

Thoughts on Publishing

“A Writer is one who writes,” are words of writer and teacher Donald Murray which counter the belief in our culture that “a writer is one who publishes.” Robert Louis Stevenson is reported to have said, “I hate to write; I love to have written,” which I take to mean he loved being a published writer, but dreaded the writing he had to accomplish to achieve that end. I meet many aspiring writers who, to my mind, put the cart before the horse. They call to ask “how to get published”, and when I ask them about their writing, they say that--while everyone says they should write a book--they haven't written it yet. I ask if, perhaps, they've written parts of the book? if they keep a journal? if they write regularly? if they write at all? and often the answer is no. By contrast, many of the women who come to WWf(a)c say, “I'm here because I love to write.” Many report the pain and shame of revealing that love, however modestly to others, and being asked, not *what do you write?* but *what have you published?*

For people who love to dance, there are many venues (dance groups, nightclubs, etc.) to keep them dancing whether or not they are dance performers. Singers can find numerous church and civic choirs in which to use their voices. Painters can show their work in galleries, churches, art fairs, decorate their own and friends' homes. Writers, by contrast, are regaled with stories of the near impossibility of getting published in the conventional market sense, while simultaneously being told: you're only a “real writer” if you publish in the conventional market sense.

WWfac is a school which was created to keep women writing, to keep their words coming, while encouraging each woman to forge her own link between writing and publishing. For me, the link between writing and publishing is fairly simple: I know that having places to take my words will elicit more of them. I write first for myself, to understand, to clarify, to feel, to define myself and to resist others' defining of me. I once read, in a source I have been unable to recall, a playwright remarking, something to the effect of "wanting to publish too much is sort of like stockpiling nuclear weapons." When I got over my initial shock at the odd analogy, I understood her to mean that there is in our culture an aggressive, even violent face of publishing: pushing my views endlessly onto others, filling the available space with my meanings, stockpiling even more of my words, and aggressively searching for more places to spew them. (As the saying goes, "having only one function--transmission, no channel for reception.") I have also learned that if women do not transmit our own words about our lives, we will continue to be defined (idealized, demonized, misunderstood) by the dominant culture. As Audre Lorde so succinctly put it in Sister Outsider:

For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that
it we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined
by others--for their use and to our detriment. (p. 45)

Yet another motivation to publish is the passion to connect. "I read to know I'm not alone," says a character in Shadowlands, a film version of the relationship between C.S. Lewis and Joy Gresham. I also *write* to know I'm not alone; the words on the page are a trail of bread crumbs out of the shadowy forest of self, toward a possible "coming

home” to others who might see and understand. The "caged bird” of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem alluded to in the title of Maya Angelou’s memoir, sings for the pleasure of hearing her own voice, and in the hope of being heard. Emily Dickinson wrote out of her isolation in Cambridge toward listeners imagined and real. Hero Joy Nightingale, whose names are both poetic and prophetic, writes an internet magazine, from her room in Canterbury, England. Born with what doctors call a “locked-in condition,” Hero cannot speak, walk, or take care of herself, yet she composes music, plans arts installations, and writes all day by spelling words into the hand of an assistant. Hero’s mother, Pauline Reid, then types dictation into the computer, allowing Hero to publish, to connect with the world outside her window. Her internet magazine is called From the Window, and despite her locked-in condition-- and because of it-- Hero has a passion to connect . Her words reach readers in 77 countries. Unlike Robert Louis Stevenson, Hero does not hate to write.

“Writing is everything. Without writing I am nothing because everything I feel, think and need must be conveyed through my spelling.”(Cincinnati Enquirer)

Women Writing for (a) Change classes put writing, getting the work on the page first, then we imagine ways our words might flow into the world. I often say, our learning about publication is mostly “re-thinking” or “re-framing” publication. We learn from each woman’s stories of how she put her writing in appropriate relation to publishing. Writers tell stories of publishing their letters, stories, poems within their families which can one of the most courageous forms of publication. Others contribute pieces to literary journals, chapbook contests, magazines and newspapers. Increasingly, I

see women integrating their personal writing with articles or talks they write for professional journals or conferences.

Women Writing for (a) Change on the Radio was born of my dream of having a way to publish women's words about our lives as women directly into the kitchens and cars of listeners across the country, this kind of publication serving as an antidote to the loud, angry voices of talk show hosts whipping up hatred and intolerance.

A key to my own understanding of the dynamics of publishing has been the word, "submit." I started writing in order to stop submitting. Yet, very early--far too early--in my "starting to write" I was encouraged to "start to submit." I spent hours I should have been writing and honing my craft staring at pages of Poets Market, and reviewing grant applications forwarded to me by well-meaning friends and professors. The words began to catch in my throat, just as I was beginning to get them out. Connected to the possibility of being either "good enough" or "possibly rejected" by people I didn't know, would never see, the writing which began with such joy began to feel like yet another beauty contest in which I would be found wanting. When I submitted to submitting, when I had as yet created no context for understanding what was mine to write, and who might want or need to hear it, I was--as my mother would have said--"back in the soup." Writing to discover what was on the inside, I hooked myself up too early to outside reaction to be helpful to me, to further my writing. Elation at having a poem or two "accepted" and published in journals and anthologies was short-lived. Because I had no sense of the words' effects on real readers or listeners, I felt as if the words had disappeared in an ocean of words. The only gain was, to be able to say, "yes I've published," and to begin

to accumulate a list of publications on my vita which said, *real writer* to someone. Rejection of a manuscript--which was more common-- plummeted me to: *why in the world did you think you were good enough?* And, in certain contexts, or contests, I was not, and will never be good enough. I'm no Mary Oliver, nor Linda McCarriston, nor Sharon Olds, nor Jayne Kenyon whose poems I love, whose words are so powerful and original as to not disappear in an ocean of words. But do I want to *not write*, not feel the great pleasure of making, of making whole, of bringing my soul to the page, because "I'm no Mary Oliver?" They say self-knowledge is the greatest knowledge, and I am engaged in applying self-knowledge to my life as a writer, or I will have no life as a writer. Neither to inflate nor deflate my gifts, neither to seek publication for its own sake, nor to shrink from publishing my words when and where they can be heard and perhaps do some good for someone in addition to myself. (I heard poet Stanley Plumly say once as a reading, "if poetry is therapy for the poet, it should be for the reader too.")

I know myself well enough to say: I am the kind of writer who came to writing to break personal silence, and to engage in the deeply pleasurable activity of "making things with words." Along the way, I have discovered how my personal silence was connected to the larger, systemic silencing of women, and eventually began to perceive the even deeper connection to the suppression of "the feminine principle" in history and on the planet. People often ask me to "explain" the name, "women writing for (a) change," and, though I sometimes suspect that they want me to justify rather than clarify, I can answer more clearly and succinctly now than I was able when I founded the work. The name refers to keeping the focus on what women are expressing instead of

what men are expressing for a change. Refers to the personal changes which occur in women's lives when we see our truths expressed on the page and taken seriously. Refers to systemic changes which result when women's version of things are included in the making of institutions, policy, medical protocols, etc. Refers to how life on the planet will change, when the feminine is brought back into proper balance with the masculine. One path to this is "bringing women to words, and the words of women to the world.," a tag-line I invented for Women Writing for (a) Change on the Radio which ran for seven years on WVXU, a PBS affiliate.