

Thoughts on Publishing: Take Two

“The Wild Geese” by Wendell Berry

Horseback on Sunday morning,
harvest over, we taste persimmon
and wild grape, sharp sweet
of summer's end. In time's maze
over the fall fields, we name names
that went west from here, names
that rest on graves. We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise,
pale in the seed's marrow.
Geese appear high over us,
pass and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear,
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.

“What we need is here.” is wisdom enough for a lifetime, wisdom with the potential to reclaim lives otherwise spent in the not-always-quiet desperation of futile seeking. All along, what we need lies in the Here of Here, “fall fields” we carry inside.

Not Perishing

I can't think of anything which destroys meaning-making more than approval-seeking, fear that what is here, *in* here: our words, ideas, are not good enough. Nor can I think of anything which fosters that fear more fully than the mechanics of “getting your work published” as conventionally constructed.

Get It Out There

Very soon—way too soon—after I began writing, people began to pressure me to publish, to research markets, “get my stuff out there,” --anywhere it seemed, just so I could say I had been published. One woman suggested I use her method to speed things up: *keep a stack of envelopes addressed to places which might publish your poems. When a manuscript is rejected, don't pause for any longer than it takes to stick it on the next envelope, affix postage, and get it to the post office.*

How could I tell her: *I came to writing to NOT SUBMIT, to make something I WOULDN'T market, wouldn't have arbitrary value assigned by “places” I'd never been; persons I'd never met?! My body of work is MY BODY; I will choose how it is handled as long as life is in it. Even my son, the most precious production of my body, I will have to turn over to forces of market and government, to be judged and used as they will.*

How spill my secret to this well-meaning friend? I will not have my path toward creating a self take a cruel turn, leading me back to the all holy faceless father's chamber of horrors, Jack the Ripper with red pen and condescension.

In this, as in so much else I have done since I began to write for a change, I risk ridicule on behalf of my project of self-defining. I hold myself to a high standard of honesty; I conduct rigorous self-interviews, submitting to my own interrogation about why I persist in this attitude toward publishing which wins me no status, blocks my entry to places I might like to be, places (classrooms, conferences, work groups) where I might have something of value to teach, had I the credential of “published author.”

Truth to Tell

Truth to tell, I want to be published in the conventional sense only insofar as it supports my true aims: to write what is mine to write as beautifully and powerfully as I'm able; to be heard; to connect; to tell the truth; to do whatever good I can do in the world. My writing gift is not luminous; it is not powerfully original, startlingly lyrical.. I know I'm not going to have my poems published by a "big house," have them reviewed favorably by critics or other poets.

I also know my poems have integrity, their own beauty, a reason for being in the world beyond my pleasure in writing them—though that is no small thing. I experience the time-stopping "zone" of composing/crafting as the place of my greatest health and joy. In that alone, if I never so much as read a poem of mine aloud to a friend, I am published. For I publish my wellness, my self-knowledge, my wholeness to the world as I move through it as teacher, mother, wife, grandmother, friend. And it would be as true were I shop-keeper, single woman, politician, or rock and roll singer.

Protecting my gift

My personal history makes me sensitive to the following questions: *If I came to my desk each day with the known identity of "published," famous, taken-seriously writer, would the wholeness, the truth-telling, the joy be compromised? Would I come to the page haunted by "what have you done lately" voices, the pressure to produce another book, not be a "one-hit" wonder, pressure to publish another saleable book? Would I lose writing my true I's to the seductive identity of being The Writer?*

What relationship, in short, toward publishing, will keep me writing, rather than keep me *from* writing, from the kind of writing which has taught me that what I need, who I fundamentally am, is "HERE."

In no way am I projecting my values with regard to publishing onto other writers, questioning the integrity of published writers, nor their deserving to be read! That would be ungrateful in the extreme, for books have been magic keys for me since childhood to worlds I desire to know, their writers my teachers-at-a-distance, my magic-weavers. My project here is to situate my own need to continue writing within a context which dictates you may only write, be a writer, if you publish--moreover publish in ways and places “the faceless we” approve. In this chapter I am writing my own self-scrutiny, my own understanding of my life as a writer, as part of the foundation from which I teach others to write. I am publishing it toward any who would join me in the ongoing project of re-imagining publication in ways which will restore its vitality and integrity.

Writer-a-festo

I am a writer because I write; I am a published writer because my words have appeared in journals and collections *which did not require me to submit*; because my words have been heard in the numerous places I have been invited to stand up with them before audiences within and beyond my community. Part of my mission as a teacher of writing is to help each student construct her authentic writing self, a self which reflects her “true aims,” her gifts. It is also part of my work, to help her discern the path her words will take into the world, to help her publish her words spanning a continuum from traditional venues to those as yet unimagined.

Perspective and Two Stories

Before going on to some of the ways we have re-imagined and widened the definition of publishing in wwfac, I want to provide larger-world context for my thoughts about publishing. I am keenly aware, for example, of my own idealism with regard to the

role of the arts, especially the literary arts. My idealism is captured in part by these words from Czeslaw Milosz,

To whom do we tell what happened on the
Earth, for whom do we place everywhere huge
Mirrors in the hope that they will be filled up
And stay so? from “Annalena,”

Because poems, stories, books, newspaper articles, etc. have challenged, enriched, entertained, so much helped Make Me , I continue to be wedded to the power of words to “save a few lives,” as Grace Paley has written. I continue to be inspired by projects such as those initiated by Kaethe Weingarten who writes about compassionate witnessing. I “spread the gospel” of Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry, of Barbara Kingsolver, of Rumi, of any / all writers who bring us to the world, to one another, to ourselves.

On the other hand—while no censor—I question the need for churning out more books, “killing more trees,” just to be able to say, “I’m an author.” More than question the need, I see the relationship between this striving and the killing off of wisdom and the killing off of one another. I am haunted by a recalled snippet from a longer essay in a collection, I think, about play writing. The writer says something like, “wanting to publish too much is like wanting to build more nuclear weapons.” Shocked, at first dismissive of this comparison, I have, through observation of mindless, cutthroat ambition of some artists, come to see the connection she makes.

Helen Luke

In her essay, “The Sense of Humor,” Helen Luke cites the diaries of Etty Hillesum. In them the young Jewish woman describes both the horror of Auschwitz and her realization of “ what a very little thing all this misery was in the glorious wholeness of the universe.” (Luke, *Way of Woman*, 78). Luke goes on to say:

As we wonder how we could possibly have endured such a fate, we are nevertheless inspired by these great ones urgently to seek in our everyday lives a fuller realization of this joy, this laughter. (Luke, *Way of Woman*, 78)

Luke calls activities which restore our sense of perspective, our insight into fundamental meanings, “play.”

Tragedy, comedy, farce, and all kinds of music—Bach, plain-song, jazz, or rock and roll—are brought to us by players, among them are those who appreciate and understand the nature of play and so convey the joy of it to their audiences through their “playing” whether of dark truths or light. *But there are so many who have no perception of the meaning of play and whose striving motives are to acquire fame and money or self-satisfaction by sensational performances, often in productions without meaning—the opposite of play.* (Italics mine) (Luke, 78-9)

This is the context in which I am understanding my work both as a writer and as a teacher. While not in the business of deciding for others which productions have meaning and which don't, I am very clear that I want my work to line up with the human capacity to play, in all keys, on instruments held by many-colored, any size hands. I want my writing-teaching life to restore “playing” to its original purpose of creating as if meaning, god, nature, humanity mattered. Having a program which “teaches toward the

market” is not part of my aim, any more than I would have been able to “teach to the test,” were I still part of the educational system now destroying learning by the centrality of scoring and measuring.

Story #1

“I’m so proud; I’m so jealous,” exclaims the mother to the daughter, after daughter’s performance. Mother is an English Teacher of the old-fashioned, intellectual kind, inspirational institution-in-her-right in an all girls’prep school. She passes on to Daughter her love of language, stories, the magic and power of words. She also passes on to Daughter (and to her female students) her conviction that, unless the flame burn as brightly as that of the greats at whose altar she worships, it is better to snuff it out. Better to be a great reader than a failed writer. Better, one might say, to “know your place.” Mother quotes Shakespeare and Faulkner, Tolstoy, Rabelais, Keats, and Shelley. Embraces high moderns, post-moderns, cutting edge, DeLillo and Pynchon. Her own words lie dead in her, smothered by her expertise on the rules of the game, her identity as cheerleader on the sidelines, or, more reverently, acolyte to high priests.

Mother says she is happy in her place, but what is unspoken shouts louder in the daughter’s ear. “Fulfill my dreams; be a Great Writer.” In the other ear, the witch’s sibilant whisper, “but don’t embarrass me by being a pretender, a fraud, dilettante. You are either Jane Austen or nobody.” Daughter feels called to be a writer, but fears writing. Fears both: becoming the failed writer of whom the mother will be ashamed and becoming the successful writer of whom the mother will be jealous.

Story # 2

Mother is a writer; writes three novels which “those who know such things” praise extravagantly. Mother sends the books out again and again, efforts to publish largely replacing writing both because of limited time, and quashed spirits. Nearing fifty, Mother has a breakdown. Daughter comes home from school to a scene of Mother feeding the novels into the barbecue pit in the back yard. Now mother is “an intellectual,” corresponds with Helen Luke, John Huston, and others the Daughter does not even know about until discovering her mother’s letters.

Late in life, Mother is an expatriate, adored old lady consort of artists, writers, journalists, political activists. Mother has one final book; *her life’s aim is to publish just one great book*. Her friends praise the book, sincerely, for she is a gifted writer. Her friends send the book around to their publishers, but the timing is not right, or the market is not good right now, or... Time is running out, and the Mother dies, her greatest dream dying within her.

The Daughter becomes a teacher of writing; she too is a gifted writer, but does not make time for her own writing, approaches it; avoids it. The Daughter keeps Mother’s unpublished book in a box.

What’s a daughter—what are the writing daughters to do—with such legacies? How do we do our own writing within a culture which Adrienne Rich has rightly described as “predator to the intellectual woman.” How move forward carrying our mothers’ dead dreams in boxes?

Opportunity

I remember a greeting card series built around Chinese calligraphy. The card for Crisis features two pictographs: *Opportunity + Risk*.

I think of this when reading or hearing accounts of how the publishing industry is in a time of great volatility, forever said to be on the brink of crumbling.

A mystery-writing friend, for example, secures an editor who advocates her work, only to have that said editor “down-sized” before the writer’s manuscript, which has been making the rounds for two years, has been fully vetted for publication. Said writer, encouraged by the publishing house under its former editor, to begin work on a sequel, has a once-accepted, now-rejected first book in her desk drawer, a half-finished sequel on her laptop. She is writing mysteries because people read mysteries and she wants to make her living as a writer = writing the kinds of books people read. When we talk, she wonders whether to go on writing mysteries or use her time for the poems which feed her soul, but which will never feed her bank account.

I wonder if the very dysfunctionality of the publishing industry is an opportunity to re-imagine publishing in ways which will keep writers writing, their work connected to their true aims. More extroverted than Emily Dickinson, I reached a point in my writing of poems when I DID want to publish them as a way of completing the loop, sending energy out into the world, and receiving energy back which would keep me engaged. An early journal entry of mine says, “I don’t want to be published; I want to be heard.” What I was fortunate enough to discover was that, being heard IS being published. I don’t write thinking, “mmm, I wonder where I could take this to see how it affects listeners, but I *do* come to a place where I am ready to see what I can learn from the interactions of reader and listeners. I learn a great deal about my craft by hearing the words bounce off the bodies of listeners, and by hearing—when possible—what is stirred in them by my writing.

In my work as a teacher, I mentor students to cultivate ways of publishing which will keep them writing, which will line up with their true aims, ways which will not distort their voices, nor require them to suppress parts of their stories. In my chosen vocation as a change agent, social entrepreneur, I am always imagining ways to publish the conscious feminine in my home community, and when possible, beyond. Here I will borrow words fresh from the pioneer class of *The Feminist Leadership Academy of Cincinnati* to re-iterate what I support publishing:

In this circle (the FLA) we know that it is only the feminine that can step in to create balance, only women who will know how to create the next wave of healing and raise the consciousness of the world. This will happen with our grassroots efforts and in ways that model respect for all people. This will happen as we reflect this in the public eye and as we create an opportunity for all people to heal by our deep sense of rising hope. Marta Donahoe “Women With Wings”

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Not Propaganda

Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Azar Nafisi) while writing this chapter, I am even more than usually aware of a favorite mantra, that *orthodoxy is the enemy*. I believe I learned this phrase from Donald Murray, in an *English Journal* article warning teachers to not fall in love with new composition theories, making them as formulaic and lifeless as the “old traditional paradigm” had been. I am decidedly NOT advocating that women’s words about a narrow and “acceptable” range of experiences and beliefs replace the relatively narrow range of subjects and meanings which still determine “what is publishable” and how it is published. What drove me, for instance, to publish the words of ordinary/extraordinary women on “a radio program of our own,” was the determination to create an alternative to the “war of the words” which drench us

daily. The perserveration on sports, on celebrity, on raw power, on moral certitude, on “entertaining” by fomenting division, cannot--must not-- be the only game in town.

Azar Nafisi introduced me for the first time to the story of Henry James’s final years when he descended the tower of art for art’s sake and stood on the ground of his despair over the carnage of World War I. James wrote passionate letters and pamphlets insisting on the “. . . most important of human attributes—feeling—“ as opposed to the suppression of all feelings except the anger which fuels aggression.

All his life had been a struggle for power—not political power, which he disdained, but the power of culture. For him culture and civilization were everything. He had said that the greatest freedom of man was his “independence of thought,” which enabled the artist to enjoy the “aggression of infinite modes of being.” Yet in the face of so much carnage and destruction he felt helpless and impotent. His affinity with England, and with Europe in general, came from that sense of civilization, a tradition of culture and humaneness. But now he had also seen Europe’s depravity, its fatigue with its own past, its predatory, cynical nature. It is no wonder he used all his powers, not least the power of words, to help those he believed to be in the right. He was not insensitive to their curative potential, and wrote to a friend, Lucy Clifford, *“We must for dear life make our own counter-realities.”* (Italics mine)

