

# Quiet, Paper, Madness: A Place for Writing to Reach To

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Writing is a way of saying you and the world have a chance.

Richard Hugo

We want things to be right before writing. We want a room of our own, a study, a place we can go and have quiet and write. Now then, a pile of paper, pencils, they say those Word Processors are really the thing. Of course the big problem is that we don't have enough "quality time" for writing. We want to be "released," from classes, from family obligations, from "outside pressures to publish." We can't wait for the summer.

And then we get it all, everything we want: freedom, quiet, paper, a place. And the writing doesn't come. We may go mad. Certain stratagems may seem to give us something to do short of going mad: We may insert between ourselves and writing the various forms of bad-faith pretence that some call English (the term makes me think of Bosch's Garden of Delights), or themewriting, or cant. Or we may say that we have writer's block. It can be serious. We may be made mad enough to kill ourselves.

In this ideal and terrible writing situation, what still keeps us from writing? May be we lack a place for the writing to reach to.

We don't just lack an "audience," if by that we mean somebody out there whom we choose to address, or who wants to hear what we "have to say." Nobody knows beforehand if they want to hear what we have to say, even if, like some parents and teachers, they want to want to hear it. Some tormented writers-not-writing report that it helps to be assigned an Audience or Task by a patron or a boss. But even though writers may be taught and may learn that "taking account of your

audience" can make you a "more effective writer," this cannot be what justifies and motivates writing in our ideal and terrible writing situation. What is effective is not necessarily what is real. We may learn this from Plato's Apology, which imagines an audience other than the one at hand, but which has held its meaning far beyond the concrete situation in which it might have been effective, but wasn't. The writer's audience is always a fiction (Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction"): So is the place I am talking about here.

Some researchers have found it useful to think of writing as problem-solving. But before you can solve a problem, you have to accept it, you have to "have" it. I think that is one way we look at people who seem to be mad: They are not "having" certain problems that the rest of us have. This is not a bad way to look at some writers. Teachers know well that students won't "have" certain writing problems just because they are pointed out to them. So as writing teachers, we need to think not just about how to solve problems, but how to make it possible to "have" problems in such a way that they become something to solve.

Don Murray answers the question of what motivates writers with a powerful argument. What motivates writers, speaking for himself and many other good writers who have let us see their writing processes, is discovering in the act of writing what one didn't know one would write. If he stopped discovering, Murray says, he would stop writing.

William Stafford gives us an enticing image of what it is like to write like that:

...I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out

there), and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble—and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me. Something always occurs, of course, to any of us.... If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started (Stafford, pp. 17-18).

But Stafford gives us another image of what it is like to write in this way, an image that helps me say what I think is needed beyond what he and Murray tell us we must rely on.

[S]wimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any prejudgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this)—swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence (Stafford, p. 23).

Most of the time when we imagine a swimmer, we probably imagine him in the pool or the pond. But we may also imagine him in the middle of the ocean after the ship has gone down, or reaching further, we may imagine him, as one of Columbus' sailors might have imagined himself, not in an ocean, bounded by land and relieved by islands here and there, but in the medium that takes you to the edge of the world. And in these last two cases, we have to ask what would be necessary to support the repeated acts of "reaching out with confidence" that constitute swimming.

I take it that the sailor from the Pinta would have a significantly harder time starting to swim than would one who had seen the pictures of our globe sent back

from space. It is not that the second sailor would have a clear picture of a particular place. Rather that he can imagine that there might be such a place and imagine himself getting there alive.

No one has thought that Hemingway is talking only about fishing when he describes Santiago, the fisherman who, even after a long string of bad luck, still rows out past where the others stop and who lets his line down into the cold water where he knows, where he imagines and believes the real fish to be though this is a place far beyond what he can actually see to. Santiago's loss of his great fish to the sharks is a terrible defeat, but it is nothing so complete as having lost, or never having had the ability to imagine catching it.

It might be thought that what I am saying about the necessary context for writing applies only to Great Writing, that it has nothing to do with the world of work-a-day writing or the writing class. I think what I am saying has to do with the world of every writer. My witnesses are literary people not because they are doing something different from what other writers do but because they are better than most at giving us ways of seeing the situation we all are in as writers.

Students can do the kind of writing I am talking about. Their revisions are often what show them doing it, or not. At the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, William Coles read us some examples of revisions his students had made, revisions that seemed to Coles to show these students writing. I too think they show it:

There were four main causes for the War Between the States.

What are seen as the four main causes for the Civil War seems to depend on the point of view of the historian.

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My mother used to love my father, but she left him when he

became an alcoholic and wouldn't admit it.

My mother loves my father; she had to leave him because he's an alcoholic who can't admit it.

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My high school math teacher was tough but fair.

My high school math teacher was tough and fair.

To this list I add a revision by a Michigan judge of an opinion she was writing in a workshop I conducted:

There is a lot of pain in a divorce. But this is not justification for the child's pain.

In a divorce, the parties often suffer greatly. The duty of the court is to see that the children suffer as little as possible.

I think it is fair to call this "great" writing since it seems to show a writer in the act of becoming something other than what is given. We might find such writing in inter-office memos and quarterly reports. No reason why we couldn't.

But we can find also plenty of the other kind of writing, bad-faith writing, writing that does not reach for anything, any place, but which instead interposes itself between us readers and what we might want or need to be reaching for.

I think that if you look at the entire history of our country, that it has always been the federal government that has come to the rescue. Take the great depression and all the federal programs that we used to bail it out. What you are really doing is you stimulate the economy by priming the pump. When you give people salaries and positions, they will go out and spend money, which promotes business—the

private sector. Because they have got money coming in, they have a cash flow, and you hope for expansion.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of writing doesn't happen accidentally. But it doesn't happen either just because someone is trying to do something else in--would that it were always so amenable to conscious correction. It seems to me important to realize that everyone commits it sometimes; the greatest writers groan at what they have written. We might even think of the difference between them and us as lying in how often they groan and what at.

Why do students write so often in this way? Their characteristic bad faith as writers is not to be explained by their hormones, their cussedness. If we leave it at that, we have no option as teachers but to teach in bad faith.

Neither is the bad-faith writing of politicians, judges, and executives attributable only to defects in character. I think we can get much further in understanding why such writing happens if we ask what kind of place bad faith writers are imagining for their writing. And we might do more to eliminate bad faith writing if we ask what we can do to change whatever it is in the situation that is likely to prevent the writer from reaching for what she may not yet know to say.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Ohmann, "Reflections on Class and Language", College English, Vol. 44, No. 1, (January, 1982), p. 3. This example of bad faith writing isn't writing at all. It is taken from the transcript of a statement by a mayor who has been explaining to the interviewer why a factory left town, and telling the interviewer what should be done for the local economy. I have doctored the transcript a little to make it sound a bit more as if it had been written. I hope the bad faith of this "writing" is apparent even though the politics of the mayor would appear to be liberal and his intentions would appear to be good, and even though the "spoken" qualities of the language make it a good deal less arid than much that is written on this subject.

If we want writers who reach, we must do what we can to make a world in which reaching makes sense. There is much in our schools and our culture that keeps reaching from making sense. I am not talking about teaching grammar or the five-paragraph theme, or giving grades.

No doubt all of this can be part of a situation in which writing that reaches does not make sense. But I know teachers who can make all these things part of a situation in which writing that reaches does make sense. I am not talking about regulations, "government" or otherwise, which may or may not create situations in which reaching makes sense. In any case, it is obvious that reaching is impossible in a wholly unregulated context.<sup>2</sup>

We reach for what we do not have and can't arrange more easily to have given to us. But I am not here worrying about letting kids have it too easy. We may learn to let them write, but if we do, they will not have it easy, though I would predict that having the real writing will keep them from much regretting the not-having-it-easy.

Writers will fail to reach because they feel threatened, but you can't non-threaten someone into reaching. Or threaten them into it. We reach sometimes out of desperation, never out of despair. When there is nothing else to do, reaching must still, somehow, be something to do: It must make sense.

Much could be said about what specifically we can do to make our schools, our students, ourselves places that writing can reach from, and much of what would be proposed would certainly have to be negotiated. But Stafford tells us one thing that I think we must do: We must realize that the writing that we do when we do it

is just exactly the writing that we could do just then. We must learn to forgive ourselves for not being able to reach as far just then as we might think we ought to or as far as others might want us to.

We'll probably do better at the next pass. We need to realize, Stafford tells us, that writer's block is a kind of vanity. As, we might add, is bad faith writing, when it is not madness. We'll get someplace, rather than noplacement, Stafford says, if we'll just lower our standards. The wisdom of this observation is profound, and as practical as any I know for making writing that reaches.

We'll get someplace if we ask questions about what we can do in our schools and homes and towns--and in ourselves--to let reaching make sense for a writer, but we won't get all the way home. Because we can only let reaching make sense. Because writing that reaches is reaching for something that is not yet there, and thus it is reaching for something that we couldn't give even if we would.

For teachers, this means that no matter how active we may be in removing obstacles to writing that reaches, no matter how earnestly and imaginatively we may invite such writing, we will always be infinitely far from "achieving" it for our students, since it can never be for anyone but the writer to do the reaching. There is no world, no method, no curriculum that will make it happen. I am far from saying that as teachers we can do nothing to help. I teach writing, and I teach teachers of writing, and I teach the Summer Institutes of the Wyoming Writing Project. I think I know a lot about how to let writers and teachers of writing reach in their writing and teaching. But I do not reach for them, couldn't if I would. When they reach, as they often do, it usually strikes me as both surprising and inevitable.

I believe that in a very important sense the best we can do is wait and watch, though it's crucial that we be waiting for something, not nothing, and reaching too, ourselves, as we wait.

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<sup>2</sup>Johann Huizinga, Homo Ludens (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). Huizinga argues that play is central to culture, and that decorum (among other things) is necessary to play. Reaching, I take it, is one thing that distinguishes play from non-play.