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*And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld
not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour:
and this was my portion of all my labour.*
Ecclesiastes 2:10

*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is
no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave,
whither thou goest.*
Ecclesiastes 9:10

*He that laboureth, laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of
him.*
Proverbs 16:26

In the end it's all about play, isn't it?

Of course those of us who are supposed to take ourselves seriously—take what we do seriously—must cower in fear of being found out—found out by the bankers, the grocers, the lawyers, who frown with secret contempt anyway at the idea of a writer. What is that? You bake no bread, you mend no bones, you birth no babies, you tend no busted carburetors, you build no houses—what is it exactly that you do but sit around and make up things in your head? You, grown man, grown woman, you do nothing but play all day.

Suppose you've published something. Suppose you're one of the luckier ones who's been hired to presume to teach the craft. Suppose a bit of ink has been spilt in your name and in your favor. Just suppose.

(Oh, and dear possums, forget it if you're the genius-in-hiding, working at the video store, or the brilliant lass who waits tables by day, both of you dedicated Flauberts and Hurstons by night, hunched over laptop or IBM Selectric or Underwood-- Because, honey, you've got a whole lot of proving to do; first of

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all to yourself; second of all to the world. But of course you do work, I mean real work, and there are W-2 forms and Social Security taxes to prove that hallowed point. Convince anyone that those stacks of paper, both the ones on the desk and the ones wadded up in the garbage can are more than play, and I'm certain Hillary Clinton has a job waiting for you in public relations. Just forget trying to be taken seriously. It ain't apt to happen. But take yourself seriously. Take what you do even more seriously. That's what matters. That's what's important. That's what gets you through the nights of editing, re-writing, re-casting, reading, pulling you hair out, cussing at the blank page, and the full page, and dumping your girl/boyfriend who never even heard of James Agee.)

But suppose that fleeting, wonderful, at-times-agonizing, at-times-joyful, but always productive days, weeks, months, years—and yes, for some of us, alas, decades—are come to an end: *Granta* has bought two of your stories, your poem will be included in an anthology of young poets, a bright young editor at Simon and Schuster has paid you more than five nickels for your racy and well-written bildungsroman, which Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* will call a dazzling debut; you're invited to the Miami Book Fair along with 150 other authors—yeah, you're an author now, and someone actually gives a flapdoodle about what you're tapping away at on your laptop, your IBM Selectric, your Underwood. Yes, Jean, you've been taken seriously, as an artist, as a craftsperson, as a writer. Let us just suppose.

Say your name is Toni Morrison, or Cynthia Shearer, or David Mamet, or Richard Howard, or Larry Brown, or Arundhati Roy, or this one or that one. Oh, yes, all those brilliant little day-dreamed eggs have finally hatched and they're sprouting glorious feathers. Let's just suppose.

Now what?

At some point, sooner or later, a writer must confront this frightening question, a question that goes well beyond the goodies and bangles of material success. This crossroads, as I see it, is the crux at the center of writing. Almost Zen in its simplicity/complexity, yet so many people—including myself—so often peer around it, over it, beyond it, but never really at this most simple of truths: a) writing is a tremendous amount of work; b)

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writing is a tremendous amount of play. The best writing comes after a great deal of labor; the labor a writer puts into her or his work, must come from a type of love: a writer must love what he writes, what she actually does, or the work is not even born a still-born thing: rather it is an embryo that never develops legs, let alone wings.

Or, as someone once wrote, A man labors for that which loves, and loves for that which he labors.

A question I ask my students, my fellow writers, and myself most often:

Take away the Nobel Prize, and the Pulitzer too; take away massive advances, movie rights, foreign rights, and bestseller lists; take away *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* and *The Yalobusha Review*; take away excellent book jackets and beautiful type; take away readings, Broadway, radio interviews and all the vanity associated with authorhood—take it all away. Now ask yourself: Would you still write?

Why do you write? Why does anyone?

I think of Michel de Montaigne. A Spanish nobleman of the late 16th Century, he wrote out of a need to understand, to express himself, to grapple with his mind and its relation to the world. . .or so he writes.

Here is Montaigne on death:

Wherever your life ends, it is all there. The advantage of living is not measured by length, but by use; some men have lived long, and lived little; attend to it while you are in it. It lies in your will, not in the number of years, for you to have lived enough. Did you think you would never arrive where you never ceased going? Yet there is no road but has its end. And if company can comfort you, does not the world keep pace with you?

I enjoy reading Montaigne, for I feel I can see his mind at work. There is a grace, there is a bold honesty, there is a special brand of wisdom. Four hundred years later, his words seem uncannily fresh and relevant. Mind you, fellow traveler, Montaigne could not count on Oprah's Book Club to rescue his works from so-called obscurity. He surely didn't sit by the phone

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either, waiting for James Cameron to call about a movie deal. To be sure, Montaigne was a man of material means—not a fact to let slip by easily—yet the fact remains: He wrote. Why?

I think of Jane Austen. A few years ago, at the Academy Awards, the British actor, Emma Thompson, upon accepting an award for her work on a movie adaptation of a Jane Austen novel, said something to the effect: “I don’t know if she knows it, but Jane Austen is big in Paraguay right now.”

Indeed, 181 years after her death, the novels of Jane Austen are “big.” Her readership could populate entire countries. Today. But we often forget that during her lifetime the number of people who read her books numbered fewer than the readership of one well-received first novel published today; that is to say, only a few thousand. Why on earth did Jane Austen write?

Folk write for various and sundry reasons, obviously. Some write for fame and fortune, and some happily achieve these elusive and powerful goals. Some write to exorcise (or exercise) their personal demons, and some succeed in that exercise. Some write to calm or even hear a calm voice within, or to realize some pageant, some drama taking place in their brain, to find meaning in the beautiful chaos of life. Some succeed. Many do not. But those who fail and those who succeed all engage in the same activity: writing; why?

Nowadays, to speak of what is “good” can get a person frowned upon, or worse. For better or worse, “good” has been re-defined, democratized. For example: my earlier use of Montaigne and Austen could be viewed as the most reprehensible for of Eurocentric, essentially paternalistic, canonical propaganda. There can be some merit to that non-exclusive point of view. Granted, so-called genre work —police procedurals, westerns, romances, humorous sketches, fantasy, science fiction, popular song lyrics, comic books—can all be done excellently, and even in the least rigorously realized stuff (i.e. trash—and yes, that is a value judgment) some work went into creating it, some something can be taken out of it, either learned, felt, or understood.

But there again is my rub: whatever the form, whatever one’s objective goal, whatever levels of accomplishment one uses as a measure—there is a degree of work involved. Saul Bellow may have worked a little harder and a little longer on *The Adventures*

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of *Augie March* than did Neil Gaiman on his latest issue of the *Sandman* comic, but they both did some work, a certain type of work, a mental work which ultimately came together in the form of squiggles and dots on a page. Let us lay aside, for the moment, issues of quality, for I am about something more fundamental, something about the nature of putting pen to paper.

What is this thing we do when we write? I do not presume to have any special authority to speak knowingly on the actual mechanism within our brains that makes and forms sentences, characters, scenarios, ideas. I have no Oliver Sacks-like learning on the mind, nor any Howard Gardner-like hypotheses on how the brain works. Rather I can speak on the value of that work, of that mysterious labor which, as aforementioned, is marked by no physical change in the wide world. Often quiet, often un-known, un-seen, un-felt.

A writer must, at some point, admit to the self that there may be no pay-off at the end of the Yellow Brick Road; that more trouble might be invited into the life than abated or banished; that the words set down might not quite work, ever; that the fickle, questionable—and purely subjective—Muse of Talent may never ever visit their none-the-less deserving cranium or soul. However, at some level, at some propitious time, the writer must make a faithful decision: to honor the work. To take seriously that peculiar labor of talking to one's own self on the page. To honor the actual labor involved in composition of whatever and however. To love the labor of the work of writing. I speak not of the artifacts of the trade—the pens, the pencil sharpener, the fresh ream of Hammermill paper, the 24 megs of RAM and the 18 pixelated screen attached to the 5 gigs of memory and the pentium chip and Wordperfect, Word, Write—right; no, I speak of what goes on in the brain. Folk who've done this type of work know that the process of writing is work. Real work.

We live in a society, just at this moment of the world, where we are taught to put a great deal of value on Product. On visible Service. We are taught also to disparage the value of the process. In fact we spend time and energy and money trying to find ways to reduce the process, make it more efficient, speed it up, cut to the chase.

Question: How, exactly, do you speed up the imagination?

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Vladimir Nabokov once gave a lecture at Cornell University on what he called Uncommon Sense. Common Sense, according to Nabokov, was not what a writer needed, or wanted; common sense surrounds and abounds at car dealerships, beauty salons, on military bases, at Wal-Marts and at casinos. Common sense, quite literally, rules the world. Uncommon sense, however, is rare and powerful. Think of the uncommon sense of *Crime and Punishment*, of *Beloved*, of *All the King's Men*, of *The Color Purple*, of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, of *West with the Night*. And please, let's not leave out Batman, Spiderman, the Roseanne Show, Richard Pryor's comedy, and the stories of the late beloved Isaac Asimov. Strange, curious works, from strange, beautiful imaginations, full of uncommon sense.

And, as I mentioned earlier, though I have no special dispensation to make this case stick, I do feel in my bones that only in the imagination—outside and away from the paper-minded men and women with their credit-card eyes—can uncommon worlds be achieved, realized, thought-up. Only in the imagination can such ideas be played with. Ah, play!—such fun. But such serious fun. The writer labors within that fun of the imagined. She labors to put down what she has witnessed in the realm of her imagination: of how a little girl got lost in the woods and encountered a snark or a phear, and did battle for her life; of how a poor fellow of honest heart fell in love with a princess of surpassing beauty and intelligence and proved himself worthy of her hand; of how three sisters turned on their youngest sibling and had her cast from the family; of visions of castles and wars and magical goings on down by the river; dramas of betrayal, malice, hubris, sickness, love—sweet, sweet loves—bitter-sweet success, happy failure; of memories most precious, like jewels; of other ways of living life, coping, learning, being. . . . But without first having played there in the fields of her mind, she has little of value to say.

But here is the dilemma: For grown folk to admit that such a thing is to be visited by guilt—a guilt imposed, directly and indirectly, by society.

For we must be held accountable for the time spent, the electricity burned, the money gone. Are you writing a best-seller? Some undying prose to win grand awards? Some poesy for your

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beau? Some ephemeral gobbledy-gook? What exactly are you doing, Mary? Is it of value?

Value? In the real world, it is simply not possible to keep questions of quality and worth at bay for too long. We structure our lives based on a system of priorities: What's more important? What's better? How much does it cost? I have no intention of wasting anybody's time trying to debate whether *Moby Dick* is more or less valuable than Action Comics, or whether Paul Simon's song lyrics should stand beside Gwendolyn Brooks's poems—That's another game. The truth is I'm glad we have them all.

But I do contend that the act of writing—more often than not, a labor of love, mysterious, uncommon, painful, rewarding, on the page, with each unfolding, new, revealing, exciting, dangerous sentence—is, in and of itself, of more worth than most living and breathing Americans are willing to accord it, let alone say out-loud. The process, more than the product. The actual imagination, more than its remnants. True, the remnants are precious, but we must never forget these words are treasures brought back from Other-worlds. We must never forget to honor the traveler's moxy for taking that brave journey.

By the same token the writer has no right to whine—No one appreciates how hard I work! No one gives me my just due!—Nope. And why should anyone? As the novelist Mordecai Richler once observed: Nobody asked you to do it anyway. You volunteered. (He that laboureth laboureth for himself.) So forget about the banker's sneer and the grocer's quibble and the lawyer's scoff, for, when done right, the writer's work is rewarded by its own fealty. External validation is tertiary at best. For the weary sojourner of the mind has discovered: We truly do contain multitudes:

If you don't believe me, the proof is there on the page. . .

In the end, for writer, reader, mom, dad, lover, employer, idle looker-on, fellow citizen, the decision of which I speak—to honor the process and keep it Holy—in this workaday, give-and-take, get-what-you-can-while-you-can, hurry-up-and-wait world, is actually more easily said than done.

The avowal, too, takes work, but it is work well worth the effort.