

THE RIGHT *to* WRITE

AN INVITATION AND
INITIATION INTO THE
WRITING LIFE



JULIA CAMERON

JEREMY P. TARCHER/PUTNAM

a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

NEW YORK

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ALSO BY JULIA CAMERON

NONFICTION

The Artist's Way

The Artist's Way Morning Pages Journal

The Artist's Date Book

(Illustrated by Elizabeth "Libby" Cameron)

The Vein of Gold

God is No Laughing Matter

Supplies

(Illustrated by Elizabeth "Libby" Cameron)

God is Dog Spelled Backwards

Heart Steps

Blessings

Transitions

The Artist's Way at Work

(with Mark Bryan and Catherine Allen)

Money Drunk, Money Sober

(with Mark Bryan)

FICTION

The Dark Room

Popcorn: Hollywood Stories

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Public Lives

The Animal in the Trees

Four Roses

Love in the DMZ

Avalon (a musical)

The Medium at Large (a musical)

POETRY

Prayers for the Little Ones

Prayers for the Nature Spirits

The Quiet Animal

This Earth (also an album with Tim Wheeler)

FEATURE FILM

God's Will

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In order to preserve my friends' and students' privacy
certain names have been changed.

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FOR MY WRITING MOTHER,
DOROTHY SHEA CAMERON



INTRODUCTION

IN DECEMBER 1967, under the baleful gaze of a gargoyle high in an upper cranny of Georgetown Library, I came across a line from the poet Theodore Roethke. He wrote, “I learn by going where I have to go.” That phrase accurately describes my writing life.

I’ve written since I was very young and, as I get older, I write more and more frequently, in more and more genres. I have written fiction and nonfiction, films, plays, poems, essays, criticism, journalism, and even musicals. I have written for love, for money, for escape, for grounding, to turn out, to tune in, and to do almost anything that writing could be made to do.

Writing has for thirty-plus years been my constant companion, my lover, my friend, my job, my passion, and what I do with myself and the world I live in. Writing is how, and it sometimes seems why, I do my life.

My story is simple: I simply write. I have tried, in this book, to write only about the things I know only about the things that have been my tools, my path. This means that there are many things that will not be included in this book because they are either not a part of my writer’s experience or they are something other books on writing have written about very well.

This book will not teach you how to write a query letter, how to find a market for your work or get an agent. It will not teach you to punctuate or spell. Anton Chekhov advised actors, “If you want to work on your acting, work on yourself.” This same advice applies to working on our writing.

Our writing life, our life “as a writer,” cannot be separated from our life as a whole. For this reason many of the essays and especially the “tools” in this book “about writing” may, at first flush, seem to have nothing to do with writing—but they have everything to do with writing. Think of each essay as an invitation to explore a certain area. Think of each tool as an experiential initiation into that area.

What this book will do, if I have done it well enough, is talk to you about writing for the sake of writing, for the sheer unadulterated joy of putting words to the page. In other words, this is less a “how-to” book than a “why” book.

Why should we write?

We should write because it is human nature to write. Writing claims our world. It makes it direct and specifically our own. We should write because humans are spiritual beings and writing is a powerful form of prayer and meditation, connecting us both to our own insights and to a higher and deeper level of inner guidance as well.

We should write because writing brings clarity and passion to the act of living. Writing is sensual, experiential, grounding. We should write because writing is good for the soul. We should write because writing yields us a body of work, a felt path through the world we live in.

We should write, above all, because we are writers whether we call ourselves writers or not. *The Right to Write* is a birthright, a spiritual dowry that gives us the keys to the kingdom. Higher forces speak to us through writing. Call them inspiration, the Muses, Angels, God, Hunches, Intuition, Guidance, or simply a good story—whatever you call them, they connect us to something larger than

ourselves that allows us to live with greater vigor and optimism.

It is my hope that this book will dismantle some of the negative mythology that surrounds the writing life in our culture. I have found that life to be positive, invigorating, spiritually sourced, and eminently do-able. This book, therefore, will be an “into the water” book as we look at common blocks and some simple ways around them, common problems and some simple ways to solve them, common sticking points and some simple ways through them. In my experience, the writing life is a simple life, self-empowered and self-empowering.

This book will be a cheerleader for those trying the writing life, a companion for those living it, and a thank-you to my own writing for the life it has given to me. It is my hope that this book will help heal writers who are broken, initiate writers who are afraid, and entice writers who are standing on the river’s edge, wanting to put a toe in.

I have a fantasy. It’s the pearly gates. St. Peter has out his questionnaire, he asks me the Big Question, “What did you do that we should let you in?”

“I convinced people they should write,” I tell him. The great gates swing open.

BEGIN

I AM SITTING AT a small pine table, facing east toward the Sangre de Cristo foothills. My “view” has a horse tank that needs filling, a white fence with a small robin’s-egg-blue gate, a birdbath, a terra-cotta with some of its figurines knocked off, a bright yellow garden hose I will use to fill the horse tank and the birdbath, an overgrown garden plot, a bucket lying on its side, my small dog Maxwell, soaking in the early spring sunlight like an optimistic sunbather on a chilly beach day. When it warms up and that yellow hose has thawed out, I will fill the horse tank. When I warm up, I will tell you what I know about letting yourself write.

The first trick, the one I am practicing now, is to just start where you are. It’s a luxury to be in the mood to write. It’s a blessing but it’s not a necessity. Writing is like breathing, it’s possible to learn to do it well, but the point is to do it no matter what.

Writing is like breathing. I believe that. I believe we all come into life as writers. We are born with a gift for language and it comes to us within months as we begin to name our world. We all have a sense of ownership, a sense of satisfaction as we name the objects that we find. Words give us power.

As toddlers, first we grab and then we grab with words. Every word we learn is an acquisition, a bit of gold that makes us richer. We catch a new word and say it over and over, turning it like a rich nugget in the light. As children, we hoard and gloat over words. Words give ownership: we name our world and we claim it.

As children, we learn new words at an astonishing clip. Words give us leverage: “Me go with Mommy!” Or, “Mommy stay” Children are specific and direct. They don’t beat around the bush. Their words are personal and powerful. They are filled with will and intent. They are filled with passion and purpose. Children trust the power of words.

If words give us power, when do we start to lose our power over words? When do we start to feel that some of us are “good” at language and even have a shot at being “writers” while the rest of us just happen to use it and don’t dare consider ourselves in that league?

My guess is that for most of us school is where this sorting starts to happen. School is where we are told, “You’re good with words ...” The neat teacherly scrawl, diagonally written across the top righthand corner of the top page of, say, a geography report on Scandinavia, “Well written.”

Well written—what does that mean? In school it usually means clear, orderly thinking. Neat enough grammar. Lots of orderly facts. It may also mean things we are taught, like “topic sentences” and “transitions.” Very often it does not mean words that sing off the page, innovative word combinations, paragraphs of great free associations and digressions—all the gifts a young poet or novelist might have and want to use but not find useful under the scholarly discipline of an academic paper.

What happens when writing of that kind shows up in school papers? Too frequently, it’s another margin quote, this time negative: “You stray from the topic a bit here” or “Stick to the point.” It is a rare teacher who takes the time and care to praise the kind of writing that doesn’t fit into an academic paradigm. It’s as though scholastically we’re on a pretty strict diet: “Not so much pepper here.”

Not so much pepper. Not so much spunk. Not so much humanity, please. Academically we are inclined to a rather pedestrian prose denuded of personality and passion, perhaps even a bit elevated tone as if writing is something to be done only from the loftiest of motives, a kind of distillate rationalism trickled onto the page.

In countries and situations where writing is forbidden, it takes on primacy. In prisons, people scratch their message into stone, onto dirt. On desert islands, messages are shoved into bottles and sent to sea. When communication is made to seem actively impossible, the human will to communicate rears its head and people willingly risk death and dismemberment to do it.

This is healthy

In our current culture, something much less healthy is afoot. Writing is not forbidden, it is discouraged. Hallmark does it for us. We shop for the card that is “closest” to what we wish to say. Schools drill us about how to say what we want to and the how-to involves things like proper spelling, topic sentences, and the avoidance of detours so that logic becomes the field marshal and emotion is kept at bay. Writing, as we are taught to do it, becomes an antihuman activity. We are forever editing, leaving out the details that might not be pertinent. We are trained to self-doubt, to self-scrutiny in the place of self-expression.

As a result, most of us try to write too carefully. We try to do it “right.” We try to sound smart. We try, period. Writing goes much better when we don’t work at it so much. When we give ourselves permission to just hang out on the page. For me, writing is like a good pair of pajamas—comfortable. In our culture, writing is more often costumed up in a military outfit. We want our sentences to march in neat little rows, like well-behaved boarding-school children.

Burn down the school. Save the books, perhaps, but get the teacher to tell you the real secrets: Why does he write and read as a guilty pleasure? Guilty pleasure is what writing is all about. It is about attractions, words you can’t resist using to describe things too interesting to pass up. And forget lofty motives.

I don’t write from lofty motives—I never have. In sixth grade, when I wrote my first (very) short stories, it was to snag the attention of Peter Mundy—Peter was a newcomer to St. Joseph’s grade school, Mrs. Klopsch’s class. He’d moved north from Missouri. He brought a southern accent and chestnut hair, hair the color of a jar of Tupelo honey, a physical look as sweet as the something southern that whispered through his voice. I wanted Peter to be my boyfriend. I wanted him to notice me. And so, I set about wooing him by writing him stories.

Twenty years later, long after he’d dated Peggy Conroy instead of me, Peter told me I had captured his heart with my writing, “I just chickened out.”

Peter may have chickened out, but in the act of chasing him with pencil and paper, I discovered a bigger chase, the thrill of chasing anything with words.

Writing is a lot like driving a country blacktop highway on a hot summer day. There is a waver, a magical spot that shimmers on the horizon. You aim toward it. You speed to get there, and when you do, the “there” vanishes. You look up to see it again, shimmering in the distance. You write toward that. I suppose some people might call this unrequited love or dissatisfaction. I think it’s something better.

I think it’s anticipation. I think it’s savoring. I think it’s tasting a great meal from its scent on your

nostrils. I do not have to eat freshly baked bread to love it. The scent is nearly as delicious, nearly ~~much the satisfaction as the thick slice of bread slathered with butter and homemade apricot jam.~~

The brain enjoys writing. It enjoys the act of naming things, the processes of association and discernment. Picking words is like picking apples: this one looks delicious.



The act of writing, the aiming at getting it right, is pure thrill, pure process, as exciting as drawing back a bow. Hitting a creative bull's-eye, a sentence that precisely expresses what you see shimmering on the horizon—those sentences are worth the chase—but the chase itself, the things you catch out of the corner of your eye, that's worth something too. I love it when I write well, but I love it when I write, period.

When I began this essay, it was a blue, cloudless day. As I finish it, big weather has come up. Fat dark clouds are spitting a petulant rain. The wind is gusting in stiff puffs fragrant with spring. I don't need to fill the horse tank. The rain is doing that nicely. My little Maxwell has come inside and cuddled by my feet. The day, like this essay began one place and moved to something else entirely.

Kabir tells us, "Wherever you are is the entry point," and this is always true with writing. Wherever you are is always the right place. There is never a need to fix anything, to hitch up the bootstraps and start at some higher place. Start right where you are.

Left to its own devices, writing is like weather. It has a drama, a form, a force to it that shapes the day. Just as a good rain clears the air, a good writing day clears the psyche. There is something very right about simply letting yourself write. And the way to do that is to begin, to begin where you are.

BEGIN

Initiation Tool

This tool puts you directly into the water. Take three sheets of 8½ by 11 paper. Start at the top of page one and for three pages describe how and what you are feeling right now. Begin where you are—physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Write about anything and everything that crosses your mind.

This is a free-form exercise. You cannot do it wrong. Be petty, critical, whining, scared. Be excited, adventurous, worried, happy. Be whatever and however you are at this moment. Get current. Feel the current of your own thoughts and emotions. Keep your hand moving and simply hang out on the page. When you have finished writing three pages, stop.

LET YOURSELF WRITE

WE PUT A LOT of bunk around the notion of being a writer. We make a big deal out of putting words on paper instead of simply releasing them to the air. We have a mythology that tells us that writing is a torturous activity. Believing that, we don't even try it or, if we do, and if we find it unexpectedly easy, we stop, freeze up, and tell ourselves that whatever it is that we're doing, it can't be "real" writing.

By real writing we mean the kind we have all the mythology about. We mean the kind that does not involve scenarios like the one I had tonight: a dinner with my good friend Dori, watching *Il Postino* on video afterward, kissing Dori good-bye when it was still mid-evening, and strolling into my study to write just a little while little dog Maxwell curls at my feet.

There is something too casual, too effortless, too normal about this kind of writer's life. It too closely resembles everyone else's life—just with some writing sandwiched in. Why, if this is how a writer lives, lots of us could do it. If the suffering is actually optional, if writing needn't be an antisocial activity ...

What if there were no such thing as a writer? What if everyone simply wrote? What if there were no "being a real writer" to aspire to? What if writing were simply about the act of writing?

If we didn't have to worry about being published and being judged, how many more of us might write a novel just for the joy of making one? Why should we think of writing a novel as something we couldn't try—the way an amateur carpenter might build a simple bookcase or even a picnic table? What if we didn't have to be good at writing? What if we got to do it for sheer fun?

What if writing were approached like white-water rafting? Something to try just for the fact of having tried it, for the spills and chills of having gone through the rapids of the creative process. What if we allowed ourselves to be amateurs (from the Latin verb *amare*, "to love"). If we could just get over the auditioning to be respected at this aspect, a great many people might love writing. Although our mythology seldom tells us this, it's fun.

When people undertake writing, it is often not with the agenda of writing but with the agenda of "becoming a writer." We have an incredible amount of mystery, mystique, and pure bunk around exactly what the phrase means.

The bottom line, the fact that the act of writing makes you a writer, barely enters the equation at all. Instead, we come up with ideas like "Real writers are published," or "Real writers make a living from their writing." In a sense, we are saying, "Real writers get validation from others that they are writers. Their passport is stamped in ways that indicate they are writers. They have appeared in _____. They have received quotes from _____."

With mythology like this, with a product-not-process orientation like this, is it any wonder that the aspiring writer is seized by anxiety? Even those gifted with a silver tongue doubt that they are gifted with a silver pen. The blank page strikes them like a blank check where they may be asked to fill in an amount far larger than the talent they feel they possess.

“I’d love to be a writer. I just have no gift for it,” I’ve often been told by people whose gift of language is as clear as a neon sign.

“I’m a good talker, but I can’t write to save my life” is another thing I’ve been told quite often. Where do we get the idea that putting words on paper is so dangerous and so difficult?

There is something that often happens as people try to move onto the page: the fluidity they feel talking suddenly freezes up. Every word becomes a commitment, a matter for intense scrutiny and self-absorption. The blank page creates a sense of seriousness. Words that sounded fine suddenly look funny. We forget the term “rough draft” and want everything to emerge as well-polished gems. There’s no place for error, for colloquialisms, for the charming roundabouts. Our schooling kicks in and we remember all those rules for good writing: topic sentences, organization....

Most of us think we can’t write. We think it’s something other people do—“writers.” Or, if you have a novice’s happy skill and amateur’s fervent love, it’s a name you reserve for the skill belonging to “real writers.” The kind of people who can march their thoughts like little soldiers, marshal the logical paragraphs like troops storming Normandy, a scintillating wave at a time.

It doesn’t have to be like that.

If we eliminate the word “writer,” if we just go back to writing as an act of listening and naming what we hear, some of the rules disappear. There is an organic shape, a form-coming-into-form that is inherent in the thing we are observing, listening to, and trying to put on the page. It has rules of its own that it will reveal to us if we listen with attention. Shape does not need to be imposed. Shape is part of what we are listening to. When we just let ourselves write, we get it “right.”

LET YOURSELF WRITE

Initiation Tool

This tool clears away the debris that stands between you and the page. Set aside one half hour. Go to a café with writing paper. Buy yourself a cup of coffee, tea, a soda, or mineral water. Write out the following exercise.

Step one: What are your hidden associations with the term “writer”? Fill in the following as rapidly as possible.

1. Writers are _____
2. Writers are _____
3. Writers are _____
4. Writers are _____
5. Writers are _____
6. Writers are _____
7. Writers are _____
8. Writers are _____
9. Writers are _____
10. Writers are _____

Step two: Convert the negative associations to positive affirmations. For example: ~~“Writers are broke”~~ converts to “Writers are solvent.” ~~“Writers are crazy”~~ converts to “Writers are sane.” ~~“Writers are loners”~~ converts to “Writers have good friends.” For the next week, write out each of your new positives five times daily.

LET YOURSELF LISTEN

ONE OF THE simplest and smartest things I ever learned about writing is the importance of a sense of direction. Writing is about getting something down, not about thinking something up. Whenever I strive to “think something up,” writing becomes something I must stretch to achieve. It becomes loftier than I am, perhaps even something so lofty, it is beyond my grasp. When I am trying to think something up, I am straining. When, on the other hand, I am focused about just getting something down, I have a sense of attention but not a sense of strain.

Another way to think of it is that writing is the art of taking dictation, not giving it. When I listen to what I hear and simply jot that down, the flow of ideas is not mine to generate but to transcribe. When, on the other hand, I struggle to write, it is because I am trying to speak on the page rather than listen there.

Once writing becomes an act of listening instead of an act of speech, a great deal of the ego goes out of it. Instead of self-consciously thinking about the sentence “I” have written, I find myself amazed and interested by the sentences that seem to want themselves written. Instead of being an act of pontification, writing becomes an act of revelation. This is true for any writer who lets writing write through him. We the writers, as much as any reader, are in for the treat of discovering what comes next.

When writing is about the importance of what we ourselves have to say, it becomes burdened by our concerns about whether the reader will “get it”—meaning, get how brilliant we are. When writing is rooted in the process of taking down the next thought as it unfolds itself to us, then it is less about our brilliance and more about our accuracy. How carefully are we willing to listen? How much control are we willing to surrender for the sake of allowing creativity to move through us rather than our trying to flog it forward for agendas of our own?

We can either “think a plot up” or we can “jot a plot down.” We can either “think of something to write about” or we can write about what we happen to be thinking about. We can either demand that we write well or we can settle more comfortably into writing down what seems to want to come through us—good, bad, or indifferent.

Most of us are really willing only to write well, and this is why the act of writing strains us. We are asking it to do two jobs at once: to communicate to people and to simultaneously impress them. Is it any wonder that our prose buckles under the strain of doing this double task?

Of all the writers writing on writing I have ever read, it seems to me that Henry Miller was the most honest, the least self-serving and self-mythologizing. Miller advised:

“Develop interest in life as you see it; in people, things, literature, music—the world is so rich and simply throbbing with rich treasures, beautiful souls, and interesting people. Forget yourself.”

When we “forget ourselves,” it is easy to write. We are not standing there, stiff as a soldier, our entire ego shimmied into every capital “I.” When we forget ourselves, when we let go of being good and settle into just being a writer, we begin to have the experience of writing through us. We retire as the self-conscious author and become something else—the vehicle for self-expression. When we a

just the vehicle, the storyteller and not the point of the story, we often write very well—we certainly write more easily.

LET YOURSELF LISTEN

Initiation Tool

This tool encourages you to lighten up and stop taking writing so seriously that it is frightening. Pretend that you are sitting under a large tree with your back resting on its trunk. On the other side of the tree, a Storyteller sits also resting against the tree trunk. Take a sheet of paper and number from one to five. Tell the Storyteller five things you'd like to hear stories about.

THE TIME LIE

IF I HAD A YEAR OFF, I'd write a novel."

Maybe you would. Maybe you wouldn't. Often the greased slide to writer's block is a huge batch of time earmarked: "Now write." Making writing a big deal tends to make writing difficult. Keeping writing casual tends to keep it possible. Nowhere is this more true than around the issue of time.

One of the biggest myths around writing is that in order to do it we must have great swathes of uninterrupted time. Speaking for myself, I have never had such silken bolts of time. My life—and all the work I have made from my life—has been more like making a patchwork quilt than unfolding bolts of limitless and serene silk.

The myth that we must have "time"—more time—in order to create is a myth that keeps us from using the time we do have. If we are forever yearning for "more," we are forever discounting what is offered.

Just at the moment I have out-of-town guests coming in, a meal to cook, horses to feed, and my dogs would really like a good long walk. I may or may not get to the "long" part of walk, but I will get to everything else—right after I write. Years as a single mother, a full-time teacher, and a full-time fiction writer taught me to grab for time to write instead of wait for time. Grabbing is what I am doing right now. Grabbing works.

For most of us, the seductive and unstated part of "if I had enough time" is the unstated sentence "I can hear myself think." In other words, we imagine that if we had time we would quiet our more shallow selves and listen to a deeper flow of inspiration. Again, this is a myth that lets us off the hook—if I wait for enough time to listen, I don't have to listen now, I don't have to take responsibility for being available to what is trying to bubble up today.

As a teacher, I have often heard, "All that stands between me and the great American novel is a year off." Viewed this way, the obsession with a block of time becomes writer's block. Most students—most of us, period—are not going to be given the gift of a year off. And without that year off, we can't "really" write, can we?

Maybe we can.

The "if-I-had-time" lie is a convenient way to ignore the fact that novels require being written all at once—that writing happens a sentence at a time. Sentences can happen in a moment. Enough stolen moments and enough stolen sentences, and a novel is born—without the luxury of time.

Lawyer Scott Turow wrote his riveting novel *Presumed Innocent* on his daily commuter train. My student Maureen has managed nine full-length screenplays while raising an infant son and juggling a design career. Michael, another student, wrote an entire book in his "spare" moments the year that he got his master's degree. All of them did it by making time to write rather than waiting to "find" time.

When we make time to write, we can do it anytime, anywhere. Once we learn the knack of "dropping down the well"—a knack I teach by having people write three pages of longhand first thing in the morning—the well can be dropped down anywhere, anytime: in your dentist's office, on a

airplane, at the train station waiting for someone else's commuter train, between appointments at the office, at lunch, on a coffee break, at the hairdresser's, at the kitchen table while the onions saute ...

If we learn to write from the sheer love of writing, there is always enough time, but time must be stolen like a quick kiss between lovers on the run. As a shrewd woman once told me, "The busiest and most important man can always find time for you if he's in love with you and, if he can't, then he's not in love." When we love our writing, we find time for it.

The trick to finding writing time, then, is to write from love and not with an eye to product. Don't try to write something perfect; just write. Don't try to write the whole megillah; just start the whole megillah. Yes, it is daunting to think of finding time to write an entire novel, but it is not so daunting to think of finding time to write a paragraph, even a sentence. And paragraphs, made of sentences, are what novels are really made of.

Annie, a newspaper writer by trade, was always waiting to "find" the time to write for pleasure. This made it sound like time was a hundred-dollar bill that she might stumble on in the street one very lucky day.

"Don't wait to find time," I told her. "Get aggressive. Steal time."

Annie found she could steal fifteen minutes a day at first. Then she found she could manage it twice a day. Before too long she was managing stolen hours, twice a week. Like an unexpected love affair, Annie's pleasure in writing caught her by surprise, insinuating itself gently into her heart. She suddenly "had" time.

Alan, a writing teacher and a yearning-to-be-novelist, told himself for years that his novel would come once he took a sabbatical. One day he made the mistake of telling the same thing to me.

"What's wrong with now?" I asked him. "Start writing now and think about rewriting on the sabbatical."

"I don't have time," Alan protested. "I teach writing. I sit there and watch my students write." His voice sounded bitter and grumpy.

"So write while they're writing. Stop making it such a major production. Just scribble a few things while they do."

"I get these ideas but I don't know exactly where they're going," Alan protested.

"So chase one and see where it leads."

"Chase one! What if it's a dead end? I don't have time for dead end!"

"There are no dead ends, not really" I assured him. Alan was cornered, and he knew it.

Alan had time to write. We all have time to write. We have time to write the minute we are willing to write badly, to chase a dead end, to scribble a few words, to write for the hell of it instead of for the perfect and polished result.

The obsession with time is really an obsession with perfection. We want enough time to write perfectly. We want to write with a net under ourselves, a net that says we are not foolish spending our time doing something that might not pay off.

"Start with Morning Pages," I urged Alan. "Let yourself get on the page. Write three pages about

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