Some Wisdom on Writing

On storytelling:

"We have a bequest of stories, tales from the old storytellers, some of whose names we know, but some not. The storytellers go back and back, to a clearing in the forest where a great fire burns, and the old shamans dance and sing, for our heritage of stories began in fire, magic, the spirit world. And that is where it is held, today.

Ask any modern storyteller and they will say there is always a moment when they are touched with fire, with what we like to call inspiration, and this goes back and back to the beginning of our race, to fire and ice and the great winds that shaped us and our world.

The storyteller is deep inside everyone of us. The story-maker is always with us. Let us suppose our world is attacked by war, by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise... but the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us - for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative." - Doris Lessing

On inspiration:

"The poem comes in the form of a blessing, like the rapture breaking through on the mind." - Stanley Kunitz

“A poem...begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion finds the thought and the thought finds the words.” - Robert Frost, Letter to Louis Untermeyer (January 1, 1916)

Some Wisdom on Writing

“The state of mind that I reach when I am deep in my work is a kind of trance, characterized by total self-forgetting. It is a kind of animal state, singularly focused and unselfconscious. I am inside of an intelligence that is driven by instinct and imagination, that is utterly separate from the mind that thinks of emails and to-do lists and how others might see me. It has no allegiance to the story I’m committed to living. It is loyal only to the work to which it is applied.” - Melissa Febos

"You never have to change anything you got up in the middle of the night to write." - Saul Bellow

On restraint and omission:

"Poetry is a kind of distilled insinuation. It's a way of expanding and talking around an idea or a question. Sometimes, more actually gets said through such a technique than a full frontal assault." - Yusef Komunyakaa, American poet

The Iceberg Theory: The Iceberg Theory is a writing theory stated by American writer Ernest Hemingway, as follows: “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. The writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.”

“A writer shouldn’t manipulate or lead the audience, showing this card or playing this hand, but rather trust that it’s okay for the person in (seat) G 113 to feel something different than the person G 115. The lust to have those thousand people feeling or thinking or knowing the same thing leads a writer into doing all sorts of bad things.” - Stephen Sondheim

Some Wisdom on Writing

“If you think in terms of subtext, you’ll always leave something out. It is the Hemingway principle: what you leave out is more important then what you include. If you leave something for the actor, they are only grateful, and a good performer will fill that space,- or not fill it- with all kinds of richness and subtleties. It is so remarkable how good performers can bring songs to life, even good songs, if you’ve left them some space, some interstices to fill.” - Stephen Sondheim

On vulnerability:

“Beginning writers often fear the vulnerability of exposing their most intimate experiences and their past ignorance in published work. It is important to remember that most of us write our books alone. Memoirs begin as conversations with the self. Our first confessions must be to this internal witness. I test words for the unspoken in the privacy of the page for as long as I need to before another set of eyes ever sees it. By the time most books find their unknown readers, the transformation has already occurred. The writer’s relationship to the past is irrevocably changed. The writer is changed.” - Melissa Febos

On tapping into your subconscious:

“The unconscious wants truth, as the body does.” - Adrienne Rich

On using details:

“If you go for the universal, you get nothing; if you go for the specific, you get the universal”. - Marshall Brickman

On rejection:

"I discovered that rejections are not altogether a bad thing. They teach a writer to rely on his own judgment and to say in his heart of hearts, 'To hell with you.'" - Saul Bellow

Some Wisdom on Writing

On the difficulty of writing well:

"A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." - Thomas Mann

"It is harrowing for me to try to teach 20-year-old students, who earnestly want to improve their writing. The best I can think to tell them is: Quit smoking, and observe posted speed limits. This will improve your odds of getting old enough to be wise." - Barbara Kingsolver

"I get a fine warm feeling when I'm doing well, but that pleasure is pretty much negated by the pain of getting started each day. Let's face it, writing is hell." - William Styron

“My compositional process almost always begins in a kind of despondency, or hopelessness, or desolation, usually born of a conviction that I will never write again. That I will at long intervals turn out little mechanical B-plus poems, but that I’ll never again feel that I am at the throat of the dog, that I’m at something essential. This pattern really hasn’t varied, though my first book was more diligently written. But even then there were long hiatuses of silence and periods of despondency, like in the desert, that have come to seem to me the norm of my aesthetic life . . . which isn’t to say those passages are not brutal. So that each of my books really begins with a prayer, you know: Appear to me again. Let me be suffused with the wish to, and ability to, make meaning out of language.” - Louise Gluck

On the blank page:

"If you write a story today, and you get up tomorrow and start another story, all the expertise that you put into the first story doesn't transfer over automatically to the second story. You're always starting at the bottom of the mountain. So you're always becoming a writer. You're never really arriving." - Edward P. Jones

Some Wisdom on Writing

On writer's block:

"Sometimes I think that 'writer's block' is nothing more than a breakdown in communications between a writer and his or her subconscious cowriter. Here's a suggestion: When writing alone, treat your subconscious as a living, breathing collaborator by providing moments of relaxation and introspection, opportunities for your 'partner' to talk back to you." -Jimmy Webb

"Just write, damn it. I believe that ninety percent of writer's block is not the fault of the writer. It's the fault of the writer's wrongheaded educational conditioning. We're taught to write via a 20th century industrial model that's boringly linear and predictable: What's your topic sentence? What are your sections? What's your conclusion? Nobody wants to read a piece that's structured that way. Even if they did, the form would be more a hindrance than a help to the writing process, because it makes the writer settle on a thesis before he or she has had a chance to wade around in the ideas and inspect them. So to Hell with the outline. Just puke on the page, knowing that you can clean it up and make it structurally sound later. Your mind is a babbling lunatic. It's Dennis Hopper, jumping all over the place, free associating, digressing, doubling back, exploding in profanity and absurdity and nonsense. Stop ordering it to calm down and speak clearly. Listen closely and take dictation. Be a stenographer for your subconscious. Then rewrite and edit." - Roger Ebert

On listening to your characters (the back story):

"The precision of the storytelling in these types of songs is very important. The correct detail can speak volumes about who your character is, while the wrong one can shred the credibility of your story. When you get the music and lyrics right, your voice disappears into the voices you've chosen to write about. Basically, with these songs, I find the characters and listen to them. That

always leads to a series of questions about their behavior. What would they do? What would they never do? You need to locate the rhythm of their speech and the nature of their expression. But all the telling detail in the world doesn't matter if the song lacks an emotional center. That's something you have to pull out of yourself from the commonality you feel with the man or woman you're writing about. By pulling these elements together as well as you can, you shed light on their lives and honor their experiences." - Bruce Springsteen

Andre Dubus III made the case against outlining. In his warning against intellectualizing one's work—"Do not think, dream"—he insisted that fiction comes to life when you stop trying to control it by working towards an ending planned out in advance:

"We're all born with an imagination. Everybody gets one. And I really believe—this is just from years of daily writing—that good fiction comes from the same place as our dreams. I think the desire to step into someone else's dream world, is a universal impulse that's shared by us all. That's what fiction is. As a writing teacher, if I say nothing else to my students, it's this.

I began to learn characters will come alive if you back the fuck off.

Here's the distinction. There's a profound difference between making something up and imagining it. You're making something up when you think out a scene, when you're being logical about it. You think, "I need this to happen so some other thing can happen." There's an aspect of controlling the material that I don't think is artful. I think it leads to contrived work, frankly, no matter how beautifully written it might be. You can hear the false note in this kind of writing.

This was my main problem when I was just starting out: I was trying to say something. When I began to write, I was deeply self-

conscious. I was writing stories hoping they would say something thematic, or address something that I was wrestling with philosophically. I've learned, for me at least, it's a dead road. It's writing from the outside in instead of the inside out.

But during my very early writing, certainly before I'd published, I began to learn characters will come alive if you back the fuck off. It was exciting, and even a little terrifying. If you allow them to do what they're going to do, think and feel what they're going to think and feel, things start to happen on their own. It's a beautiful and exciting alchemy. And all these years later, that's the thrill I write to get: to feel things start to happen on their own.

So I've learned over the years to free-fall into what's happening. What happens then is, you start writing something you don't even really want to write about. Things start to happen under your pencil that you don't want to happen, or don't understand. But that's when the work starts to have a beating heart."

"I had this really vivid picture of this woman standing over the sink with soap in her hands. She wanted to get out of her house and her marriage and everything. She just wanted an angel to come and take her away from all this. So I just kept that whole idea image in mind when I was writing the song and I just let it pour out of that character's heart. I didn't realize all this at the time, but if you come up with a strong enough character, you can get a really vivid insight into the character that you've invented. You let the character write the song. You just dictate from then on. You stick to it, and whatever the character is saying, you have to figure out how to keep that in the song. You know? That's how I do it. I almost go into a trance….once I've got an outline, a sketch in my mind, of who the person was, then I figure I'd better let them speak for themselves rather than me saying: 'Hey, so here's a middle-aged woman. She feels she's much older.' It wouldn't have

Some Wisdom on Writing

been nearly as effective." - John Prine on "Angel From Montgomery"

On the theatrical nature of songwriting:

"I was essentially trained by Oscar Hammerstein to think of songs as one-act plays, to move a song from point A to point B dramatically." - Stephen Sondheim

"I also learned something about subtext, the notion of an actor having something to play underneath the speech, bringing a depth, a counterpoint to what is said that keeps a scene alive." - Stephen Sondheim

"The idea of the actor as an instrument and the use of subtext-informed nearly everything I wrote after that." - Stephen Sondheim

"When I'm writing a song, I try to be the character. A good actor will not let you know the end of the play when he's playing any scene. He will leave the rest of his journey- that awful word used these days - unknown, so he has some place to go. In the same way, if you're writing a song in the first act, though you know the character will kill himself, you don't write the song with that knowledge. You try to be the actor who does not know he'll reach a point of despair and kill himself." - Stephen Sondheim

On self-delusion in songwriting:

"Every time one can write a self-deluded song, you are way ahead of the game, way ahead. Self-delusion is the basis for nearly all the great scenes in all the great plays, from Oedipus to Hamlet. When the audience starts to know something the character doesn't, they get excited- and who wouldn't? We get it, why doesn't he get it, but when he finally does get it, it's so much

Some Wisdom on Writing

more devastating than when we get it." - Stephen Sondheim (from "A Conversation With Stephen Sondheim")

On the truth vs. the facts:

"The "truth" (or "honesty") and the "facts" are not necessarily the same, they are not necessarily equal and one often requires the suspension of the other. This may not be the case in higher math or on Wall Street (or, actually, it may work there as well, but I'm clueless about that) but it is an immutable "truth" in art and music that facts are not necessarily the best indicators of the deepest human experience.
The table where you found the suicide note, the cup of coffee that turned cold because you were distracted in a painful reverie staring out the old wavy-glass window at the rain dripping off the eaves, the seashell left in the coat pocket from the last time you were at that favorite spot at the ocean, when it all came clear that you were at the right place with the wrong man, the letters, the photos, the marbles and jewels — all these physical, material, real-world artifacts carry poetic weight and should be used liberally in songwriting. These are the facts that convey truth to me. The exact words he said, who was right or wrong, whether he relapsed on the 7th or the 10th, why exactly she does what she does, the depth and weight and timbre of the feelings, whether Love Heals Everything — these aren't facts, these are ever-changing blobs of emotional mercury, and when you are working in rhyme, it can be much more powerful and resonant to write about the shards of the coffee cup than about the feeling that caused him to throw it across the room. You are better off moving the furniture than you are directly analyzing the furniture maker. This is to say nothing of the fact that the lyrical content of songs is by definition wholly entwined with melody, rhythm, tone and possibly a backbeat, and these carry their own authority.

Some Wisdom on Writing

We are so deeply limited by language, and so ennobled by it. Songs are the attempt to convey what is under and behind language, and so it is counter-productive, if not counter-intuitive, to clutch at exactitudes of circumstance that retreat further in meaning the more desperate we become to quantify them.

My friend Joe Henry says that songwriting is not about self-expression (ewwww), but about discovery. I am of entirely the same mind, which is why I recoil against the attempt to categorize "personal" songs of mine as diary pages and why I resist that niggling insistence on the facts. Self-expression without craft is for toddlers. Real artistic accomplishment requires a suspension of certitude. E.L. Doctorow said that "writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go." He may not have been referring specifically to songwriting, but it applies. Great songwriting is not a poor man's poetry, or a distant cousin to "real" writing. It requires the same discipline and craft. Bright flashes of inspiration can initiate it, but it cannot be completed that way. (That is not to say that all songwriting is important and good, just as not all fiction is important or good. I don't think anyone would put "Like a Rolling Stone" or my dad's "Big River" (a truly great piece of American poetry wedded to a wicked, swampy backbeat) in the same category as The Archies' "Sugar, Sugar" (it is what it is).

But in the space where truth and fact diverge, a larger question arises: if the facts don't lead us to meaning, what does? Perhaps a willingness to live with questions, not answers, and the confidence to ascribe meaning where we find it, with our own instincts as guide. I should approach my writing as if I am meeting someone for the first time, and have no idea what he will say or what kind of mood he is in. If you already know entirely what you want to say, and want to document an "honest" rehash of what happened and why, then I still maintain that you are better off

taking up jurisprudence. I appreciate my readers' instinct to protect my songwriting students and their attempts to stay honest, but in songwriting, as in painting, photo-realism is only one style; it is not the litmus test for everything else. In many great songs a larger, universal modicum of truth is revealed and resonates on a personal level with the listener, even when the facts make no sense at all. Sometimes especially when the facts make no sense at all. And, if everything goes well, you can also dance to it." - Rosanne Cash

"A writer's job is to imagine everything so personally that the fiction is as vivid as memories." - John Irving

"Art is a lie that tells the truth." - Picasso

On craft:

"There are, it seems, two muses: the Muse of Inspiration, who gives us inarticulate visions and desires, and the Muse of Realization, who returns again and again to say "It is yet more difficult than you thought." This is the muse of form. It may be then that form serves us best when it works as an obstruction, to baffle us and deflect our intended course. It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings." - Wendell Berry

On co-writing:

"Sometimes a kind of glory lights up the mind of a man. It happens to nearly everyone. You can feel it growing or preparing like a fuse burning toward dynamite. It is a feeling in the stomach, a delight of the nerves, of the forearms. The skin tastes the air, and every deep-drawn breath is sweet. Its beginning has the pleasure of a great stretching yawn; it flashes in the brain and

whole world glows outside your eyes. A man may have lived all of his life in the gray, and the land and trees of him dark and somber. The events, even the important ones, may have trooped by faceless and pale. And then - the glory - so that a cricket song sweetens his ears, the smell of the earth rises chanting to his nose, and dappling light under a tree blesses his eyes. Then a man pours outward, a torrent of him, and yet he is not diminished. And I guess a man's importance in the world can be measured by the quality and number of his glories. It is a lonely thing but it relates us to the world. It is the mother of all creativeness, and it sets each man separate from all other men. I don't know how it will be in the years to come. There are monstrous changes taking place in the world, forces shaping a future whose face we do not know. Some of these forces seem evil to us, perhaps not in themselves but because their tendency is to eliminate other things we hold good. It is true that two men can lift a bigger stone than one man. A group can build automobiles quicker and better than one man, and bread from a huge factory is cheaper and more uniform. When our food and clothing and housing all are born in the complication of mass production, mass method is bound to get into our thinking and to eliminate all other thinking. In our time mass or collective production has entered our economics, our politics, and even our religion, so that some nations have substituted the idea collective for the idea God. This in my time is the danger. There is great tension in the world, tension toward a breaking point, and men are unhappy and confused. At such a time it seems natural and good to me to ask myself these questions. What do I believe in? What must I fight for and what must I fight against? Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a man. Nothing was ever created by two men. There are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group

never invents anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of a man. And now the forces marshaled around the concept of the group have declared a war of extermination on the preciousness, the mind of man. By disparagement, by starvation, by repressions, forced direction, and the stunning hammerblows of conditioning, the free roving mind is being pursued, roped, blunted, drugged. It is a sad suicidal course our species seems to have taken. And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about. I can understand why a system built on a pattern must try to destroy the free mind, for that is one thing which can by inspection destroy such a system. Surely I can understand this, and I hate it and I will fight against it to preserve the one thing that separates us from the uncreative beasts. If the glory can be killed, we are lost." - John Steinbeck, East Of Eden

On embracing ambiguity:

"The most common and certainly the most difficult question I might be asked by a stranger on an airplane is, "What is your work about?" It's a conundrum for any
artist. And I suspect the one single quality that may peg one as an artist—as opposed to, say, a craftsman—may be the artist's inability to form a satisfactory answer. I could say it's about the process of discovering what it's about. And that would be honest. I could quote William Faulkner and say, "it's about the human heart in conflict with itself." And that would be honest too.

What my poems are about is—and comes out of—a kind of knowledge not preconceived. It's available only in the course of literary composition, a kind of wisdom that has to float like a piece

of ice on its own melting, as Robert Frost said a poem must. So I probably won't be able to tell you what any particular poem of mine is about in any words other than those in which it's composed. Frost, again, famously responded to a question about what he meant by a particular poem, saying, "If I'd wanted you to know, I'd have told you in the poem." On another such occasion he simply read the poem again. When someone tells me they wish they could read my poems but that they just don't understand poetry, I hear, as a sub-text, them saying, "I just don't know what it means," as if poetry were a kind of riddle that only a select few can decipher. I think the difficulty may lie in the word, "understand," when applied to a work of art. It seems to me a word no more germane to a poem than to a painting, a sculpture, a piano sonata or a novel. I will say that most of the poems I consider great, that have grown and deepened in me over the course of 30 or 40 years, were quite beyond me when I first encountered them. And yet they rang somehow inside me, like music heard for the first time. And I knew from the outset they were something I needed in my life, something I had to have. I recognized quite surely, they were necessary to the one who made them, and that they were necessary to me, though, on that first occasion, that may have been all I was able to take from them. "And so we are grasped by what we cannot grasp," Rainer Maria Rilke said. "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem by Frost, grasped me the first time my mother, or one of my older sisters, read it to me, but my appreciation of it has changed, deepened, saturated, over the years. The same can be said of "Leaves of Grass," by Walt Whitman. I've never understood either of them in the sense that one may feel he's come to understand a theory or an argument. How do we understand delight? I can't say I understand a Mark Rothko painting, but often I can feel what is grave and constant in human suffering when I stand before it. I seem to grasp a Norman Rockwell painting on my first glimpse of it but am seldom drawn to encounter it again, and in fact may

become enervated by repeated exposure. I may seem to be, and may, in fact, be a snob, but I believe as my old friend and teacher, George Oppen wrote, "... there are other levels / but there are no other levels of art." I don't think of an audience when I write, but if I did it would be someone very much like me. I'm deeply pleased when a neighbor, or a stranger, writes or tells me they have been moved by or delighted by my work—deeply pleased, but what really matters is the response of those I regard as my peers. I remember novelist Tom McGuane once saying "What really matters is the response of four or five friends. They're the ones I had in mind when I wrote it." William Keats said, "I never wrote a line with the least public thought. Everything I've written has been for the all- being, the principle of beauty, and the memory of great men." And it occurs to me just now that what I write is for, and in response to, Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Willa Cather, John Keats, Federico Garcia Lorca, Rilke, Antonio Machado, Frost and so many others—those through whom what I am and do began to wake up in me. I write for those who taught me to see. There is work, like that of John Asbery or, at times, Vladimir Nabokov, that seldom moves or strikes a deep chord in me, but which I enjoy visiting for its juice, its pure verbal facility, its virtuosity. I may learn from or catch a little fire from them, though their art is not what I aspire to. What is bad art to me is banality, of any kind, or what Joseph Campbell called pornographic art—"... that which engenders desire or loathing for that which is depicted." I've never understood Lorca, but I need him, just as I've never understood Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and I need him too.

Now that I've come to a point in my life where I look back to what we commonly call middle-age, I think, finally, that what my work is about is this: Our working to discover what love is—in its least discriminating, least object-focused, and deepest sense—when the foundation stone of all we've spent our lives thinking of as our

Some Wisdom on Writing

own has been worn away, something we might be given to understand, if only for a moment, in something like a poem."

- Dan Gerber, "Something Like A Poem"

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Miscellaneous:

"Old songs are more than tunes. They are little houses in which our hearts once lived." - Ben Hecht

"There are painters who transform the sun to a yellow spot, but there are others who with the help of their art and their intelligence, transform a yellow spot into the sun." - Pablo Picasso

"I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing." - Seamus Heaney