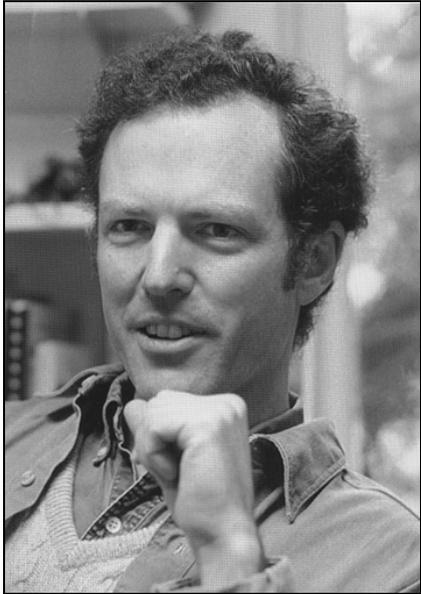


Selections from Kim Stafford, *The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft* (University of Georgia Press, 2003). Stafford is the director of the Northwest Writing Institute.



Writing Daily, Writing in Tune

Once there was a physicist who played the violin. One morning he took his fiddle to the lab, wrapped it green with felt, clamped it gently in a vise, and trained the electron microscope close on the spruce belly, just beside the sound-hole, where a steel peg was set humming at a high frequency. Through the microscope, once he got it focused right, he saw the molecular surface of the wood begin to pucker and ripple outward like rings on a pond, the ripples rising gradually into waves, and the steel peg a blur at the heart of play.

When he drew the peg away, the ripples did not stop. In twenty-four hours, the ripples had not stopped. He saw, still, a concentric tremor on the molecular quilt of the wood. The violin, in the firm embrace of the vise, had a song, a thing to say.

In another twelve hours, the ripples flattened and the wood lay inert.

Musicians know this without a microscope. An instrument dies if not played daily. A guitar, a violin, a lute chills the air for the first fifteen minutes of fresh play. It will need to be quickened from scratch. But the fiddle played every day hangs resonant on the wall, quietly boisterous when first it is lifted down, already trembling, anxious to speak, to cry out, to sing at the bow's first stroke. Not to rasp, but to sing. The instrument is in tune before the strings are tuned.

Pablo Casals used to put it so: "If I don't practice for even one day, I can tell the difference when I next cradle the cello in my arms. If I fail to practice for two days, my close friends can also tell the difference. If I don't practice three days, the whole world knows."

Writers know this when they are writing daily. With the first stroke, the hand may swim, the pen glide. The cold glass of the window brightens; the rug has a biography. Sweet tension of silent meeting throbs in the room. Unsaid words grow powerful, wish to speak out. Ideas gather their bones and rise up. A face becomes a life, a place a story. Everything speaks, or is powered by silence. Everything dreams aloud. The pen grows numb with haste, yet calm with plenty.

Yes, there will be labor, and hours with sweat dripping off the elbows. Yes, the words will have to be tuned — but the pen! Already shouting, poised and happy.

Why Write?

The answer must be pleasure. If I don't write for pleasure, I want to adjust the conditions until I do. The pleasure of immersing myself in stories wakes me in the morning, and makes me reluctant to retire at night. So much of life is attrition, and how precious the realm of creation, seeing stories and poems come into existence, as if from nowhere, a garden in the open land. As my daughter said when she was young, "I love the way you can impossible make things up on the piano." Me too, with only a pen and a blank scrap. A weaver told me once:

I'm a good weaver because I love all the steps. I love picking dirt out of a raw fleece, inhaling that rank lanolin. And I love the carding and then the spinning, the controlled slip of a thread turning through my fingers. I love the smell of the dye pot, and the handling of damp hanks of yarn as I pick out the shreds of onion skin and alder bark. I love threading the loom! Lots of weavers hate that part, just wanting to get to the weaving, but I love it — getting the tension right as you roll the warp onto the loom, and threading every end strand through the heddles and the reed. And then the weaving, well, that's pretty great. And then you cut it off the loom, and work it in the water to full it, get it to cohere as a fabric. The only part I don't like is letting it go — sales.

And with writing? I love all the stages — the gathering of shreds from everywhere, notes, letters, reading, sensation, conversation, dreams, and the plain magic of imagination. I love the tools — papers of different tooth and texture, inks, nibs, the cedar of pencil shavings, my computer in its little black bag. A friend insisted I try writing with a good fountain pen on stiff bond on a cool slab of polished marble — on a hot day, with good light. He was right: what a symphony. And I love the jazz of not knowing — yet — where a piece of writing wants to go, and then the taking hold! I love the second genius, when revision takes on the salty vitality of first writing, all over again. And then I love the nit-picking of editing, spelling, sentence detail, and getting the headers to work on my old computer. And I even love scouting for a good home for my child, once the story or essay has grown, and needs to set out into the big world. I send her off with gusto: Go, and may the world hear thee.

I remember a student, Karen, who could not speak, but could point with a wand to the letters on the alphabet-board taped to the arms of her wheelchair. At home, she could type at quite an amazing speed with her nose. She found such pleasure in making known the secrets within her, we all were humbled. One of her poems, addressed to a friend, seemed to speak for her love of writing itself: "When I see you, I lose the urge to be responsible!" Marvelous Karen.

When the time is right, I like to give an audience what I call my quiz — about the human condition. The story goes like this: Once, in the last century, missionaries went to an island off the south California coast and took away all the people there, took them to the mainland to watch over them. Do you know this story? Scott O'Dell wrote the novel *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* imagining how it was for the one who was left behind, the girl who lived on San Nicholas Island for eighteen years alone. In those years, she would long for human contact, but when a ship came, she was suddenly afraid, and would hide. And she could hide very well, for she knew her island with great intimacy.

Finally, the story goes, a group of sailors decided to capture her — to save her, as they called it. They moored their ship, and starting at one end of the island, they marched in a row stretching across the whole island, never out of sight of each other, at a slow walk to the other end. But the woman hid herself away in a crevice, and they missed her. After their line had passed, she came out of hiding, and crouched on a low ridge, watching them all stride north.

But one man had dropped back from the others, and ahead he saw this woman crouched down, humming softly to herself, rocking back and forth as she watched his fellows march away. Silently, he came up to her from behind. He touched her shoulder.

Here is the quiz about our kind: What did she do? Did she leap up to embrace him? Did she run? Did she lose all ability to act — in that frenzy we can feel when life is suddenly too big?

She motioned for him to sit on the earth, and she prepared a meal for him.

The meal may have been a strange one — perhaps some kind of seal meat and roots — but her impulse was the core of all we do, to put before another the pleasure we can, we who are alive at the same time.

It is said then she boarded their boat, and when a storm came up in the crossing, she stood at the prow and sang a song in her own language, and the winds grew calm. She sang in a language known by no one else on earth, for her people by then were gone. And it is said she died soon after. The food they gave her on the mainland was too rich. Hers was the simpler gift. That's how they tell the story.

Why write? Before my time is through, I have a few words I want to put before you, now that you have touched my shoulder, coming out of nowhere. I want them to be the best I have, to squander everything. We might never meet again.

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from Democracy: A Great Thing Not Yet Done

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Proverbs 29:18, as quoted by JFK

November 1963

...In the past I thought I was a writer, and a writing teacher. But now I find I am a listener who uses the act of writing to identify and pass along gifts that come to me. I eavesdrop on others, and on the quietest voices in myself. In my teaching disguise, I am a student's companion using the custom of writing to invite discoveries by a circle of listeners. We are seekers, active in the spirit of the elder I heard at the Root Feast on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation:

Down on the corner was a song, waiting to see if anyone would hear it. In my heart was a song, waiting to see if I would hear it. I have heard it! I would sing it now for you....

When my radio first brought me Elton John singing "Candle in the Wind" for Princess Diana, I had to stop the car and sit by the road and cry. Sure, I'm a big softie; it got me. I had never been taken with the Princess Di mystique, but strangely, her death still struck me a blow. Traffic streamed past. Even through my tears the cynical side of my mind was saying, He made this song for Marilyn Monroe — and now he recycles it for the Princess? But the other voice inside was asking, How did he know the thing to do was to make a song? Not to suffer and be still. Not to lament in silence, or in talk, gossip, news. He knew he had to sing. And where is our song for Martin Luther King? What do we sing to our children of Mother Theresa? What song do we use to teach our children the ways of Bobbie Kennedy? What song could bring home to our children the lives of children in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine? What songs everywhere could advance the healing of the world?

When the anthropologist Ruth Underhill asked her Papago informant, Maria Chonas, about the meaning of a particular song, Maria replied: "Our songs are short because we understand so much." Then she proceeded to elaborate her tiny song into a cosmic story. Reading this, it struck me about my own culture: "Our songs are long because we understand so little."

Carol Bly once furnished us with a question central to this quest:

How can I take the dent in the lid of a canning jar well-sealed; or the plain look of surprise on the face of a cow, when it meets you on the highway and will not turn aside; or the way snow, when it first falls in the mountains, is so fragile you are afraid to touch it at all — and turn those things, through my writing, into something clear enough, and passionate enough, that teenage boys in America will not have to go to a war somewhere in order to feel alive?

The short songs we need, then, are about local understandings and collective devotions that offer national, and even international clarity and engagement.

I submit that the songs we need are about to be written by voices we don't yet know: citizens, children, workers of all kinds in the hive of the world. We will need to be eloquent listeners to invite these songs forth, and share them all around. Our leaders are in need.

Toward the end of his life, someone asked my father, "What is your favorite thing of all you have written?"

"I love all my children," he replied. (Any parent knows that answer.) But then he said, "I would trade everything I have written for the next thing."

Democracy through poetry in multiple forms is our next thing. It will require from each of us the prevailing habits of sharing letters, passionate email, life-stories, songs, and often the adventure of a few clarifying words spoken out loud in memorable form — words so memorable they travel beyond the context of their first utterance, and become available to all.

What should it be about, this utterance? How should we compose what we are learning? How should we share what we compose? Our leaders flounder, trying to work for us, cut off by partisan isolation from our own best thinking.

When I was a child, my parents would remind us, "Don't forget to talk to strangers." How else could we be helped if we got lost, or hurt? And how else could we be citizens of the world? Our millions of intricate moves may be as direct and simple as talking to strangers....

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Epilogue: There Was a Time

There was a time when art was but a decoration,
when music in the background was the rule.
There were times when culture was a way to sweeten days
like fine cuisine.
We knew times when poetry murmured
in a classroom, once the real work had been done,
when a book at home was something we might use
to put ourselves to sleep.

A storm of terror cleared all that—again.
And now we live by killing far away.

Art is not a weapon but a hand.
Is it naive to reach for justice with a poem, a story,
or a song?
Not so foolish, I say, as to promise lasting safety, prosperity,
or any shred of true abundance in a child's long life
by striking back.

Art must be like breath, catching at the brim of fear to inspire
the next epoch of our life together.
Can money do that? An army? The greatest power in the world?

Be honest: rivers find each other by seeking the meeting place.
Live there. Take up the pen.

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