even if I only write non-fiction essays. These authors are correct on both counts about the writing life: it is difficult, and it is worth it. But the difficulties and the rewards are different for me than for either of them. That’s the true message of these books. In other words, though Amy Tan, Anne Lamott, and Stephen King all have a way of living and writing that will never be true for me, I can take some of the principles they have shared—drawing on my life experiences as idea fodder for articles, letting my greater love of writing carry me through the times when getting words on paper is challenging, speaking from a particular cultural perspective—and get a little farther in the writing life than I was before—to have “joy in writing.”

NOTES

¹ Brans also talks about another reason readers want to hear from their favorite authors. Being “brought up on the New Critical sufficiency of the text,” she understood that it was not necessary to talk with her favorite authors in order to love their books. But still she wanted to meet them and talk with them about the writing life. (She says the interviews she began having with various authors about the writing life were not originally even intended for publication.) The other reason, the one Brans doesn’t quite articulate fully, is what she calls “having a touch of Holden Caulfield in my makeup.” “In *Catcher in the Rye*, you will remember, Holden says, ‘What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it’” (Brans xv).

² In a 1980 interview with a writer from *The Boston Phoenix*, just six years after King stormed onto the book market with *Carrie*, King said, “Writers are not stars; they’re not supposed to be stars. It’s a thing that will play itself out in time. It’ll pass” (Chute 103). However, the fame has not passed. In fact, in an Aug. 13, 2000, profile of King in *The New York Times*, writer Stephen J. Dubner says that it is attention that actually motivates King’s career, far more than money. “If King’s Internet orgy [self-publishing a novella on his personal web space] proves anything, it’s that he likes attention, a lot. What doesn’t drive King is money” (Dubner n.p.). King’s obvious ambivalence between critical and popular success and writing for the money and writing for the craft are not unique to him or even new for writers. Author Ernest Hemingway was one of the first American authors to be documented in the midst of this struggle. Hemingway rose in fame in the 1920s and 1930s with his *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises*. Although he claimed to write for the “art” and to abhor the publicity that was increasingly coming to him, he also seemed to promote it with his “larger than life” existence. According to Leonard Leff, in his book *Hemingway and His Conspirators*, “Hemingway had often chided Scribner’s for the very publicity he had aroused or generated. Not unexpectedly, then, he denounced Hollywood—publicly—for the press releases that told entertaining stories about him. But the rebuke was too little, too late. He now had the international fame that he had abhorred and wanted, and feared, the personal rather than literary fame that would so wound him and his work. He was now and forever a star” (xviii).

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