

# *Writing Without Teachers*

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## *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.

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 “break-throughs.” 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 solidier 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 quarrelled 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.



(1) 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, frowning 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 Macrorie<sup>1</sup> 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.

(2) 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 umpteenth 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. Affectively, 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 discriminatingly 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.