

SOMETHING TO PONDER
Thoughts from a Writing Life

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Forward

Between October 2011 and May 2017 I was usually writing about one essay a month on my website. These essays are mostly about experiences and thoughts I encountered somewhere within my loosely defined writing life. Some of these essays changed in smaller ways, some in larger as I was gathering them together. One of the things I love about writing is having the opportunity to discover all of the unknowns from among the many possibilities. Part of being an organic writer is being open to possibilities and knowing when to follow or to not follow an impulse. Why, when and how things begin is a mystery, as is why, when and how things end. It has been encouraging and surprising to see, explore and experience the changes and growth in my thoughts and concerns and in myself as a writer over this time. Some of these topics called me, some urged me on and others needed to be extracted from deep within. I don't remember what stirred me to write my first essay in October 2011, but I know after 5½ years it is time to set this pen aside and open a door to other writing projects.

S.G.

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1

What does it mean to be a writer in the 21st Century? I grew up in a society that held individualism as the model, be it Henry Thoreau living at Walden Pond or Gary Cooper standing up to the thugs and bullies of the Frank Miller gang. Over the past decades we've become a culture of conformity, where one size fits all, the lowest price is best (no matter who or what is exploited) and you don't have to think for yourself because "the best and brightest" (and highest paid) have already done that for you.

I'm an unproduced playwright. I have been writing for over a decade and I don't have a single original full-length play to my name. I've written a couple of original full-length plays, but they've either been cut down to a shorter play or will be the foundation of a newly imagined full-length play that is, as of yet, not written. So what right do I have to call myself a writer in the 21st Century?

The most thoughtful and influential voices I've read in my life were singular voices, not plural voices. They spoke for individuals, for the everyman, not groups, not corporations. They added to my understanding of the human condition. They added to what I might become, to who I am becoming. When Robert Frost looked down one path and then the other, he knew he couldn't travel both. Conformity is always about pleasing someone else, either singular or plural. A writer is still a writer, so I guess I'll do what writers have always done, if I want to be a writer in the 21st Century.

2

How long does it take for a writer to find his or her voice? There is no do-this-and-you-will-get-that as a writer, from my experience. My professional career as a playwright began in the summer of 1997. I was halfway through my graduate degree and hadn't written a play in a couple of years. Then within a few short weeks the germ that would become *The Night Before* was planted and I began adapting Richard Boleslavsky's book, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, for the stage.

More than fourteen years have passed since that summer, I'm still unproduced and I still don't have an original full-length play to my name. *The Night Before* and *Shakespeare Restored* were full-lengths when I first wrote them. After 14 years, I'm still at work on those first three plays. If my voice is organic, if it is natural, then it was there at the beginning, when I began those plays.

My adaptation of Boleslavsky has, within the last year, become *Six Lessons*. It has grown beyond the book for the first time. *Shakespeare Restored* has, within the last year, been cut down to a shorter play. I thought the topic was large enough to support 90 minutes, but it isn't. The most organic of the three plays, *The Night Before*, is becoming a new play as I write this. Perhaps I'm stubborn. Maybe I'm stupid. Or possibly I know who I am as a writer is within these three plays. This then is my primary job: to discover my voice by finding my way through to the end of these three plays.

3

One thing playwrights do is to build conflict. Conflict is not the most important element in drama (behavior and compelling characters rate higher for me) but it is a strong element. A good example of building conflict is what happened this past weekend at UC-Davis, where the campus police used pepper-spray on student activists staging a sit-in. I don't know what they had done to warrant this punishment, as they were peaceful on the YouTube video I saw. I looked in two local newspapers and found one article on the altercation. The students were joining in with student activists at various campuses protesting their concerns about how dismal their financial futures look, with the imbalance of Wall Street profits and Main Street losses. There is obviously anger and fear among the activists.

This type of societal anger builds slowly. I doubt these are overtly angry people under normal circumstances. However, these circumstances are not normal. They are angry about how the top 1% is using its resources to purchase an overt economic advantage to the detriment of the bottom 99%. They feel oppressed. They are oppressed. The concerns of the bottom 99% are real. Their futures look bleak because they are. A well meaning response would listen to their genuine concerns and attempt to ease their anger by addressing their concerns. An illogical response would be to suppress or aggravate their anger. If I were writing this for the stage, I'd do an illogical response, as it's more dramatic. Though, in real life, you'd think students could expect some decency and humanity on a college campus.

When I first heard about the campus police at UC-Davis pepper-spraying students, my mind flashed back to the Kent State Massacre. National Guard troops turned *en masse* and fired high-powered rifles with live ammunition on *unarmed students*. Four students were killed; nine were injured; one of the injured was paralyzed from the waist down. Three students who were shot were between 60 and 100 feet away from the Guardsmen; the others were between 225 feet and 750 feet away (Caputo, Philip, *13 Seconds*, p70-71). There were 28 Guardsmen who shot: twenty shot in the air or in the ground; eight *shot at people* (Caputo, p69). There had been trouble and significant destruction over the weekend. However, this was on Monday, May 4th 1970. An anti-war rally was scheduled for that afternoon, but no protesting was going on. It was around noon, so many students were milling around the Commons. One student killed, Sandy Scheur, was simply walking to class (Caputo, p65).

In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, late in the second battle, Henry's vastly out numbered army has decimated the French forces at Agincourt. In a barbarous act a few of the French sneak into the English camp and kill the boys who travel with the army; the boys are unarmed of course. After weeks of marching and two draining battles Henry says, "I was not angry since I came to France / Until this instant" (IV.vii.). Using pepper-spray on unarmed students will incite anger, not soothe it.

4

Writers are quilters; we put things together. We take bits and pieces, we take scraps from here and there and create something larger. We see the forgotten and overlooked. Hopefully we create a new and larger perspective of our society and world. If you go on the internet you can get an answer to most any question in a few seconds. One of my concerns about the internet generation is they often miss or lack the ability to put those pieces together into a coherent whole and see the larger picture.

When I heard Barack Obama campaigning for President with words such as “Hope” and “Change,” I hoped he was sincere. What I have seen is our President supporting the “Military Industrial Complex” President Eisenhower warned us about. This reminds me of the Presidential campaign of 1964, when LBJ’s platform was the olive branch of peace while he was gearing up for a war, a very large war.

When I saw Barack Obama and the Democrats oust the Republicans in 2008, I was reminded of the hope we had in 1968, when Richard Nixon and the Republicans ousted the Democrats. We were sure a switch of political parties would change our country’s direction and put an end to our participation in the war we were stuck in on the other side of the world.

Now, when I see the campus police at UC-Davis using pepper-spray on students, I flash back to the 1960’s, with anti-war and civil rights activists. I too think back to the Kent State Massacre (see #3) and what we as a Nation became on that day and what we as a nation are willing to accept and to turn a blind eye to, to justify the actions of our government.

Now I look back and wonder if we’ve learned anything since the 4th of May in 1970. Did the deaths of Allison Krause, Jeffery Miller, Sandra Scheuer and William Schroeder teach us anything or are we regressing back to an old dysfunctional behavior we have chosen to forget about.

I wish you peace and contentment this Thanksgiving and leave you with three words from a memorial at Kent State University:

Inquire

Learn

Reflect

5

It is important for writers to read, which I do. I read plays. I read poetry. I read non-fiction. However, I rarely read fiction. I find fiction a big, sprawling form of storytelling. Plays are not sprawling, at least mine aren't. Plays are necessarily more cohesive, at least if you want an audience to be able to follow along. For the holiday season, I decided to read a piece of fiction I know very well, though I'd never read it: *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. A big fan of theatre, Dickens gave a public reading of *A Christmas Carol* every Christmas Eve, a selfless act. The day after I posted my two previous essays, shopping's "Black Friday," I heard a story about a woman at a store, who attacked several other shoppers with pepper-spray so she could get to a product first.

"'You fear the world too much,' she answered gently. 'All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you. Have I not?'" (*A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings*, p65, ed. Slater, Michael). Scrooge's one true human love says this. It was an interesting choice Dickens made, as he didn't identify her when she was speaking to Scrooge. It was three pages later in the next scene when her husband brings her to life by giving us her name, Belle.

Scrooge hoards his money. Multi-National Corporations and the top 1% are hoarding money. This woman with the pepper-spray too is greed to the core. So are all shoppers who are willing to do anything to get a product for the cheapest price—no matter who is hurt, no matter who is exploited. These exceptionally inexpensive products people are fighting over were not made by people earning a living wage—how could they be. Many of these products were made halfway around the world and transported here. The transportation alone is likely half of the purchase price. The inhumanity of indentured servitude, of virtual slavery, of actual slave labor is not possible unless consumers make it possible. Consumers, it could be argued, are the real slavers. "I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you. Have I not?"

6

One of the biggest challenges a playwright will face is finding a sense of balance between what you need to tell the story and what the audience wants to hear. It is one of the most important questions you must answer as you discover who you are as a writer. Many of the new plays and movies I've seen in the last couple of decades spoon-feed the audience. TV fosters this. TV is a numbers game. The more eyeballs in front of the TV, the more they charge for advertising and the more money they make. There is nothing new about this as audience response was just as important in Shakespeare's day. Early in your career you write for an audience of one and that audience is crucial to your development. At some point you must find a larger audience, if you're going to be a professional writer. My first draft is always for that audience of one. The challenge then becomes how to make my work accessible to a larger audience without pandering to them: I write for myself; I rewrite for the audience.

7

Shakespeare Restored has been on my mind recently. My interest in the topic began due to my interest in Shakespeare, but the play is about two of the early editors of Shakespeare, not Shakespeare himself. Much of what Alexander Pope and Lewis Theobald, the two editors, struggle with is how the language had changed and how difficult it was even in the 18th Century to figure out exactly what Shakespeare had written. So this play begs the question: why Shakespeare?

The main reason we understand as much of what Shakespeare wrote as we do is because of the research editors, scholars, actors and directors have given to Shakespeare's writings since the early 18th Century. Imagine trying to understand the "to be or not to be" soliloquy without the help of footnotes to inform us that *fardels* are burdens or *quietus* is to be released from one's debts. Then fight your way through the entire play and see how much you would be capable of understanding.

For all their poetic and literary qualities, Shakespeare's plays were meant to be performed. They belong on stage, not in the classroom (though work in the classroom will often enhance the enjoyment and understanding of what you see on stage). Their value is in what actors and directors *bring to life*. There is one thing most people don't see on the written page but is essential on stage—so essential people rarely talk about it: Shakespeare's characters *are more alive*. Four-hundred years after they were written, audiences love to see, actors love to act and directors love to direct the most living, breathing, fully-fleshed-out characters the world has ever seen.

8

One of my favorite paintings is Vincent van Gogh's *The Sower* (June 1888). The first time I saw it I was mesmerized. The energy, the force, the vibrancy shook me to the core. He offered me the pathway in, the sun low in the sky and the corn field. He offered the bluish-purple under the sower's feet and the pulsing yellow sun and sky. I can still feel it. However, I didn't understand the message van Gogh was offering, just the feeling that came through.

As a playwright, I too am a sower of sorts. From my research I cull the seeds I plant and the ideas and images I put forth. I nurture those seeds with time, energy and sometimes more research. Then, hopefully, when they have been planted on the page they'll have the opportunity to grow to full fruition. Some seem to gestate for an unfathomable amount of time. Some grow more quickly than others. Some fall flat and never become anything or do they.

I'm an unproduced playwright, so some people consider me a failure. The art buying public considered van Gogh a failure in his lifetime. What I see is that merely none of my seeds have blossomed yet. Patience and care are important ingredients in the nurturance of these seeds. Though I'm not sure you'll ever know exactly what becomes of the seeds you plant, I do know those seeds will affect the actors and directors you work with. They too will affect the other writers who help guide you as you help guide them. These seeds also can and hopefully will affect the audience in countless ways. I know as an audience member, at a play or even at a reading, what I hear on stage can affect and reshape my thinking and my process as a playwright. We never know when something we do will affect another person's life or work. So, as playwrights, we keep trying. Because the truth is nothing will happen, if we don't try—which makes *not trying* the only real failure there is.

9

I've been thinking about stories recently, my stories. The story is one of the most important elements of a play. This is especially important for me because I'm still at work on my first three full-length plays (and will continue to work on them until they are produced, because all three are producible).

A story is something you need, above all things, to believe in. I'm quite fortunate that after nearly 15 years, my first three plays still hold my interest. I don't work on them constantly, mind you, but they still surprise me by revealing fresh insights. When I workshopped the second draft of *Boleslavsky's Acting* (now *Six Lessons*) at Sewanee Writers' Conference in 2010, I was stunned at how much I'd grown as a writer or at what I'd lacked as a writer back in 1997, when I wrote those two drafts.

After the workshop, I saw this play with fresh eyes. What was more confounding was when I went to rewrite it, it felt as if my old brain (from 1997) was still in my head and was somehow encased in a shell or covering. My 2010 brain was more flexible and pliable and offered the play an understanding I didn't have back in 1997. What I had in 2010 was the voice I'd discovered, a hard-earned writer's voice. When I broke through the shell, I could merge my new voice with my old play, my old adapted story. Being a writer isn't about finding the right story. It is about finding your voice, your authentic voice, so you can tell each story *as your story*, even if it is an adaptation.

10

There will be a few crucial moments in your life. Moments that define who you are. Moments when you are honest enough to grow and courageous enough to become something you were not before that moment. There may even be moments when you learn something about yourself you have always known, but never fully understood. Life is for me a constant pursuit to better know who I am.

Art, in any form, is above all things the communication of emotions. Art is an expression of who you are as a human being among your various guises. Every expression of art is a self-portrait. As I grow older, I find it impossible to separate my life from my art. I know many people will spend their lives without a deep connection to art—but art can not exist without life. It is important as artists that we imbue our work with a life-like energy if we want our work to come to life for the audience.

As artists we must then continue to grow and learn as human beings. We must continue to evolve, so our art can continue to evolve. If we are not honest enough with ourselves, to be ourselves, if we are not courageous enough with our own emotions to feel those emotions then who are we and how do we expect to communicate those emotions in and through our art? Is this simply another place for us to hide from ourselves or are we genuine artists who are honest enough and courageous enough to be ourselves with our families, with our friends, with ourselves and with our plays.

11

I don't own a TV. I haven't had a TV in my home for over a decade. I'm not a sound-bite person. I like depth, not superficiality. Life has depth; TV is superficial. Sound-bites are for TV, not theatre. One of my favorite scenes in Shakespeare is the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*. It is layered with resonance. This is the scene when Hamlet finally understands and declares his identity: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (V.i.)! But then you must ask what or who was Hamlet before he was aware of his identity?

At the play's beginning Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, scolds him for his excessive grief at the loss of his father. I know there are other things going on Gertrude is concerned about, but what if Gertrude is correct? What if Hamlet's grief is excessive or *unnatural* in some way? What if Gertrude is correct, for all the wrong reasons? What if Hamlet has never learned how to process grief in a healthy way? And if he hasn't, is there a reason for it? I think there is. I think Hamlet was wounded as a child. I think his wound was left open and never dressed, so it never healed properly and it left Hamlet incapable of processing his emotions, including his grief, in a healthy way.

When Hamlet first encounters his father's ghost, he gives us a clue to his problem by telling us he's going to put on "an antic disposition" (I.v.). "Antic" in Shakespeare's day could be defined as something wild, fantastic or even grotesque, but it could also refer to a clown, a jester or even a jester's cap. When Hamlet puts on his "antic disposition" he is playing a game, a game only he knows the rules to. He taunts and toys with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with Polonius, with Ophelia, with Gertrude and with his one-time uncle and now his stepfather and king, Claudius. Hamlet's game keeps everyone off balance and gives him some control over the situation or so it would seem.

What Hamlet discovers in the graveyard scene is love. Not the love of his father; not the love of his mother; but the love of his surrogate-father, the person who played with him, carried him on his shoulders, joked with him, kissed and cared for him when he was just a boy. When a skull is thrown from the new grave being dug, Hamlet is asked if he knows whose skull it is, but the graveyard is unconsecrated ground and having never been there Hamlet says, "Nay, I know not" (V.i.). The skull belonged to Yorick, Hamlet's father's jester and Hamlet's boyhood companion. A flood of memories come forth of days long gone. Hamlet's wound of unresolved grief from having lost his dearest childhood friend, whom he likely didn't even know had died, is dressed and healed in a few moments.

As the scene continues, Ophelia's body is brought in and all of the emotion in Hamlet's life that he's been unable to process or understand is now at his fingertips: "This is I, Hamlet the Dane!" "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not ... make up my sum" (V.i.)! In a seeming moment, Hamlet's "antic disposition" has disappeared along with his games. He is healthy. He is clear. He is direct. He has become an adult and is ready for his adult responsibilities: he is now, as the rightful heir to the throne, ready, willing and capable of defending, with his life, Denmark from its usurper, Claudius. Sound-bites are for TV—life and theatre are too rich for sound-bites.

12

I sometimes wonder which is more theatrical: Theatre or Politics? In the America I grew up in you knew the difference between a Republican and a Democrat. I saw a bumper sticker the other day. It said “Not a Republican.” It is obvious this person is traditionally a Democrat, but disillusioned with the current administration and with the political climate in Washington. The biggest complaint I’m hearing is there is virtually no difference between what the two political parties are offering this November, so it is easy to understand the disillusionment behind the bumper sticker. A recent poll said 41% of American voters consider themselves “independents,” so this bumper sticker is not alone.

I too wonder which, Theatre or Politics, creates more of an illusion. Voter apathy is the most powerful tool politicians have. Their second most powerful tool is our ignorance: not our ignorance of the issues, but our ignorance of the disconnect between what politicians say and what politicians do. This is a perpetual deceit. They invalidate us as human beings and as thinking people with their lies. The problem is we are a magical thinking electorate. The American voter has yet to figure out Santa Claus couldn’t possibly fly around the world and deliver packages to every household in one evening. How long will it be until we put $2 + 2$ together and get 4, as opposed to the 22, they tell us the answer is?

The truth is the Democrats and the Republicans are failures. They have failed the public trust as much as Goldman Sachs, AIG and every other “too big to fail” business that failed and was bailed out by the American taxpayer. There must be a price to pay for failure. Goldman Sachs, AIG and all of the others we bailed-out did not have to pay a price for *their failure*—but we taxpayers did. If we don’t hold the Democrat’s and the Republican’s feet to the fire for their failure—it will be *our* failure.

Here is a story beyond theatrics, beyond illusion, that is pure fantasy! What would happen if the bottom 99% rallied together and voted one of ourselves into The White House? Instead of being disillusioned by another ultra-rich politician—how about all those “independents” voting for an independent candidate? How about every “independent” voter voting against disillusionment this November? How about a grass-roots-pauper-President who will represent all the people of the country! My guess is if everyone in the bottom 99% voted for an independent candidate, the candidates for the two major parties would each receive about a ½% of the vote! What a novel idea! The Republicans get ½% of the vote, the Democrats get ½% of the vote and independents get 99% of it!

If we start now, before the 2012 election and give ourselves four years, I bet we can overcome these ultra-rich, self-interested, bought-off politicians we use to vote for and put a real human being in The White House. Well it may be a fantasy, but it’s worth thinking about. It would be a story that could only happen in America, at least it could have happened in the America I grew up in.

13

Most of the time our lives seem to be stationary and we get use to the tempo and flow of things as they are. There are also times when change will come at us unexpectedly and overwhelm us. I'm at an age (I'm in my 50s now) when change is coming whether I like it or not. As a playwright I seek change because it is in the nature of the job, as life changing incidents make for good drama. When characters are forced to deal with things they would rather avoid, that is drama in a nutshell. Though I seek change, it can still frighten me. Experience has taught me some people deal well with change, while others don't. Some even find change threatening to the point of self-destruction. So what is the nature of change? And why is it threatening to some and not to others?

Age seems to have some influence, as younger people expect change, while we older folks tend to avoid it. However this doesn't explain it. If you want to understand change, simply observe nature's organic pattern. Each and every season moves fluidly into the next. I've never met a confused or frustrated tree, so why do people and characters fight against change instead of yielding to it? Everyone understands in a storm older trees snap because they lack the flexibility of younger trees.

Change happens every day of my life, whether I like it or not and whether I'm aware of it or not. The problem some people and characters have with change might have to do with a life-time full of experiences. Change is like pain, emotional pain. Things can hurt simply because they are changing. If your life is going through a difficult stage, any change can be a threat to make things worse. We too must remember pain is a great teacher. When I think about Hamlet (see #11) and his struggle to deal with the mountain range of changes in his life and I see the lack of emotional development from his unhealed childhood wound, I can't help but wonder if his wound prevented him from developing the tools and the ability to deal with his present day pain, and therefore all of these changes, in a healthy manner. As an organic writer, facing pain and change is a conscious choice I make for myself. From my life experiences, I've learned both are best dealt with when I embrace them, not when I fight them.

14

Christmas is for children. I know Christmas isn't the only holiday this time of year, but it is the holiday I grew up with and it is the only holiday I'm comfortable enough to write about. Christmas is symbolic of childhood in many ways. Christmas vacation was always full of snow and playing pond hockey in the field behind our house, along with hot chocolate and frozen toes when we came in; and there were presents. Not only have the times changed, but with the unemployment rate at over 21% (done the old fashion pre-Clinton way: including the long-term unemployed and those who have given up looking for work completely) many pocketbooks in the bottom 99% are strained simply to keep a roof overhead and food on the table. How do these families afford presents for their children?

One of my first favorite-quotes from Shakespeare was "This above all: to thine own self be true / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (*Hamlet*, I.3.). I say was because I wouldn't include it on a list of my favorite quotes now. Personally, I like the quote, I like what it says and I think it's good advice. What I have a problem with is who says it: Polonius. Polonius is a buffoon; he's a sycophant; he's bad parent. Polonius says this to his son, Laertes, and his daughter, Ophelia, is also there to hear it. The next time we see Polonius he is sending Reynaldo "to make inquire / Of [Laertes'] behavior" (II.1.): Polonius is spying on his son! He then uses Ophelia, who is already in a fragile emotional state, "to read on this book" (III.1.) to help draw information out of Hamlet, as Polonius and Claudius listen in: Polonius is using his daughter as a sexual-fishing-lure for Hamlet.

Still, no matter what Polonius does or how disingenuous he is—this advice is still important. However, if Polonius's actions don't reinforce his words, then you must ask how useful is his advice? As parents and role models we need to realize our actions communicate more than our words. It takes courage to be a writer; it takes courage to be an artist of any sort; it too takes courage to be honest with yourself. If you are not honest with yourself, how can you be honest with your children? When we are dishonest with our children, we weaken their ability to understand honesty within themselves and within other people. Much of our advertising-based culture is dishonest and manipulative. Our children need a touchstone of honesty, so they can ground themselves in reality. Honesty is not complicated. Honesty is not difficult. Honesty with your children (and everyone else you know) will cost you nothing this Christmas and it is one of the most valuable gifts you will ever give.

15

Rejection is part of this business. If you can't deal with rejection, then you're probably going to have a tough time as a writer. I try to not take rejection personally, especially when it comes to my plays. I think I'm more comfortable than most writers when it comes to rejection. I'm a good enough writer and I know it; I too know good enough writers often go overlooked. A couple of my friends have commented on how comfortable I seem to be as an unproduced playwright. One of the reasons I'm as comfortable being unproduced as I am, might be how I look at rejection.

As I've grown older, my voice as a writer has grown and evolved. I have an understanding of who I am as a writer and why I write. My first three full-length plays are still growing and changing, so it's likely a good thing they were rejected many of those times. I too have had a couple of bad breaks, but then who hasn't had to deal with people small-of-mind and small-of-character at one time or another? These plays are works-in-progress and will continue as such until they are produced. At the bottom of it all, it is the play that is being rejected. My plays are a part of who I am, but they are not me.

Another thing I learned about rejection was when I was applying to graduate schools. I don't know of anyone who wasn't rejected by at least a couple of schools. I remember one time seeing the envelope in the mailbox and knowing *without touching it* it was a rejection. What surprised me was how I felt: I was glad, maybe even happy! It was startling: I knew *in this particular instance* if they didn't want to work with me, I didn't want to work with them. Be it school or theatre, this is an industry that will always foster some incompetent people and those small-of-mind and small-of-character are best dealt with by avoidance. For me rejection isn't a one-way street: it can, and at times will, work both ways.

16

What does it mean to be an organic writer? It is a claim I make of myself, so I should know what it means—at least I should know what it means to me. I say on my “about me” page on my website that plays are wrought, not written. I too say it is my job to serve the play. My focus needs to be on what the play needs, not what it wants. I need to make the play accessible for an audience, though I don’t directly serve the wants of the audience. I also don’t serve my own wants. Each and every play I write must become who or what that play is and it is my job to see that that happens.

It is easy to believe in your play early on. The difficult part comes when the rejections roll in. I’m a firm believer in continually sending work out. It is part of the process and it can be helpful to have my work rejected—yes, I said helpful! It gives me distance from the play. When a play has endured enough rejections, I’ll reevaluate it. I will look at my play with a more critical eye, though I never forget the very real possibility that the rejections might be wrong, not the play.

At times it feels as if my plays and my career are being held back by a brick-wall. There is an energy in the things you write. An organic writer responds to and with this energy. As with all relationships this is interactive and its success or failure is based upon trust. There too can be an energy *around* a piece of writing. From my experience, this energy will often have a positive or a negative feel to it.

It can be difficult at times to read or interpret the energy around a piece I’ve written. Sometimes it isn’t as strong and other times it isn’t distinctly one thing or another. Sometimes this energy will come from an un-organic source, which can be more difficult to pinpoint. An example of an un-organic source is my own ego. Ego driven energy is often cognitive. However, ego driven energy can also come from other people, theatres or even organizations. No matter what the source *I have to deal with the energy*, if I’m going to remain organic and if I’m going to continue to grow as a writer.

It is important to understand the difference between organic energy and energy that is un-organic. Organic energy occurs naturally, like a breeze blowing in a field. Un-organic energy often comes from a particular source and appears to be as solid as a brick-wall. When an energy doesn’t change overtime, it likely isn’t organic, which brings up the question of how to deal with an un-organic energy, if you find it gathered around one of your plays or your career? If I’m comfortable the play is where it needs to be, I continue to send the play out. Brick-walls are man-made. As an organic writer my job isn’t to break through the wall. My job is to remain organic, to be who I am and to serve my plays. I know every time someone reads a play or a sample of a play, there is the possibility I might loosen a brick. If I can loosen a brick or two, the wall might become vulnerable. If I can remove a brick or two from the wall and allow some organic energy to flow through it, the wall at some point will crumble.

17

Where does drama begin? At birth I suppose and it ends at death, at least our own personal drama will. I'm intrigued by origins, especially creative origins: both where and how things begin. I've previously (see #13) said life changing events make for good drama and they do. As an organic playwright, I need to understand, not only what makes good drama, but if I'm going to create dramatic stories, I need to know where and how they begin, so I can see them, discover them and craft them accordingly.

"Drama is conflict!" I've heard it thousands of times, mostly from academics. Yet I know from my own experience that drama is not conflict. Conflict is conflict. Conflict is easier to talk about, easier to teach and easier to direct. Conflict often comes from change, but conflict does not *drive drama*—change does. Much of the conflict in today's entertainment comes from outside a character. However, drama, real drama, universal drama comes from within a character. Even if a character's internal struggle intersects with something from outside, it is a character's internal struggle an audience connects with.

Drama is everywhere and can begin anywhere: forgetting to make a phone call or a seemingly harmless lie that causes havoc years later. The seed of drama is in the possibilities of change and how people or characters respond, or don't respond, to the challenges of that change. As a playwright, I can create characters who simply react or I can delve more deeply. I hopefully will create characters who are struggling, struggling to learn and grow, struggling to be more human, struggling to find a better connection to themselves, struggling to live their own personal drama, as we all do.

18

I had my first sight of spring near Belvedere Castle in New York's Central Park last month. The green shoots stood out because they were poking through some yet remaining snow. Thirteen years ago I was living in the tri-state area. I'd been writing plays for a couple of years and decided to move east in hopes of finding a theatre to work with. However, what happened was after about four months, my playwriting stopped! A couple of months after that, once I was sure my it had stopped, I left.

New York City (NYC) is a bundle of contradictions and I suppose this may simply be another one of them. I returned to NYC in June for the first time in twelve years. I returned because it felt as if I'd cast myself aside; a self-imposed exile of a sort; a Prospero without an Antonio. I remember a conversation I'd had years ago with a long time resident, who loved the energy of NYC and wasn't willing to give it up for anything. More recently, a playwright I know told me she loves The City *because* of the cacophony, though she too generously pointed me toward a couple of her favorite places of solitude.

As a contemplative person, I can understand the appeal of NYC. The museums, parks, bookstores and vegetarian restaurants are all places of solace. This may have been the inherent difficulty I struggled with years ago: to find a sense of balance from among the vast choices. I've been to NYC three times in the last year and each time I've become more of a New Yorker. On my first trip I felt much like a tourist, which was how I felt when I lived there. On my second trip the tourist-like feelings disappeared and I fed off the energy in a more connected way. On this most recent trip I felt as if I belonged there, as if I was not reacting to the energy, but was an integral part of helping to create the energy.

19

As a playwright I've discovered myself bit by bit and piece by piece. This lengthy process in the early part of my career has given me the opportunity to make some choices as to who I will become as a writer. I will be a writer who will take his time. I will learn about myself and what I'll write about. I will be organic. I will listen to my plays and I will listen to my characters. I will listen to their wants, but I will be more aware of their needs, as I know I need to be.

If I'm committed enough to my writing, I will eventually put enough of these bits and pieces together to create a whole writer—a writer with a writer's voice and a writer's career. When I first began to write, I didn't have any genuine cognition of myself as a writer (any more than I had any cognition of who I was when I was born). Both of these lifelong journeys have been a process of experimentation and gradual discovery. I've discovered myself in these bits and pieces: in the bits and pieces of my ideas, of my thoughts and of the people and things with which I've concerned myself.

In my first three full-length plays, there were a couple of things I did well in each play. Each of these plays had different needs, so each drew out different strengths. However, there were other things that didn't work so well: things that blocked the meaning, cluttered up the storyline or somehow made a coherent connection difficult. At some point I realized I needed to bring all these disparate strengths together in every play I write. At this point I understand I've found *a sense* of wholeness to my voice as a writer. From this point on, I expect this sense of wholeness to continue to grow and evolve and to serve as a reflection of who I am as a writer at the moment I'm creating every piece I work on.

20

Trust is the one necessary ingredient in any production. I've had the misfortune to have had to deal with out-of-control actors and out-of-control directors, from both backstage and on stage. In these circumstances, the possibility of a meltdown within the production looms large. Things can happen on stage that will pull the audience out of the production and into the real-life danger an actor may be in. This isn't theatre. It isn't theatre if it isn't safe on stage. It can only be safe on stage if everyone knows his or her job and you can trust everyone involved in the production to do their job.

Trust is important at every stage of the writing process. I wouldn't be capable of writing anything, if I didn't trust the process; however the process also needs to be able to trust me. This trust needs to be earned. Trust needs to be there with any theatre I might work with and I know I need to be worthy of other people's trust. Trust is a two-way street. It always has been and always will be. Initially, I'll extend a certain degree of trust to everyone I work with and I hope a certain degree of trust will be given back. As we work together and get to know one another that trust hopefully will grow throughout the production—in a perfect world I will be able to trust everyone I'm working with more with every rehearsal and performance and I will earn more of their trust in return.

I don't like theatres that don't respond to submissions. I know some writers prefer a *no response* to a *rejection*—I don't (see #15). If I've jumped through the hoops a theatre has outlined, they owe me a response. I don't expect a response from a query letter, but I do with a dialogue sample or a script. I know some theatres are small and their staff is unpaid, but a simple form e-mail is not arduous. Still, I'm willing to cut smaller theatres some slack, but not larger organizations. When larger organizations purport to be professional, but are disrespectful of the time and energy I've put forth—they are unprofessional. If an organization says it wants to *build relationships* with playwrights and is then disrespectful to me or other playwrights, what am I to think? How can I trust an organization that is disrespectful? How can I trust an organization I know is unprofessional?

21

I had no interest in history when I was in high school. I don't have much recollection of either the classes or the teachers, as they didn't open any doors for me. As an adult I'm drawn to the American Revolution and the Founding Generation, as they feed my interest in origins (see #17). On the 4th of July we blow off fireworks and wave flags at our hometown parades to celebrate our independence. I wonder how many people stop to think about what "our independence" really means and why it was important to the Founding Generation. If I've learned one thing from the Founding Generation it is: if you don't think for yourself, then you're allowing yourself to be controlled and maybe manipulated.

With today's push toward globalization, things don't seem much different. The politicians in the mother country saw the colonies as something to be exploited. Like all governments, they were interested in profits (profits for themselves and their cronies in particular). They saw the most profitable way to *use* the colonies was as a source of raw materials to support their manufacturing and then as a market for those same manufactured goods. To accomplish this they passed the Navigation Acts, which prohibited the colonists from manufacturing their own goods—can you imagine that! In the years preceding the American Revolution the colonists began to fight back with protests such as the Boston Tea Party and other more formal non-importation agreements—what we today would call boycotts.

Our current (the last 20 years or so) politicians are treating us in much the same way, by allowing our jobs to be outsourced. Now instead of manufacturing jobs that pay a living wage, we have service jobs that pay minimally. Unfortunately, most of the products we now *choose to purchase* (every dollar we spend, we choose how and when we spend it, do we not) are imports that exploit cheap and even *slave* labor markets—but these cheap products we buy we do get cheap—or do we? I guess what they say is true: "you get what you pay for." If we are not going *to choose* to pay a living wage to the people who make our products, why would we expect there to be jobs in our country that pay a living wage? We should disregard what the top-1%-owned-politicians and the top-1%-owned-media tells us about our economy and think for ourselves. We could raise awareness of this problem by making July "National Boycott of Foreign Made Goods Month" and then we could *choose to support* jobs here at home, not just in July, but with every single purchase we make every single day of the year.

22

One way to break playwrights into types is to look at them from a personality perspective: the extroverted and the introverted. I would guess many playwrights fall clearly into one category or the other, but most can probably claim an element or two from the other category as well. As I'm contemplative and rather solitary, I fit easily into the introverted slot. Though I know when I've stage managed or directed an outgoing side of my personality joyfully emerges.

The life of a writer can be solitary and is likely necessarily so. We in theatre have an advantage in that theatre is a collaborative art form, which gives us an active connection with other artists. This leads to another category for playwrights: those who are theatre people first or writers first. Hopefully, most playwrights will house several elements from both categories; I certainly do. I first became aware of this category, after I'd been to a writers' conference where playwrights were in a decided minority to writers of fiction and poetry. Eventually I realized which trait was more predominant in me.

Two years ago the Dramatists Guild held their first national conference. I was there and was looking forward to seeing a couple of friends, whom I rarely see face-to-face. As the conference ended, I was among 7 or 8 writers headed to the train station. I didn't know any of these writers. We had some time before our trains, so we had lunch together. These writers were from different parts of the country, had different levels of experience, had different stories, had different lives they were headed back to. However, we all had one thing in common—our care, our interest and our willingness to make sacrifices to write plays. I didn't expect something so satisfying from a meal with a group of strangers, but for that time together we were not strangers. We were all one: sharing our experiences, sharing our knowledge, sharing our concerns and sharing our frustrations.

23

The elusive art of the rewrite includes many questions: do I change the location? do I move a scene to another place in the play? do I add or remove one or more of the characters? do I write a character's backstory? do I break the play down and rebuild it with several of the same pieces? with some of the same pieces? with a few of the same pieces? do I take a couple of the original thoughts or images and take it in a different direction? or do I simply begin anew? This list is endless, as process is a constant exploration. I've had different experiences with the processes of rewriting my first three full-length plays. Yes, after eight years, my third play, of the original three, has become a viable play again.

It was always clear what *Six Lessons* was and how faithful to Richard Boleslavsky's book I wanted to remain. *Shakespeare Restored* always provided a constant direction, which gave me a visible path to follow. The biggest challenge of the three has been *The Night Before*, as I never knew or understood what was driving this play. My difficulties with the first two plays were about my lack of experience as a writer; so discovering who I am as a writer and finding my particular voice were crucial. With *The Night Before* the challenges before me are as elusive now as they were at the beginning.

I initially wrote *The Night Before* in graduate school. The second draft was my Master's thesis, which challenged me to find a methodology behind the play. Creativity and methodology are at best strange bedfellows. If there is a single reason why I utilize research and other writer's writings as much as I do, it is from an unknown quality I was drawn to in needing to find a sense of balance between the elusiveness of creativity and the cognition behind methodology. No matter how much research I do, as an organic writer, my rewriting is less about cognition and more of a listening—a willingness to seek, a willingness to be open, a willingness to be led. Rewriting is after all not as much about the play you are rewriting, as it is about your willingness to allow yourself to be rewritten.

24

I recently read Henry David Thoreau's most important political essay, "Civil Disobedience." Thoreau calls for a higher understanding of what it means to be a *citizen* of this or any democratic nation. I can't help but think he was influenced by elements from the early stages of the American Revolution, in particular the Suffolk County Resolves, which were a written response to the liberty-limiting Intolerable Acts, including the closing of the port of Boston, after the Boston Tea Party.

The Suffolk County Resolves were originally written outside of Boston in September 1774 at the Suffolk County Convention. At this same time, the First Continental Congress was also in session in Philadelphia. There were over 65 delegates from the 19 towns within Suffolk County, Boston being the largest. The first time they met, they came up with a working draft. When they met again three days later, that draft had been reworked by Dr Joseph Warren. The now largely forgotten Dr Warren was a self-sacrificing doctor, patriot, writer, war hero and natural leader. He is the person who would send Paul Revere (and William Dawes) on the famous "midnight ride" to Lexington and Concord (Thoreau's hometown) in April 1775. Two months later, Dr Warren was killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

The Suffolk County Resolves were written outside of the legal limits of Boston, as it was *now* illegal to have a town meeting without the approval of the Crown-appointed-Governor (one of the Intolerable Acts). The Governor didn't like town meetings because that is where people got together and talked to one another and protests such as the Boston Tea Party *could* become possible. Dr Warren's reworking of the Suffolk County Resolves includes a lengthy and eloquent prologue not in the earlier draft. When the Suffolk County Convention heard Dr Warren's reworked draft, they unanimously endorsed it.

Paul Revere then took one of his not-so-famous rides and delivered the Suffolk County Resolves to the Continental Congress, in time for the Congress to unanimously endorse them. The Suffolk Resolves, as they are now known, was our would-be nation's first articulation of a *citizen's responsibility* in the need to stand up to a government, when that government had become tyrannical, oppressive or had in other ways lost-its-way. The Suffolk Resolves call for simple, common sense protests such as boycotting foreign made goods, supporting locally made goods and consciously not paying your taxes. The Suffolk Resolves was an essential step toward our Declaration of Independence.

Thoreau was disturbed enough by how his taxes were being used, or misused, to not pay them and consequently spent a night in jail. The reasoning behind his protest was two-fold: he disagreed with *slavery* (easy to understand) and he disagreed with the then *current war* with Mexico (also easy to understand). He first delivered this essay as a lecture in January 1848 and it was published twice, once in his lifetime and once posthumously (all three had different titles). When it was published posthumously, it was given the title we now know it as: "Civil Disobedience."

"Civil Disobedience" influenced Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King Jr in their non-violent calls for governmental reform. Many people are frustrated these days with how unresponsive our government has become to the needs of the bottom 99%. However if we look to our collective heritage,

we'll discover nearly 250 years of ideas and actions on how *responsible citizens* molded, shaped and helped our democratic government evolve from some rather lofty ideals.

The title of Thoreau's original 1848 lecture is "The Relation of the Individual to the State" (p. lviii, *Thoreau in His Own Time*, ed. Sandra Herbert Petrulionis). Thoreau gave this lecture more than once, with more than one title, which has caused some confusion throughout the years. When Thoreau published it as an essay in 1849 (in *Aesthetic Papers*, ed. Elizabeth Peabody) he gave it the title he preferred: "Resistance to Civil Government." Thoreau died in 1862 and four years later it was again published, but with a new title: "Civil Disobedience" (in *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*, eds. Sophia Thoreau and William Ellery Channing). I wonder why it was changed?

I've referenced myself a couple of times in the last few months as an energy person. I've been fortunate no one has pressed me for further information or clarification on what this might mean because I'm not sure I can explain it. I know my study of and my understanding of the energy that draws me organically began when I was in graduate school working on my first full-length play, an adaptation of *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, by Richard Boleslavsky. If you're familiar with the book or my adaptation you might remember the 6th lesson, "Rhythm." My having to navigate something Boleslavsky said he didn't fully understand, challenged me to begin my own journey to better understand rhythm for myself.

My first conscious dealing with rhythm came when I was sitting in rush-hour traffic, frustrated. I could feel the rhythm, the energy, but I wasn't in-step with it. Boleslavsky has a monologue trying to explain the emotional difference between *what* and *how* by exploring the changing rhythms from street level in New York City to the top of the Empire State Building. This monologue is acutely aware of its rhythm and it instantly drew me in. When I was sitting there in traffic, this monologue popped into my head and helped me to better understand the inherent energy underlying all of life's and art's rhythm.

Energy is everywhere and is in everything. It is in everything we are and in everything we do. We contribute to it; we take away from it; we go with it; we go against it; we encourage it; we confound it; we delight it; we stumble around it; and we stumble through it, as we live it—each and every day and each and every moment. Energy is individual; energy is collective; energy is personal; energy is social; energy is outgoing; energy is reserved. All human and character interaction is based upon energy. When I was sitting in traffic, full of frustration, and thought about Boleslavsky attempting to define rhythm, something happened. In that one moment, I changed; when I changed, the energy of my sitting in traffic changed—the frustration was gone and for the rest of the drive I was experimenting with how I could be in-step with the energy, not working against it. In that one moment I didn't fight my frustration—I embraced it! I changed and the whole traffic-fighting world changed with it.

26

When I was young, I could never have imagined I'd be a writer of any sort or any sort of writer. It wasn't in the purview of the family I grew up in—it wasn't thinkable, not a consideration, not within the sight of a Don Quixote windmill, let alone a possibility. *Possibility* is my favorite word.

I grew up in the trades, so my life was well laid out. I don't know why, but in my mid-twenties, I began reading while winter's bluster made outdoor work impossible. I wasn't a fast or comprehensive reader, but once I began something in me changed. The first year it was Mark Twain; the second, Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln; the third year—Shakespeare! One year I went to Britain and Europe and kept a journal. I liked writing. I didn't do it all that well, but I kept at it the entire trip.

In my thirties, I gave college a try. First, a community college, then as my reading and writing skills improved, a four-year school. As an English major, I discovered my interest in reading plays and even though there wasn't a playwriting program at my school, other forms of creative writing held my interest. Before my first college class, I wasn't aware of the many opportunities out in the world, nor did I know there were richer possibilities *within me*. After graduation I sought out a playwriting workshop, which led to theatre classes, which led to working on a show, which led to more classes and more workshops and a playwriting group and eventually led me to a Master of Arts program in Theatre. I'm in my fifties now and much of my adult life has been taking me in the direction I'm now going. I can't tell you why I began reading or journaling years ago. I can tell you there was something inside of me that needed to come out. Something that seemed to exist, but was dormant or maybe unborn. There was some part of me that understood something I could not see or touch or articulate.

As I wrote the word *purview* in the first paragraph, I went diving for a dictionary. I can't remember the last time I used it. I couldn't have given you a clear definition of it, yet I knew it was the word I needed to use. I wasn't good at spelling when I was young, nor did I understand grammar well. I was good at math. Math made sense: two plus two equaled four, but with language, grammar and writing there were always more choices and more possibilities (did I say possibility is my favorite word).

My journey to being a writer has not been a straight line. However, I wouldn't change it. I welcome the struggle with the culture, with producers, directors and literary managers, with my plays and characters and with myself. I want to be who I am. I want to discover who I am. I want to viscerally understand who I am. If I viscerally understand who I am only Alzheimer's or death can take it from me. My life as a writer has not been handed to me and is only possible because for some unknown reason I began reading and journaling. Whatever my life is or will become as a writer—I've earned it. Most people see struggles as opponents preventing them from achieving what they want to accomplish. I see struggles as an opportunity—a chance to seek and discover something deep within. I see struggles as a gift. It is a gift to help me learn, grow, evolve and become—to help me better understand who I am. It is a gift when for some unknown reason life takes you in unexpected and challenging directions.

My plays talk to me. It is part of being organic, I suppose. They communicate through symbols and images, through thoughts and ideas, through other writer's writings and other artist's artistic expressions and forms. I don't always know what these messages mean or when they are about my plays, because I can not always interpret them fully. The most challenging of the symbols are those from my dreams. My plays talk to me when I sleep. They talk to me at other times too, but those messages tend to be more clear. There is something about dreams that is elusive and ephemeral, much as life is. I don't usually write my dreams down, though I know people who do. I like to keep the dream with me for as long as I can, to keep it *alive* inside of me, inside of my mind and inside of my body. If I have time, those first moments after waking are most useful, as is any quiet time before the onslaught of the day hits me. The entire dream doesn't last of course, but certain moments do, certain images call for my attention; the others fall away and are gone. Life is full of noise, but dreams require contemplative time to decipher. The stronger images will stay with me most of the day. Some images *pop back* into my conscious mind a few days later, or maybe even a week or two later. Usually when they pop back I understand what it was trying to tell me. Of course dreams aren't only about my plays, they too are about my life and who I am and how I fit in the world I've created for myself and how I fit in with the outside world I live in the middle of. Walks are good contemplative time, as is driving (when traffic isn't too heavy—if traffic is heavy I work on *rhythm*, see #25) or commuting on a bus or train. If the images don't stay with me, I let them go; maybe they'll come back in another shape, in another dream or maybe the dream will repeat itself in a day or a week or a month or a year or two; I trust the process, so if it eludes me, I may not be ready for it or I don't understand something well enough to yet interpret it; however, when a few contemplative moments occur, images will surprisingly reappear, as if I commanded them to come back, but they do it of their own volition, if they know they are welcome, as mine are; dreams are of a whole; I don't fight what it is trying to tell me—I just listen and grow with it; I listen to what it is trying to communicate to me; I roll it around in my head all day long, as I shower or go for a walk or on my way to or from the bus stop; whenever no one else is around, I listen and tap into whatever the mood, the feeling or the information is trying to tell me; knowing how to *listen* to dreams is an important element of my creative process; to re-listen, to re-hear, to re-see, to re-understand these images, as they come forth, as I try to keep them with me for as long as I can to better understand them and to better understand the organic process of dream understanding.

28

The organic approach to my writing and my life can be challenging at times. On one of my recent walks, I was attempting to avoid some ice and slipped on another patch of ice. I suppose I had it coming after all the talk of how contemplative I am in my essays. Not that this is a test (or maybe it is) but an opportunity to see how organic I am. It was after all one of the first thoughts in my mind, once the shock was past: is this on my path, a part of my journey? The answer was inevitably: yes!

I tend to be philosophical about such things. As a contemplative person, recovering from an injury can have a certain appeal, as it offers extra contemplative time. There are two situations life will throw at me that offer me this: death (not my own, of course) and injury or illness. When death enters my life, I'm more alive than at any other time of my existence. The place I go to is deep and personal and I go there immediately. With an injury (or an illness) it's different. Healing takes time, so rest and patience are great bedfellows and as I don't have a TV so are books, thoughts and an active imagination.

This fortuitous contemplative time is for receiving, not transmitting. As the days passed, I kept a tally of the moments, of the things that evolved out of the contemplative time I'd received. I read differently when I'm healing, as my attention is on the needs of my healing so reading tends to be more sporadic. Because of this I usually set my regular research aside and read other things, things I would normally read between writing projects. There have been several moments of understanding during my forced contemplative time, most of them dealing with my personal life. However there are two future plays that will be different because of this winter mishap. One play has a new character and its structure has been reshaped; the other play started off with a new line of dialogue—it then grew into virtually a new play, with a depth and precision beyond the play I was intending to write.

29

There has been much energy flowing around my life this winter, as I'm still recovering from a fall on some ice. The energy in my life has taken me places I didn't always want to go, yet I knew I had to go there. Navigating the different energy spheres in my life has on occasion been noisy, cluttered and busy in unpleasant ways. In those times I've felt more like a one-handed juggler, as I could see what needed to happen but I couldn't always reach everything calling for my attention. Because of this I haven't always felt as if I've been as organic as before my fall, yet I think I have been. The energy to heal your body is not as subtle as the energy of everyday life or the energy of finding your way through a play. Healing energy is big and obvious and you may not feel as if you're being organic, even when you are, so I'm only beginning to feel as if I'm a writer again and to feel capable of finding and understanding the organic energy. Normal or everyday organic energy is a subtle thing. In this busy workaday world where everyone is multitasking and checking e-mail every three seconds, it can be difficult to discern where the energy is and what the energy is trying to tell you. It helps me to slow things down, to go for walks, long walks and to find or make time to be contemplative. Within the deeper levels of contemplation, I find the necessary quiet I need to tap into the energy, to know where it is and to have a sense of which direction the energy is pulling me or my play. It is in the *quiet* that I find the clearest and most organic connection to the energy. So where does this leave me or take me? If there is one thing from this I'll take with me, it is to look for the positive in the negative, because it is buried somewhere in there—and to beware of the negative in the positive, because it too is buried in there.

30

The most pronounced statement nature makes is the transformation of spring's rebirth. As I love this metaphor, I'm drawn to it year after year after year. I too to some degree am reborn every year and as every tree I have another ring of experience housed within my body. Perhaps it was the aggressiveness of this past winter or my fall on the ice (see #28 and #29), but I am looking forward to this spring more than I usually do. I too am looking forward to writing a draft of a new play one of these days, as opposed to reworking an older play, as has been my preoccupation these past years.

I'd read it before, but didn't get much out of it so it surprised me when I had an interest in rereading Aristotle's *Poetics*. I've never grasped the whole "fatal flaw" argument on a human being kind of level. I get it but I've never *felt it*. I never *felt* its importance. I never *felt* it inside no matter how many times it was regurgitated to me. I remember hearing in grad school that *Poetics* was not a formal essay, but something more casual, something closer to notes for a lecture. I too came across, a few years back, a different explanation, translation really, of "fatal flaw" into "fatal error" (Wallace, Jennifer, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*, p 118-19). An error or a mistake, this is more human, this I can grasp. Tragedy makes more sense from this perspective. This I *feel* viscerally.

I read six lesser known Greek plays (three by Aeschylus, three by Sophocles) while I was recovering from my fall. With this concentration I had a clearer sense of theatre's evolution through these two playwrights—an evolution that was in process as Aristotle was writing *Poetics*. I don't mean to make it sound as if Tragedy is frozen in time—it is still evolving and will continue to evolve. Aristotle saw Sophocles' *Oedipus* as Tragedy's finest example and I agree it is the best of Sophocles' plays to come down to us. Two things struck a deeper chord for me, as I read *Poetics*: the primacy of the story or plot and the use of reversal and discovery, especially when the discovery causes the reversal, as in *Oedipus*. It is as true in life, as it is in a play—a reversal of fortune, whether positive or negative (however you may define those terms) reinvents the world we live in and makes everything anew; an organic rebirth of sorts, whether we want it or not, whether we accept it or not, whether we like it or not.

31

This has been a difficult year for reading energy. The number of things that occupy and fill my world today that didn't seemingly exist a few months ago is staggering. When all else fails, find the pulse of the energy and try to follow it. The energy today is going in different directions and pulling me along in all those directions. My first attempt at an essay leaked away a few minutes ago like a bad college Literature paper. So where does that leave me? What direction do I go now? Now that what I was planning is gone? Or is *this* the direction I'm already going? I think it must be, but I can't be sure because I'm not there yet. The uncertainty of life can be humbling, when life's pieces don't fit together as you'd like them to or don't come together as you'd expected them to. The most human of qualities is the ability to learn and grow. It is human to evolve. It is human to change. It is human to be flexible and meet challenges with freshness. The closing off of our mind or our heart to the world at large will get us nowhere. When the energy's direction changes and you missed it—you simply take a different route.

I had an experience over the Memorial Day weekend that made me think about euphemisms and how un-organic they are. Following the energy seems to be a constant for me this year. This may be why my attention is drawn to something lacking an organic nature, as that would not be following the energy presenting itself. As a writer, I dislike euphemisms and what they are attempting to hide. I may on occasion use them in a personal conversation—but I wouldn't do it in a public format. A writer needs to be specific, clear and direct. Certain words need to be said for the message being communicated to be understood, unless you are deliberately trying to *not be* understood.

What happened was I heard three or four disc jockeys used the same odd, disingenuous phrase. They all said to take a bit of time over the weekend to remember those who had “paid the ultimate price.” It was odd because they all said it *carefully* and they seemed to want to be genuine about it, but they weren't capable of being genuine without using more accurate words. A more accurate choice of words would've been: remember “those who died” or “those who gave their lives” to give us and to protect our freedom. Why this strikes me as odd and un-organic is because one of the freedoms they gave and protect for us is the *freedom of speech* and these disc jockeys weren't using this freedom.

When I mentioned the strange sense I had from their use of euphemisms to a friend, he reminded me after 9/11 the government began to regulate, specify and sanctify certain phrases, as if none others existed in our language. When talking about certain *things*, only certain *terms* were allowed to be used. As our discussion continued, I had an eerie sense that the disc jockeys (whose stations get their license from the government) might be afraid of being fined or even losing their jobs if they didn't say “paid the ultimate price.” The saddest part of this is by not respecting our *freedom of speech* our government and these radio stations—and anyone else who speaks this way—is disrespecting the very people whose lives were sacrificed to preserve our government and our freedom.

33

One of the things I enjoy about the Founding Generation is how active and involved they were in everything going on in the world they lived in. They weren't perfect; they were flawed as we are. Some were ambitious. Many disagreed with one another. However, they didn't sit around *waiting for* something to happen. They didn't think it was someone else's responsibility to do something about the things they didn't like. Nor did they think it was someone else's responsibility to do something about the things they thought were unfair. They had families; they had jobs; the economy had good years and bad, so they had challenges, difficulties and hard times the same as we do.

The Founding Generation had a sense of belonging to where they lived, to their community, to their families and friends. Their world wasn't so large they felt powerless to make concrete changes. They didn't spend three-plus hours a day isolated in front of a TV; they weren't further isolated by the internet; they actually talked to one another face-to-face. Human contact—what a novelty! They thought for themselves; they met in public places; they had spirited debates (two-way debates, debates in which they were full participants, not passive audience members); they learned from one another; they gathered in groups; they knew their neighbors and their neighbors knew them; they cared about what happened in their corner of the world. A unified effort, such as the Boston Tea Party, could only happen because they were connected to one another and one another's lives; they were part of the whole; they were part of the commonwealth, as it was for the good for their common wealth.

The Boston Tea Party is one of my favorite moments in our history. Boston had a history of being rowdy and overly destructive in their protests, but not with the “destruction of the tea” as it was then called. It was a peaceful protest; no one was hurt. Aside from the tea, nothing was damaged, but a padlock from one of the boats and it was replaced. There were over a thousand people watching *in silence* on the wharf. The chests of tea were hauled up, the chests were broken open and the tea was dumped overboard; this too was done in relative silence; it took about three hours; no other cargo was touched; they cleaned and swept up after they finished. It was a neat and orderly protest.

The Boston Tea Party didn't have to happen. Two other ports, New York and Philadelphia, also received “the detested tea,” but they received permission for their ships to return to London without unloading the tea. However that didn't happen in Boston. The people of Boston knew the ships in New York and Philadelphia had begun their return journeys—so why not in Boston? The final word on the matter came from Massachusetts Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, who wouldn't give the three ships in Boston harbor permission to leave without first unloading the tea and paying the taxes.

Once a ship came into Boston Harbor, it couldn't leave without unloading its cargo. By law a ship could remain in Boston harbor for 20 days, but after 20 days the cargo would be seized and unloaded and the taxes would have to be paid. Not absolutely everyone in the town was against the tea being landed, but there was a clear majority against it. A watch had been set up; the three ships were under careful eyes 24 hours a day to make sure the tea wasn't unloaded. The will of the people throughout the town and in the countryside was overwhelmingly against the tea being landed and yet the Governor didn't listen to them. How can this be? Why would he not listen to the *will* of the people? When all else fails, follow

the money trail! Hutchinson's two sons were among the few consignees for the tea, which meant they would profit greatly from selling the tea, *if* the tea was landed.

Note: Why is the Boston Tea Party important?

It is important because it was a collective effort.

It is important because it was a peaceful protest.

It is important because it was the will of the people.

It is important because it was regular people standing up to an oppressive government.

It is important because it was a rejection of supporting a business, East India Company, that was mismanaged.

It is important because the East India Company was trying to cut out local wholesalers to profit a select few.

It is important because it was a rejection of a monopoly.

It is important because it was a rejection of corruption.

It is important because it was a rejection of political tyranny.

It is important because the burden of East India Company losses was to be put on the backs of regular people.

It is important because the burden of East India Company stockholder losses was to be put on the backs of regular people.

It is important because the personal investment of many members of Parliament was to be put on the backs of regular people.

It is important because it was a rejection of the people bailing out big business greed.

It is important because it was a rejection of supporting a foreign economy to the detriment of our own economy.

34

When I defined myself as an energy person (see #25), I also said I couldn't explain what that meant. Yet, I seem to be following an energy thread these days. When I write these essays it's because these thoughts and ideas are things I'd like to better understand and writing my way through them is a good way for me to do this. In thinking about how #31 came about, a phrase popped into my head; a phrase I'd associated with playwriting but not my essays: *crash and burn*.

To have something *crash and burn* is to have something I've been working on and put some time, energy and thought in to, melt away. The work felt solid and clear; the direction I thought things were going and the research were stimulating; however, in a few moments the thread I pulled on made the fabric unravel into a pile of disconnected threads that couldn't hold a paperclip.

The first time a play *crashed and burned* was devastating. I'd been working on it for some time. My research was intriguing and provoking. The play moved much at the beginning, but it had been feeling solid and steady—though I'd yet to write a word. Then it happened; like trying to hold on to sand in running water; my hands were empty and all of that work was for naught. A couple of days later a new thought occurred and within a few moments a new, richer and more refined play emerged—and did I feel lucky! About the fourth time that (as of yet unwritten) play *crashed and burned* I was so excited because I couldn't wait to see what would emerge from the ashes this time.

35

I'm not superstitious, though some people in theatre are. Both the world and the theatre world are full of many types and this is one of them. Theatre's most prominent superstition is the ban against saying the name of "the Scottish play," when inside a theatre. I had a teacher in graduate school, who though not superstitious herself, had experienced strong biases when she was in graduate school and relayed those stories to me one day. I was in rehearsal once, when someone actually said the name of the Scottish play and she was aghast at herself; shortly thereafter we had a small fire backstage! True story. Even with this incontrovertible evidence, I remain unconvinced. Even more pronounced than being superstitious, many theatre people are intuitive and my experience from the rehearsal fire convinced me my fellow thespian was not capable of *creating a fire* by saying the forbidden word, but she was capable of discerning a negative or problematic energy in the air that was saying "danger is near, beware" and she promptly and unconsciously gave the best forewarning she could.

36

When I think about the beginning of our country and the Founding Generation, I see them more inclusively than some; I see the famous and the not-so-famous; I see the everyday people who suffered and risked their lives along with those of higher profiles; I see all of those who made major sacrifices so we (the Americans of their future) could live lives of liberty and live those lives in freedom.

I can't think about the Founding Generation and not think about our first and most important President, George Washington. As a General of a fledgling army, he pulled a bunch of individual militia units together and over time created the unified Continental army. This was a slow and painstaking process. He was creating an army from *scratch*! He then took on, and defeated, the best equipped and most well trained army in the world. He was not experienced enough to do this, of course, but no one in the colonies was. Washington had to figure things out as he went along. Despite some shortcomings, he was an outstanding leader! I don't know if he was the best choice, but he certainly was the obvious choice for our first President, as he was the *one person* the entire country looked up to and trusted.

Washington was trustworthy, not only because of what he did, but because of what he didn't do. As a General, he didn't rush into battle, he waited until things were favorable. He saw death and destruction all around and knew if he made a big enough mistake everything could be lost—everything! He was careful with his choices; he was careful with his men's lives. He didn't see war as an opportunity to profit himself or his cronies. As a General, he was in a position at the end of the war to do whatever he wanted. His men believed in him and they would have followed him in any undertaking. With all of the various revolutions going on in the world throughout 2014, I can't help but wonder if any one of them has a George Washington to see them through their revolution? Washington was elected our first President because he chose to not become a dictator. At the end of the war—he stepped down, when he could have taken over! Can you imagine any one of these greedy, selfish, self-important, self-absorbed, top 1% supporting politicians we elect to have the character to step down for the good of the country, for the good of our collective future? In stepping down as a General, George Washington showed *by his actions* he was a leader and worthy of everyone's trust. This is our beginning, this is our legacy from him. This is our heritage, this is our stability and this is our common decency.

In graduate school, I broke some new ground. I was a Master of Arts student, but wanted to write a play for my thesis. The department didn't have a playwriting program, let alone a regular playwriting class. What they did have was a teacher who would lead an independent study project, when asked. He usually worked with undergraduates and then he retired after my first year. My idea to write a play for my thesis didn't occur to me until the summer after my first year and when I asked no one in the department had remembered an M.A. student writing a play for a thesis, but the head of the M.A. program checked to see if was possible and she was as pleased as me, that it was!

Because it was an M.A. thesis, my committee wanted a methodology paper, along with the play. Among the things I was drawn to in my methodology research were books on creativity. These were not books on or about playwriting, but were from various creative fields: painting, sculpture, poetry and music. I found myself soaking in intangible elements—things I gleaned, not things I concretely understood. This was my first original full-length play and I was working from a few images and I had a sense of a few things that I could only describe in vague or impressionistic terms.

I worked in the trades for a dozen years before I took my first college class, so I was not a typical student and it was a longer than usual process because I didn't become a full-time, degree seeking student until a few years after that. I was well into my 30s when I began graduate school. Still, my play was coming from a decidedly ephemeral place. If I were younger, I doubt my committee would have let me get away with such a light and breezy beginning, but being older and knowing I was good with deadlines they let me continue in the direction I was being pulled.

I latched onto a few things and let them lead me. I kept things open. I listened. I followed the energy. I didn't try to tell the play what it was or where it should go. I didn't know what I was doing and I knew it, but things were happening and the play began to grow—though I had no idea where it was actually going. I didn't know or understand what an organic writing process was or was like, but it was pulling me and I was letting it take me where it would. Because I didn't know what I was doing, I was curious and tried to stay open and fluid, but mostly I tried to stay out of its way and allow it to reveal itself.

I did graduate and *The Night Before* was my thesis. I tried to rewrite it after graduation, but it stopped growing. I sent it out for a few years but eventually set it aside. When I took it to a workshop in 2005, it was on life-support. After the workshop, a new play began growing, but it too stalled. In 2011 I made a couple of attempts at writing the play anew and also tried to rewrite it. All of these attempts were interesting, but they also fizzled. I didn't know it at the time, but this entire process was coherent and organic. Over the years I'd grown as a writer and when I needed a play for a submission in 2013, I was astonished to see this older play and the three 2011 writing attempts *swirl together* and take the play in an entirely unforeseen direction. I guess this is what can happen when you're patient, when you remain fluid, and when you're willing to follow the energy where it wants to take you.

38

Our society is increasingly superficial. We take what is given and we don't question it. We expect nothing more than sound-bite information and quick-fix psychology. We no longer want information that isn't readily apparent. We don't dig deeper or apply our minds or our understanding. We don't question the pabulum the media serves us, but we should. Many people give gifts this time of year. One of the reasons I write these essays is because they allow me to discover things beneath the surface. I wrote an essay in 2011 (see #5) that surprised me because I hadn't seen it coming, so I'd like to go back and revisit the topic of slavery. Most of us only think of slavery as part of our unpleasant, long-ago cultural heritage, but slavery is more prominent now than it ever has been in the history of the world.

According to Products of Slavery, there are over 12,000,000 people (adults and children) enslaved making products to be sold—in actual slavery. You could say anyone who is producing products to be sold who is not being paid a living wage is to some degree in slavery. However, this would increase the Products of Slavery number substantially. Slavery can be broken into three broader categories:

Indentured servitude
Virtual slavery
Actual slavery

I worked in the trades for a dozen years before I went to college. I worked hard and was well paid. I belonged to a union. Hard work deserves being paid a living wage. Those in manufacturing deserve to make a living wage. So I ask you to be careful with your purchases. Look at the labels to see where the products are made and don't buy products that were likely made by people not being paid a living wage. There are not enough countries in the world where you can be certain the government is accountable enough to their citizens to protect their workers from this type of exploitation. Slavery in all of its forms *is not possible* without the consumer—I repeat *slavery in all of its forms is not possible without the consumer!* THIS MEANS YOU! So please do not be a selfish consumer. Do not be a greedy consumer. Do not be a slave-mongering consumer. If you are going to give a gift to someone, do not make your loved ones complicit in the continuation of slavery. Give a gift to all of humanity and do not support slavery with your purchases. Give a gift to all of humanity and boycott slavery in all of its forms. Give a gift to all of humanity and boycott products made by slaves.

Note: If you're unsure which countries protect their citizens, visit the Products of Slavery website (see link) and remember any government that doesn't protect every worker won't protect any worker.

[Products of Slavery](#)

39

I reworked one of my plays last summer (my third of three older plays). It has been an unusually long process to find these three plays. This is the final remaining connection to the writer I once was. I removed over 20 pages and it felt good, it felt purging. However, as there weren't any structural changes, it was more of a reduced and tighter version of the previous draft, not a new draft

Rewriting is an art in itself. I doubt you can be a successful writer, if you can't successfully rewrite your own work. My first draft will always need some cleaning up, some clearing out, some rethinking, some reorganizing and some reconnecting. An older piece is more difficult because you've changed and grown as a writer and the original piece may no longer hold as much meaning for you as it once did. In this case it is more of a challenge as the original idea was not a full story, but simply an image. I'd had another play in mind, but my graduate school adviser advised against it. I don't know if he was correct, but I'm glad he advised against it, as the original idea would satisfy me today.

As this was my first attempt at an original full-length play, I was over my head beginning from so little. I wouldn't do it again, but I'm glad I did it this once—the folly of inexperience. It is difficult to write and rewrite a play when you don't know what the play is about. I'm still learning about this play. It took me years to find the direction and focus of this play—if indeed I have found it. I suspect I may finally know what the play is about, but I'm not surprised it's still changing, still moving and still presenting possibilities. I've spent much time in my essays writing about following the energy. This play exists because I've learned how to listen, how to seek and how to follow the elusive energy stored within it. There is a comfort you must have as a writer. There is the need to know you don't know. There is the need to know it is okay to not know. There is an understanding between you and the play: this play can not and will not exist without you and you can not and will not be who you are without it.

40

Life will take you where it will at times. Drama is usually about those times when characters' lives go in unexpected and unwanted directions. We respond to this because we all go through these times. When we're young and growing up, we seek new directions because our bodies are continually changing, so we go along with the changes and adjust to them as best we can—learning as we grow and growing as we learn. As we get older and are no longer aware of how our ceaselessly changing bodies are still changing, life will still intervene and it is how we deal with these changes that will dictate who we'll become, how the world will see us and what type of a legacy we'll leave behind.

I grew up in the trades and was expected to live my life there. However, after a dozen years I was fortunate enough to be in a position where I could choose to take my life in a different direction and I took it. My first college classes were at a local community college. By the time I'd become a full-time degree seeking student, I was amazed at the infinite possibilities the world had to offer.

Most people settle into their lives by my age, but being a writer and being organic that isn't something I see myself doing. It isn't that I don't expect to grow old or that I don't expect to die one day—I will and so will you. I am an unproduced playwright and it is challenging to navigate the treacherous waters within this industry. There are many playwrights who are talented enough and capable enough of making a contribution to our society. However, the industry isn't set up to foster, encourage and offer enough of these writers a life-sustaining living. A life in the arts is not easy and never has been. Having grown up expecting another life for myself and being able to change my life's direction has offered me a different perspective. What I value in my life as a playwright is something no one: not a producer, not a director, not a reviewer, not an educator and not a family member can take from me.

41

I recently found myself on a snowy, long distance train trip. The gentleman next to me was traveling to see his sister and brother-in-law. He worked in the trades and was out of work and had been for some time. However, he had a job waiting for him at his destination. He was grateful for what his sister and brother-in-law had done to help him get the job, to help him make the trip and in providing him with temporary lodging. He regularly checked his e-mail and spoke with his sister a few times. One time I looked over and realized he was checking his e-mail on a slave-made-cell-phone. I then looked at the clothing he was wearing and it was likely purchased at a big-box-store. The irony wasn't lost on me. He wasn't supporting American jobs, so America wasn't providing a job for him.

The economy is above all things, about jobs. When you purchase foreign made goods, you support foreign jobs. When you do not support your own economy, you do not support your own job. Many people complain about the outsourcing of American jobs, but many of those same people continue to purchase the products made by those outsourced jobs. Why do we do this to ourselves? Can we not see the-two-simple-dots-and-how-they-connect? The cause-and-effect are obvious. Are we really so greedy and self-absorbed that we're willing to destroy our own economy to get what we perceive as “a deal.”

Companies outsource jobs to increase profits. When jobs are outsourced the price of the products don't come down—company profits go up! When companies outsource jobs, they exploit cheap and slave labor markets, so there is more money to be had for everyone—retailers make more, stockholders' portfolios go up and Boards-of-Directors get those enormous bonuses than can not be explained or justified. Everyone gets more money—except for the people building the products, except for the slaves. Why do we support these companies by purchasing their products? If we were halfway alert, we-would-connect-the-dots-and-boycott-all-products-made-by-companies-who-outsource-our-jobs. We should be willing to do without, rather than to not support ourselves. Before the gentleman next to me got off the train, he proved how *removed from reality* he was by mentioning he was glad he didn't attempt to drive in the snow storm, as his foreign made car didn't handle the snow well. It made me sad and not very hopeful. If he wasn't willing or intelligent enough to support his own job or to support his own economy—as much as I wanted to feel sorry for him, I couldn't.

Note: All of the clothing I wear every day, all of the clothing I had with me on my trip and even my luggage—were made in America. My car is a Ford. I do not have, nor have I ever had a cell phone. I understand there are some things that are necessary for our health and safety, but most of our foreign made purchases come under the category of convenience, not necessity.

Learning lessons or learning what you need to understand to be an artist and learning what it means to be an artist and understanding we are all connected as human beings and as artists are among the things you pick-up along the way. No one tells you these things. You are left to put the pieces together for yourself, which is primarily what being an artist and living a life in the arts is about—putting the pieces together for yourself. No writer will ever write something the same way as another writer. Part of what makes us unique is our particular voice and how we discover that voice.

We find our voice by discovery. We discover our voice with and through the obstacles before us. Some of these obstacles organically occur and others we put before ourselves, such as the play topics we choose to work on. Many of us will take writing classes, writing workshops, acting and/or directing classes; some work on shows; some go through formal programs; many (hopefully all) read; we listen; we think; we intuit; we scratch our heads; we see other writers' plays; we go to readings; we make comments and give feedback. All of this feeds into who we become as playwrights. We create ourselves as creative people and as practitioners of creativity. All of this training and discovery also supports and feeds into the theatre community at large. We may not realize it at the time but all of this which we do for ourselves—we also do for the theatre industry as a whole.

These lessons can come at us in expected or unexpected places. The first time I went to the Sewanee Writers' Conference, I worked with Romulus Linney. I learned more about writing and my writing in particular in those two weeks with Romulus than in any other experience in my life. However, what was unexpected was I too learned more about reading plays—new plays. Romulus was a great reader of plays. He could cut through to the heart of a new play and put his finger on the pulse of that play in a few words. It was astonishing. I'd never experienced anything like it in all of my education and training. Romulus wasn't trying to teach us to be better readers—he simply showed us what was possible. It was then up to each of us in the workshop to take from this what was available, to learn and to grow as readers—for those who were willing and open enough to do so.

There is a freedom I feel these days as a writer. I'm not sure where it is coming from. It wasn't in my life a year ago. I'm not sure it will be in my life tomorrow. Writing is above all things about language, about using language, about understanding language, about developing language, about using language to communicate, about using language to foster and develop relationships, about using language to be more human, to become more human, to become better human beings, to know ourselves so we can make the world a better place. When I was growing up, we were a nation of *doers*.

Our nation has never been completely fair, no matter what we claimed and no matter what it seemed to be for some of us. However, during my lifetime I have seen us become a nation of *takers*. We now *take* from one another and we're proud of it (if we are not among those being taken from). We think it is their fault, not ours. We think we are smarter, more clever, more deserving. I'm not perfect and I make no claims to be. I've been given many things in my life, but I'm not a taker. I don't want to take things from people they need. I don't want to take things from people they deserve. I don't want to take things from people they've earned. I don't want to take people's livelihoods. I don't want to take people's homes. I don't want to take people's futures. I don't want to exploit people. I don't want people to be exploited. I don't want the world I live in to be one of exploitation, but it is and even though it is—I *don't have to personally contribute to it*—and I do my best to not contribute to it.

If freedom is anything, it is above all things the freedom to give: the freedom to give hope, the freedom to give opportunity to, the freedom to give back, the freedom to grow, the freedom to evolve, the freedom to give respect to other human beings. Do we do that? Do we truly respect other human beings? Do we truly respect ourselves? We used to teach children *right* from *wrong*, so they understood these things and could grow up to become functioning members of society. Now we're afraid of injuring their self-esteem, so we "flatter" them when they haven't earned it and when we do this we betray them—we betray them because we are lying to them. We betray them because we are not giving them the tools they'll need to take care of themselves in the future. We betray them because we teach them lying is okay. We betray them because we teach them lying is normal. We betray them because we teach them lying is expected. We betray them because we're not giving them the most important tool a human being can possess—*self-respect*. Self-respect is work, hard work. Self-respect is not given to you because it can not be given to you. You must earn self-respect and you must earn it from yourself.

When does a play begin? I'm not talking about the first line of a play. I'm talking about where the first seed is planted that you'll eventually write from. Do you plant this seed or is this seed planted in you or with you by someone or something else? Do we recognize these moments? Do we feel the subtle shift in our being? Do we understand something has changed within us which will enable us to write this "new thing" in our life? It seems I am again drawn into writing about the seemingly insignificant impulses in the energy that surrounds us in our daily lives. Some first moments register with me, though I'm not sure they all do or all will. I didn't know what I would write about as I sat down this morning, but here is something coming forth. I'm unaware of the moment this essay began, other than when I sat down and started punching out a few letters to see what words were with me today. Is that true? Are there words that are with you or against you? Are there words that nurture and cradle you? Are there words that undercut and irritate you? Do words mean you harm? I don't think so, but they can hurt you. It is people who use words in harmful ways that can hurt you—it isn't the words themselves. Words, improperly used, can cause a great deal of harm and damage in people's lives. Maybe that's our job as writers: to use words properly, to find and seek and discover new ways in which words play and work together, as you'd hope people in a somewhat civilized society would do. Maybe it is our job as writers to find organic ways to communicate to ourselves and others. Maybe it is our job as writers to expose those who use words improperly, who use words to manipulate others, who use words to harm others, who use words to cover up their misdeeds—particularly if their misdeeds are intentional misdeeds, cognitive misdeeds, freely chosen misdeeds, highly profitable misdeeds.

The Founding Generation was a generation of improvisers. The world they lived in was not one in which you could afford to not pay attention to what was going on. The Stamp Act was passed by Parliament in March 1765. It required a tax to be paid on all printed products (newspapers, playing cards, diplomas, legal documents, wills, bills of sale). The tax was scheduled to begin November 1st, but there was resistance to this new tax, as this tax was designed to raise revenue as opposed to regulating trade as previous taxes had been used for. Some of the resistance was violent: in Boston a new building, owned by the newly appointed stamp agent, Andrew Oliver, reportedly containing the new stamps was torn down (though no stamps were found) and two weeks later the home of Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson, Oliver's brother-in-law (see #33) was ransacked and everything in the house was destroyed (Allison, *The American Revolution*, p8). Soon afterwards every stamp agent in every colony but Georgia resigned (Allison, p8). However much of the resistance wasn't violent. Peaceful protests began, such as people signing non-importation agreements and shortly before the Stamp Act was to begin 200 merchants in New York (merchants in Philadelphia and Boston followed suit) vowed to not import anything from Great Britain until the Stamp Act was repealed (Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, p274). Along with the non-importation of foreign goods, people began manufacturing products locally to help reduce *the need* for foreign goods. The end result of these boycotts, as we would call them today, was not a single stamp was sold. These boycotts put pressure on those in Britain—the merchants and the manufacturers—as merchants and manufacturers from over twenty cities *in Britain* petitioned Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act, which they did in February 1766 to much rejoicing throughout both Britain and the colonies (Morgan, p275 and p291).

The Stamp Act was a failure, which Parliament admitted by its repeal. The colonists would again protest and fight to protect their livelihoods in 1773 by preventing a mismanaged company, East India Tea Company, from displacing local workers to the benefit of a select few. The colonists did not expect to exist in a state of complete security, as we do. They had to be vigilant and they knew it. This was before modern medicine and before social safety nets were in place, so people didn't have a false sense of security. They knew they had to rely on one another. They knew they had to trust one another. They knew they had to learn things from one another and if they were wrong, they knew they would learn the hard way—by mistakes, by failing and by having to pay a high price for those failures, because failure, whether through corruption or incompetence, is and always will be—failure.

Have you noticed in our society: for some, there is no price to pay for failure. How can that be? Companies that are too-big-to-fail, fail and the U.S. tax payer bails them out; no one loses a job; no one is banned from ever running a too-big-to-fail company ever again—the Boards-of-Directors of those *failed companies* actually received unconscionably large bonuses from the bailout money—some failure! The Founding Generation would have begun by tarring-and-feathering the members of the failed Boards-of-Directors. However, not every company that was too-big-to-fail, did fail. Was there much talk about how these failed companies betrayed the public-trust they were entrusted with? Did anyone talk about breaking up those companies that did fail, into smaller entities, so it wouldn't or couldn't happen again? Has there been any genuine legislation put in place to prevent these failures

from happening again? Has any one person been put in jail, been convicted or even prosecuted for the failure of these companies? So it seems, for some, there is no price to pay for failure. Time has passed and we are told things on Wall Street are better, but if we look at Main Street we know things are worse and our economy is still in deep trouble, as our trade deficit is still growing.

Failure seems to be expected in our society. Our elected officials know the trade deficit is a massive problem, but as long as they can put off any problems until after the next election, they seem to be fine with things-going-along-as-they-are. Pretty soon we'll hit another debt ceiling and it will be crisis time again on Capital Hill; they'll go through all sorts of contortions and expostulations about how bad things are and how can this be happening again—until they miraculously come up with yet another *last-minute compromise* to prevent a total government shutdown by once again *raising the debt ceiling*.

If one person from the Founding Generation were alive he or she no doubt would be doing something *to reduce* the trade deficit. However our elected officials are not doing anything about the trade deficit; our elected officials are *not even talking about trying to reduce the trade deficit*. So who do we blame for this failure? We can blame the politicians, both Republican and Democrat, for betraying the American voters or we can look in the mirror and realize we-the-people are supporting foreign economies with our daily purchases of foreign made goods. What we-the-people should be doing is boycotting those foreign made goods, which are made from outsourced jobs. What we-the-people need to do is what the colonists did during their resistance to the Stamp Act: stop buying foreign made goods and support local jobs by buying American made products and support our own economy.

Note: Manufacturers are not the only people to profit from cheap and slave labor practices—retailers too profit more from slave made goods because there is more money to be made when you exploit cheap and slave labor. However, the internet makes it easier than ever to buy American made goods. Simply do an internet search for “made in America” or “made in USA.”

Here are three of my favorite sources for buying American made goods:

[All USA Clothing](#)

[Made in USA Forever](#)

[Norton's USA](#)

46

I never seem to know where I'm beginning my essays these days. I don't want to think about them ahead of time, though occasionally I do, but I do want to discover what the essay is and where it is coming from and what that particular day is telling me or where it is drawing me, so my more recent essays are much like sitting down to have a cup of coffee with a friend you haven't seen in a while or maybe someone you don't know well, but you know you get along so you can relax with one another and things can grow and move and shift according to the energy that the two (or more) of you bring with you that particular day. There are days I wouldn't try to write an essay or a play, but there are other days when I've surprise myself because I did sit down at my keyboard and something emerged. I'm not sure if this is one of those days, as I'm still trying to figure out what this essay, if it becomes one, is about. I don't feel like writing today. It has been a confounding time in my life recently and today I just don't want to write, which of course is why I need to write.

To where does this life lead? To what does this life lead? What will this life leave behind? I can't say I can answer any of these questions. Life doesn't seem to be what we're told it is. It certainly isn't what we're shown on TV or in the movies, nor would I want it to be. Writers put words and images out there, but they aren't always about clarity or understanding, nor are they about living a better, more useful or more productive life. What they're about is what life isn't: it's about what we think life should be or what we want life to be or what we hope life will be, but what these words and images do is to provide a place for us to hide from ourselves and from our life. Our disconnect from our individual lives in this culture is staggering and from what I've seen it continues to get worse each and every year.

I didn't use to think of myself as older, but I do now. It helps to have some grounding in reality, so to think of myself as anything but older, as I've gotten older, would be dishonest of me and if there is one person in this world I need to be honest with—it is me.

Polonius said "This above all, to thine own self be true. / And it must follow, as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (*Hamlet* I. iii.) but Polonius hired someone to spy on Laertes, his son, during his travels in France and he used his daughter, Ophelia, as sexual bait to entrap Hamlet (see #14). If Polonius is true to himself, he isn't to his children. Despite this, Shakespeare gave him words that still resonate if said by a person with integrity. So who is Polonius fooling by offering this obvious and somewhat trite (considering the source) advice? Maybe the only person he is fooling is himself.

As consumers, who should we-the-people blame for the feeble state of our economy? It certainly isn't a politician's fault if we-the-people don't stand up to him or her. It certainly isn't a politician's fault if we-the-people don't hold him or her genuinely accountable for his or her actions. It is after all The Media's job to hold our elected officials accountable for their actions—isn't it? Isn't that what we-the-people think? It certainly is what we-the-people do. The Media is a good place to put the blame, so we-the-people don't have to look in the mirror. Who is the mysterious "The Media" anyway? Do we-the-people ever stop to think about who The Media is or what it is trying to accomplish? The Media, as any other business, is trying to make a living for itself—and as it is a high-stakes, high-profit business, they are trying to make as much money as they can. As The Media has become deregulated it has become concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. These hands are among the wealthiest of the wealthy in our society. As I look back over the last couple of decades and see the wealthy hands of The Media gathering together more and more acquisitions, I see the divide between the-haves-and-the-have-nots growing at a frightening rate. It makes me wonder if these-two-things-are-connected. Could it be The Media, because it is in so few hands, is working primarily for the good of The Media and not for we-the-people? Are they telling us what is good for them and the top 1% and not what is good for we-the-people? But at least they keep us entertained—politics as theatre you might say—as they drain our pockets and fill theirs. However it doesn't have to be this way. We-the-people, *the US consumer*, have lost sight of one of our most potent tools—the art of the boycott! This is in the power of every human being. This is in the power of every *consumer*. Those who know their history, can certainly repeat it. One of the founding elements of our nation was the boycott—The Boston Tea Party. This was a wholesale rejection of a product the British government forced upon its citizens. We-the-consumers don't have to listen to The Media. We-the-consumers don't have to buy what The Media says we should buy. We-the-consumers also don't have to throw any products into Boston Harbor—all we-the-consumers have to do is to not-purchase-any-foreign-made-products.

Note: Be an enlightened and proactive consumer and don't support retailers who stock foreign made products. As long as their cash register is ringing, retailers won't hear a word you say. However, when we-the-consumers boycott these products and the retailers' cash registers go silent—they will finally hear and understand what we-the-consumers are saying. To find what you are looking for, do an internet search for "Made in USA" for the products you need to buy and for the products you want to buy—otherwise make a sacrifice for your future and for your children's future and go without.

I recently saw an academic production of *Water by the Spoonful*, by Querea Alegera Hudes. It was an ambitious undertaking by an undergraduate director. The undergraduate cast did well, but their collective life-inexperience left the production a bit wanting. Still I loved they were willing and eager to take on this challenging play. The art of the theatre will neither grow, nor will it evolve without this willingness and this eagerness among both theatre practitioners and audience members. What I enjoyed and was most taken with was the script itself. This was a script of pain and anguish. The life-experience the cast had yet to experience—the playwright had. I knew as I was watching the production, I was not capable of turning pain I'd lived into a message of depth and humanity because I'd not experienced a deep enough pain in my life. From my experience those of us who are creative (or think we are) tend to feel things on a deeper level than many non-creative people. This, however, is not enough to communicate deep anguish. When you experience a deep pain, a deeper pain than you've experienced before—it takes you to a deeper place within yourself and when you experience that deeper place, you open up something within yourself you didn't know was in you, you open up something you didn't know existed or could exist; as a creative person (or a non-creative person) you can then access this place and use it to communicate to and with others, to and with an audience and to and with yourself.

50

I do not feel like writing today. If I did feel like writing today, I would not want to write something for the holidays, as this holiday season doesn't feel celebratory. There is much instability in the world and in our country. A president, whoever he or she may be, should be a statesman, should be capable of understanding how our government works and should be capable of utilizing the tools of our government for the better good: to protect and to serve *all of the people*. Unfortunately what we wind up with is a cheerleader; he or she is supposed to make us *feel* better and *feel* safer without really doing anything for us. The last three administrations have egregiously served the top 1% while largely ignoring the short-term and long-term interests of the rest of us. If we are incapable of seeing and understanding the mere rhetoric, the pabulum, the distracting theatrical antics of a president late in his second term: is there any hope for us? If we are not alert enough, if we do not care enough, if we are not honest enough with ourselves: can there be any hope for our democracy? The citizens of a country—any country—are *responsible* for their government. In a democracy it is more so, as we have the power and ability to change things that aren't working *without shedding a drop of blood*. It is important for every citizen to look honestly at a president late in his or her second term, when his or her inadequacies are most apparent. It is at this point when we need to be honest with ourselves, if our democracy is to survive. To speak of anything with any holiday spirit to another person if we are not being honest with ourselves: is farcical. To be or not to be honest with ourselves—that is the question!

51

Have you ever stopped to wonder: what is talent? It is easy to define, as you can look it up in any dictionary: a natural ability, aptitude or skill. Talent can be intellectual; it can be physical; it can be emotional; it can be creative; it can be artistic. It too is the type of thing you know when you see or experience it in someone else. Talent will come in varying degrees in different people, but it too can be enhanced if it is cultivated in any one person through education, practice, exposure to others' talent, hard work, practice, dedication, focus and practice. Those of us who think we have enough talent to make a living with our talent will usually make a concerted effort to ply our talent. Those of us who know our talent offers us access to something within ourselves we wouldn't otherwise have access to will also ply our talent to the degree we can manage or afford to ply our talent. This however still doesn't answer the question. Talent is the ability to do something difficult and make it look easy.

52

There is a time, or should be, in each person's life when you question who you are, when reality forces itself on you in a way that you can not ignore. Life is not fair and never has been, no matter what the salesmen tell you. Life will throw challenges at you when it will and these challenges and how you meet and respond to them will be the overall driving force of who you become in your life. Most of the things we spend our time on are pointless. They are distractions; they are the places we hide from ourselves; they are not who we are; they are the nonsense we fill our lives up with; they are the things we squander our life's time and energy on. Why do I do this? Why should I deceive myself in this way? What am I doing wrong? Why do I not see *into* myself better than I do? Why do I not understand what I am capable of becoming? Why do I limit myself? Why do I not believe my own feelings? Why do I not trust my own instincts? Do life's challenges create character or reveal it? A fortunate life is a life that feeds you with challenges you can meet well enough and allows you to grow stronger, smarter and to be more connected with yourself as a human being between the collective challenges thrown at you. In the end, which is when I will be on my deathbed, what will be of importance to me? Do I have any idea how different things may look from that vantage point? And am I spending my time wisely enough to accomplish that thing or those few things that will be of importance to me then?

53

A word drew my attention a few nights ago. I was reading and falling asleep and from somewhere, possibly a dream, the word “multitudinous” popped into my head. From where this came and to what it was referring I wasn’t quite sure. This did however stir me out of my slumber as I went directly to a bookshelf and got out two of my copies of Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*.

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself;

I am large I contain multitudes. (*Song of Myself*, 1855 edition, p69, ed. Robert Hass)

and

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then, I contradict myself,

I am large—I contain multitudes. (*Song of Myself* in *Essential Whitman*, p94, ed. Galway Kinnell)

and

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.) (*Song of Myself*, 1891 edition, p131, ed. Robert Hass)

Multitudes indeed! Whitman is a uniquely American writer. Whitman was a robust product of the 19th Century and he is the type of writer the 21st Century could never produce. The world was large in the 19th Century, but in our globalized 21st Century, the world has shrunk to a minuscule version of itself and we human beings have shrunk proportionally along with it. Whitman’s world was big and expansive; it was growing and evolving; many things were still out of reach, so people vigorously reached for them; the language too was growing and expanding thanks to the bold inventiveness of writers such as Whitman. In our world we are shrinking away. Our focus is on ever smaller things: our individual wants, our individual needs, our individual problems. Whitman had wants and needs and problems too, but he sought his answers out in the big-wide-world; we withdraw into the confines of the internet as if the internet had all of the answers we will ever need in this life. (The internet has answers: some of those answers are correct, but many of those answers are neither helpful, nor correct; however, the internet is convenient.) But we feel safe in our minuscule internet world, as we close ourselves off further and further from other human beings on our desktop computers at work, on our laptop computers in our homes or in a coffee shop or on our slave-made-cell-phones (maybe the smaller the computer screen gets, the smaller we get). What will it take do you think to motivate us to be as actively involved in our own lives, as Whitman was in his? Will we ever once again seek answers (our answers, not someone else’s answers) for ourselves? Will we ever once again seek our answers out in the big-wide-world? Seek is a word Whitman would understand and hail extravagantly—to seek or to be a seeker! This is something we no longer do in our lives or for ourselves. I too am large, I too contain multitudes. We all are large, we all contain these multitudes, but we will never live this larger

life we are capable of living if we don't seek to understand our multitudinous selves. To seek or to be a seeker is to be active, but we 21st Century people are *boldly passive*, boldly hiding behind our computer screens, boldly hiding behind other people's answers, boldly hiding from the multitudes of our own existence and boldly hiding from the multitudes of our own life.

54

This month marks four hundred years the world has been without the living presence of William Shakespeare. He too was a large-world person, as Walt Whitman was (see #53). I don't put Shakespeare on a pedestal. I see him as a human being, as we all are. I see him as a writer who sees the human experience and the human existence as deeply as any human being has done. I see him as someone who transcends the limits of his time and his life, as we all are capable of doing. I see him as a writer of insight and instincts beyond himself, but not beyond ourselves. The sad thing about William Shakespeare is we have had him and his works for inspiration, for a teacher and as an example of the depth the human soul can attain for four hundred years and we have not been capable of building upon the life and works of William Shakespeare to produce another writer of even equal, let alone superior stature. If this isn't sad enough, with all he has given us to grow and learn from, with all he has given to inspire us we are still tragically incapable of seeing into our own being, into our own selves.

One thing we mustn't ever forget is that politics is above all things—theatre. It is contrived. It is preplanned. It is orchestrated by people whom we didn't elect. As I've gotten older it astonishes me how increasingly theatrical our politics have become. Theatre is about creating illusions; this is what our politicians and the entire political industry has devolved into. What is the single biggest threat to our country's safety, our country's security and our country's long-term well being—the trade deficit! Our trade deficit is not sustainable. Our trade deficit will undo all that has been handed down to us for over two centuries of hard work and ingenuity. Our trade deficit will imperil our children's future. The trade deficit is the elephant in the room no one is talking about. If the politicians don't talk about it—does that mean it isn't important? Or does it simply mean *they don't want it talked about?*

How often do we hit a debt ceiling? How long will it be before we hit the next debt ceiling? Don't worry, because when we hit the next debt ceiling it will play out as it always does: if the President is a Republican, the Democrats will holler and scream bloody murder; if the President is a Democrat, the Republicans will scream and holler bloody murder; if the President is an independent (what! is that even possible?!) both will holler, scream and holler bloody murder. There will be debates in Congress, there will be threats of the government shutting down, there will be theatrical contortions of how abysmal all of this is and of how impossible it will be to find a resolution “this time around” and “how can this be happening again” and then just when we have all given up hope—a miracle! Congress will come to an eleventh hour compromise and once again “agree” to raise the debt ceiling and all will be saved—except for one thing: no one, no single person in all of Congress will mention doing the obvious thing—*bring the trade deficit down!* Bring jobs back! Bring well paying jobs back! Bring manufacturing back! Stop sending our money to foreign countries! *Stop supporting* foreign economies! Stop supporting indentured servitude! Stop supporting virtual slavery! Stop supporting slavery!

This is pure theatrics because no one in Congress has any intention of doing or saying or supporting anything to bring the trade deficit down—they don't even want it talked about it, so *they* won't talk about it. Therefore it is up to we-the-people to talk about it; it is up to we-the-people to bring this topic out of the closet and make it, once again, part of the national debate. If our elected officials are willing and eager to stick their heads in the sand—is that any reason for we-the-people to do the same?

56

The journey of one's life is never a straight line (it is not the shortest distance between birth and death no matter what the cliché may claim). We do not come with an instruction booklet to guide us. We must figure things out as we go along; we must learn who we are from what our life and our circumstances offer and put before us. The older I get the more elusive my life and existence becomes. My life at times seems to be a series of misgivings, miscalculations and unintended consequences. This is not unusual, nor is it a bad thing. This too is not to be feared, nor is it to be courted. At some point I will need to understand my life and my self well enough so I can embrace it for what it is (it is my life after all). My life has been a series of choices. Some of them have been made by me; some of them have been made by other people and I have chosen to accept their choices as my own; however, other people have also made choices which were imposed upon me, in one way or another, with no regard or care for my understanding in the matter. My life is what it is and it will become what my choices make of it. My life will be the sum total of a seemingly random, but very particular set of choices I've made for myself. At its end, my life will be an expression of my superficiality or depth, my obscenity or decency, my insincerity or genuineness, my greed or selflessness, my carelessness or concern, my arrogance or determination, my self-absorption or humanity, my fear or my complacency or my courage. Every choice we make everyday is important and is an expression of who we are. We make these seemingly innocuous choices for ourselves every day of our life, whether we realize we make them or not.

We 21st Century Americans do not appreciate, let alone acknowledge, the single greatest gift we received from the Founding Generation. We 21st Century Americans are too full of ourselves. We 21st Century Americans are too self-important, too self-absorbed and too pointless to see and understand how hard they worked and how much focus they put upon the future—*for us!* It is we who are (make that *were*) the recipients of their hard work, but we have become too self-indulgent to care about future generations to continue to pass the Founding Generation’s gift along to our children and our childrens’ children. We need to go back. We need to reconnect. We need to reestablish some elemental tenants of what it means to be an American. The Founding Generation was not perfect, but they were more selfless than are we 21st Century Americans. Yes, they allowed slavery to exist and some of them profited from it; however, we 21st Century Americans also profit from slavery (in much greater numbers and to a much greater extent)—from the cheap products we buy made by slaves in foreign countries to our Wall Street investments. We invest in and reap profits from these highly profitable multi-national companies who silently reap the “rewards” of slavery while pretending their “hands are clean.” We 21st Century Americans can be rather smug about what we can see with hindsight—the greed and inhumanity of earlier generations—but we don’t see it in ourselves. That is we don’t see ourselves being seen through a future’s historical lens, but we will be. How do we want ourselves to be seen? How do we want ourselves to be remembered? What will the future think about our greed and our inhumanity? What kind of world permits slavery to exist? What kind of culture allows slavery to exist? What kind of society *profits in any way, shape or form* from slavery? What kind of human beings live in a world where slavery exists and they do nothing but continue to mindlessly purchase slave-made-products and to invest in slave mongering corporations? What kind of world are we creating—the world is in a constant state of becoming, if you didn’t know it and it always will be—and what we do and how we treat one another in our early 21st Century world will affect the future (that is those in the later 21st Century, those in the 22nd Century, those in the 23rd Century ...) the same as it did with the Founding Generation. Life for us, or those in the Founding Generation, never has been, nor never was, easy. Life is really a test—a test of your friendship, of your character, of your ability to learn, of your willingness to grow, of your intelligence, of your patience, of your humility, of your selflessness, of your citizenship, of your emotions, of your strengths, of your weaknesses, of your decency, of your presence, of your connection to yourself, of your connection to other human beings, of your humor, of your honesty, of your honor, of your willingness, of your malleability, of your virtue, of your courage, of your understanding, of your empathy, of your uncertainty, of your wholeness, of your humanness. If everything in life is a test, it too is a test of everything these things are not.

I recently read a biography on George Washington. He was a towering example of integrity. He wasn't born that way, but the choices he made in his life took him in that direction and made him that way. There was a sincerity to George Washington—you can not have a deep sense of integrity, you can not be a leader whom people will follow putting their lives at stake, you can not be the single person both sides of the aisle implicitly trust to guide and bestow the future with, you can not truly be yourself without a deep sense of sincerity. The inherent dishonesty we experience on a daily basis (and have for the last three Presidential administrations) astounds me. What we don't understand is this is more about us, than it is about them. It takes two parties to perpetrate a lie—one to tell the lie and one to accept what was said or done. A lie doesn't become a functioning lie unless (or until) the receiver accepts it as a functioning truth. It is we-the-people who accept these lies; it is we-the-people who allow ourselves to entertain these lies; it is we-the-people who allow our culture to continue down this self-destructive path; it is we-the-people who are raising our children in this toxic environment, so they can not protect themselves from it. Have we ever stopped long enough to consider what the long-term problems caused by immersing ourselves in a system of lies will do to the soul of our country and to our individual souls? Have we ever considered how we are injured and how we injure our self when we accept this behavior from the so-called *leaders* of our society? Lying is a form of abuse. Lying shows a disrespect for our collective self, for our individual self and for the self of other human beings. If our politicians are lying and we know they are lying and we still vote for them—what does this say about *who we are* as a society, as individuals and as human beings? We want to believe our politicians and we want to believe in them, but how is this possible? So who are we lying to but our self and our children and what kind of world are we giving to and leaving for our children? All you build with lies is a house of cards. It will appear to be solid for awhile, but as with the financial meltdown of 2008, one day it will dissolve in the-blink-of-an-eye and there will be no going back, because falseness is an illusion and it has no foundation under it to support anything solid, anything real or anything genuine. Lying is the trademark of one type of personality; the one behavior all addicts have in common is lying; they lie to others; they lie to themselves (you can be both the perpetrator of a lie and its victim if you choose to be). So who is it we are enabling by accepting these lies from our politicians: is it the politicians or are we really lying to our self and are we the true addicts with the self-destructive behavior.

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The writing life is not much different from any other life. Every life has a particular focus and the focus of every life has something in common with the focus with other lives. We are more similar than we are willing to admit. We are more similar than we care to understand. The things that should stand out between us are not how we differ, but how we are the same. We often don't care for certain aspects of our own personalities, so we don't want to see or acknowledge them in ourselves, but we notice and point them out in other people. I've not mentioned for some time about my being an unproduced playwright, but I am: that is I'm still a playwright and I'm still unproduced. This might bother some people, but it doesn't bother me, at least not today. Most people are not only unproduced in the presentation of their own lives—most people don't even attempt to put a pen to paper.

It is a dark time for America and Americans. There is an infallible statistic history will understand when it looks back upon the three most recent presidential administrations. Unfortunately we-the-people do not understand this simple statistic well enough to understand what is going on and to see the deceit. The statistic is the the divide between the-haves——and——the-have-nots. A President at the end of his or her administration who has allowed the the divide between the-haves——and——the-have-nots to egregiously increase has failed to protect we-the-people and the more the divide——has increased the larger——the failure. Ever since December 1993, when former President Bill Clinton signed NAFTA, it has been open season on our economy. NAFTA was an invitation to every country in the world to pillage America's economy because our government was no longer going to protect our economy from foreign invasion. When NAFTA was signed Bill Clinton began a vortex of financial irresponsibility which has grown and continues to grow exponentially year by year, month by month, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute and second by second. If you vote Republican the vortex will grow exponentially or if you vote Democratic the vortex will grow exponentially. I also don't agree with not voting, but I can not abide what the Republicans are doing to this country, nor can I abide what the Democrats are doing to this country. We need another alternative. If our economy hasn't completely imploded by 2020 (and it may well have) we will need to find a new way. Most people think this isn't possible but we could simplify things and be more inventive. We could use the internet and bypass the regular media entirely. Would it be possible do you think to use the internet and social media to communicate and collaborate and bring the 99% together? We've done it before. The first time we had 13 colonies who all had separate agendas, but they *united* against the ruling political power and with a rag-tag army they overthrew the biggest, the most well-trained and the best-equipped army on the face of the earth. If something has never been done there is certainly room for doubt, but when we know it is possible because we have done it before, maybe all we need to do is to look deeper within ourselves and expect more from *ourselves*. As things stand we're not much more than lemmings being led to the slaughter. So maybe it is time to rethink, reorganize and retool our political system; maybe it is time for a different approach with some new people and with some fresh ideas and energy. However, one thing will be necessary—the 99% will need to realize, voting Republican or voting Democratic is voting for the 1% and not for ourselves. What we need is not another ultra-wealthy bought-off political crony; we need a human being without the phoniness of PR training. We need a pauper Presidential candidate who will work for the 99%, who will protect our economy and who will not allow the free trade whores to reap their profits from our economy's destruction.

Where do you sit when you go to the theatre—up close? about halfway back? near the back? The size of the theatre certainly makes a difference. In smaller storefront theatres all seats may be about the same, but in mid-size and larger venues you have these choices. How about a movie house? Do you sit with your feet up on the screen or farther back? Do you ever purposely sit in the back row at a movie house? I've done that—it allows me to see everything going on. There are visual connections in the background you can miss when you sit too close or watch a movie at home. The top show this season has been the Presidential election. It is easy to get sucked in. All of the talking heads with their grandiose proclamations. Is it possible for a mega-millionaire to be for we-the-people? Do you get to be a mega-millionaire by playing fair? Is it possible for a candidate on either side of the aisle to be for we-the-people and not we-the-oligarchs? Which candidate is the lesser evil do you think or are they both so evil you're disgusted with the entire process? It is easy to get sucked in, isn't it. What happens is we forget politics is above all things—theatre! Who can out dumb the other candidate? Who can be so stupid no one can imagine how either of these two people can be in the position they are in. But we like the show, don't we? We must—they perform it for us. The talking heads begin spewing about one candidate or the other's lunacy and we get all riled up and pull our chairs up close to the TV and we get angry—how can he say that?! or how can she mean that?! If you would bother to put your chair back where it belongs and go out into the kitchen or maybe the backyard or the neighbor's yard three blocks away—you'd see this is theatre. We love to get riled up. We love get drawn in. We love to think we know better than they do, but do we? The talking heads talk and talk. The politicians talk and talk. But is anyone saying anything of any importance? As a playwright words are the building blocks of my craft—the words that are spoken and the words *that are not spoken*. Silence or the absence of certain words is what is being spoken so profoundly this election. There is one major issue in this election for me. There is only one thing I think is truly important for the short-term and long-term health, welfare and security of our country. There is only one thing we need to be dealing with and absolutely no one is saying anything about it—the *trade deficit*! All of these theatrics are designed to distract us from realizing no one—not one Congressional candidate, not one member of Congress, not one Presidential candidate—is or has been talking about *the trade deficit*. No one is talking about *the unsustainability* of the trade deficit. No one is talking about what she or he is planning to do to *bring the trade deficit down*. When we get drawn into nonsensical issues, such as what dumb thing this person or that person said, it is easy to keep us divided and keeping the 99% divided is the main objective—to keep us divided against ourselves and to keep us divided against our own best interests.

“Are we having fun yet?” The circus has been in town for a-year-and-a-half, but alas the fun has to end sometime. It is a Presidential and Congressional election season and we are finally at the end of the overly long cycle of the mind-numbing misinformation, of the whiny-weary pontificating and of the soul-killing obfuscation we’ve all grown accustomed to and accepting of throughout the last three Presidential administrations. Therefore, all I can do is to congratulate the winners of the election and of course offer my sympathy to the losers—what? The election hasn’t happened yet? That can’t be true, but it’s a cinch to see who the winner is and who the loser is. The winner is—always the 1%. And the loser is—always the bottom 99. Didn’t you know that? If you think about it, it is only fair. After all the 1% deserve what they’ve bought and paid for and they’ve paid good money for the Republicans and they’ve paid good money for the Democrats. What I don’t get is why the bottom 99 keep voting for candidates who will only pay them lip service, while serving their sponsors—the 1%. I heard a song from Shania Twain the other day, “Who’s Bed Have Your Boots Been Under.” Country music has always had cheating songs and they always will, as long as there are people who cheat on their spouses. I’m not going to waste your time and talk about how our elected officials “cheat” on us. What would be the point. What this song made me think of was how destructive “lying” is and how destructive “cheating” is. When someone cheats on a spouse, you don’t just cheat on the spouse—you cheat on the entire family; you cheat on your children; you cheat on your grandchildren. When you cheat you put the entire family unit at risk, you make things more stressful and this affects everyone inside your home and it affects them to the core of their being. When your children grow up, having seen your unabashed example—they too may cheat on their spouse and their children. Though the statistics say violent crime has been going down in our country for decades, over this past summer violence seems to be escalating and violence against authority in particular. Does this surprise you? It does not surprise me.

Wall Street is doing well—while at the same time—Main Street is dying.

When the economy is poor, weak, struggling and in the toilet—crime goes up. What this song made me think of was how we-the-people are “cheating” on ourselves. We-the-people betray our own economy and our own economic good each and every time we purchase something made by an outsourced job. We-the-people cheat on ourselves and we-the-people cheat ourselves when we don’t pay workers a living wage. We-the-people cheat on ourselves when we freely elect public officials who do not acknowledge the long-term unemployed and we-the-people cheat on ourselves if the public officials we freely elect don’t care if the bottom 99 are not being paid a living wage. If enough people are not making a living wage, they will likely fight back and they will likely become violent and they will likely become violent against authority figures in particular—so I ask “are we having fun yet?”

When I was young I never bought singles, I always bought albums. I put a Gordon Lightfoot CD on a few days ago and more than ever before I enjoyed the movement of the recording from song to song building connections, creating nuances and understanding how one song influenced and informed the other songs throughout the entire recording. I can't imagine most CDs are put together structurally in the same thoughtful way anymore. Most people are content to bounce from song to song and artist to artist, as they will. If the people don't or won't take the time to listen to and appreciate the artistry of a full-length recording—why would anyone bother to make one? In this sound-bite world we have created for ourselves (we do choose to do these things, after all) we simply don't bother to put forth the time and effort it would take to appreciate artistry of a more thoughtful nature. I write plays. I'm not particularly interested in writing movies or television. Maybe I will be at another point in my career, but not now. I've been to many a production where the play had too many scenes and you felt as if the writer was really writing a screenplay. I'm disappointed when this happens. Plays are structured differently than movies or TV shows and they should be. It is a different form and it has different conventions, therefore plays need to be structured as only plays can be. I don't usually write conventional scenes. This is not a hard and fast rule, but it is a rule I keep in mind when I'm choosing what topics I will write about and how I will present a story. I don't like to break things down in to bits and pieces; I don't like a story broken up; I want a story to feed on itself and carry itself forward; I want a story that builds and shifts and moves and is in continuous motion, stopping only when it gets to the end. It is more difficult to tell a story this way and not all stories can be told this way, but this is the way I prefer to tell a story. Both *Shakespeare Restored* and *Before* are continuous time plays. A play structured in this way can only happen on stage. You use your imagination differently when you go to a theatre and see a play—you give more of yourself over to the experience, at least I do. You use your imagination with movies and TV too, but you don't have to give as much of yourself over to either of those forms because they do more of the work for you. The stage is unique and because it is unique there is something that can happen there—that can't happen anywhere else.

Note: In 2016, an entirely new play, *Before*, emerged out of the ashes of *The Night Before*.

I would never take anything a reality TV personality said at face value, nor would I take anything a politician said at face value, so my overall expectations of our new President are and will remain low (and it would be the same had the election turned out differently). Most of the talk about Presidential elections is focused on the short-term, as that is the most immediate and easiest to understand. However, this election may not have been that way. Along with the short-term immediate reasons to vote for (or against) one person or the other, we need to factor in some the long-term results from the past. When former President Bill Clinton signed NAFTA in December 1993 (it went into effect on January 1st 1994) many people were behind him and voted for him because of this. This was a new direction, a new way of thinking and talking about our “ability” to support ourselves economically. This was to a large extent the giving away of our tools of production. If you remember where we were as an economic power when 1994 began and look and see and try to understand how our economy has *consistently* weakened year by year and try to deeply understand how *enfeebled* we have become as an economic power in the last 23 years, if you remember where we were as an economic power when 1994 began and look and see and try to understand how many of our well paying manufacturing jobs have been outsourced, how many of our factories have closed, how many of our cities and states are financially struggling or broke due to the low and lost tax revenues from all of those good paying outsourced jobs—then this election may not be as surprising as it may appear on the surface. For me this was a vote against the outsourcing of more American jobs. For me this was middle-class America saying “enough is enough” to politicians on both sides of the aisle. For me this was a rejection of NAFTA and other shortsighted and economically harmful trade agreements our politicians feed upon.

Our society has devolved in an unsavory direction. We have become selfish and greedy. These are not values I associate with the holiday season, but they've become embedded in our 21st Century culture. I heard a song by Billy Joel a couple of days ago, *We Didn't Start the Fire*, but that wasn't what popped into my head. For some reason I recalled Joel's video *You're Only Human (2nd Wind)*. It is the video where he plays a "Clarence the angel" type character from *It's a Wonderful Life*. You still hear the song once in a while, but if I remember correctly, Joel pulled the video years ago. I looked on the internet for this information, but was unable to find one reference as to why Joel pulled the video.

What I remember from years ago (my apologies if my memory is faulty) is he pulled the video because someone took his life and gave Joel's video as the reason for doing so. The song and the video are clearly the antithesis of taking your life. I did some digging and Joel tried to kill himself when he was younger. He wrote the song specifically to help prevent young people who were considering suicide from doing so, so if this happened I understand why his reaction would be to pull the video. However the video's message is not careless, nor is it reckless; from what I remember, the video's message is thoughtful and done with the best of intentions, which are values I associate with the holiday season. Joel not only pulled the video he also never performed the song again, until recently. He performed it at Madison Square Garden in June a few days after the mass shooting at The Pulse, a nightclub in Orlando. He hadn't performed *You're Only Human (2nd Wind)* in 28 years. As I read some articles, I glanced at a few of the comments and some were adamantly effusive about the song because it has helped and continues to help people deal with the darkness of depression.

Looking back, there is no way to know if the young man who did take his life, wouldn't have taken it, if Joel hadn't written the song or if he hadn't made the video. I don't know enough about depression to be making any claims as to what is right or best. I do suspect depression is a lonely place to be. I can't imagine it is anything but a place of isolation, emptiness and deep pain. I too know many people regularly deal with depression during the holiday season and what this song and video do more than anything else is to reach out to a zillion different people as only art can in a zillion different ways. This song will not help everyone—no song will—but those whom it will help, it may help in countless and profound ways. Nothing can bring back the person who took his life, but what has been driving this thought is, not how many people have taken their life despite the video's message, but to wonder how many people Mr Joel has helped over the years and how many people were sitting on that lonely and painful fence and heard or remembered the song or saw the video and *didn't take their life*, which unfortunately is a statistic no one, including Mr Joel, will ever know.

Something deep is stirring in me this morning. I'm not sure what it is. It is not about writing or any of my plays in particular. It is about life—that is life in these all too frail human bodies we inhabit while we exist in this form of being. Growing old is never taken into account when people decide to have children—that is sentencing those children to growing old and dying one day and all of the difficulties and pain it will cause. It is a dark part of our existence and one which society is afraid to acknowledge or even admit exists. We make it too easy to hide from the basic realities of life. People are more pliant to mindless distractions, so our economy chooses to exploit our mindlessness. We too exploit ourselves and allow ourselves to be exploited in these ways to prevent this all too real part of reality from coming into our conscious mind. Are we all so afraid of dying that we do this to ourselves? Death scares us, but everything is death and everything will change over time and that very change is death itself because when something changes into something new, the old thing that was there is now gone as it has died off. There were many unexplained feelings pulsing through me yesterday, feelings I didn't like or want to be taken in by or consumed with, but they were there. The breaking down of the human body is inevitable, once the body has been brought into existence. You grow up as a child, but there is a moment in everyone's life when you cease to be growing up and you begin growing older—that is there is a moment when your body begins to begin the inevitable process of decaying (unless you die an untimely death) which is to begin the process of dying. It is important we understand dying and in particular the process of dying because this is ultimately what gives the most sincere meaning to being alive. Are our bodies inherently self-destructive? Is life philosophically and metaphorically designed to be both regenerative and self-destructive? I'm uncomfortable being alive today; by that I don't mean I'm suicidal, but that I'm uncomfortable being a living being (as we define ourselves and our existence). In many ways we are strange and foreign to ourselves. How can life exist if we are removed from the reality of our own existence? How can any one life be of use to others or worthwhile to our self if we are removed from ourselves in the ways we are? The more removed from our life we become the less meaning our life can or will have. The less meaning our life has the more we search distractedly for something to fill it up, which only reinforces our continued move away from reality.

I've seen some lawn signs recently about hatred not making our country great again. I must agree with them, as hatred is not a human value I put much value in. Hatred dehumanizes human beings and it dehumanizes us (we are surprisingly often both the perpetrators and the victims of our own behavior). Socially defined hatred allows us to act irresponsibly and not feel the need to question, alter or change our behavior or our place in the world at large. I'm a writer so I understand the use of words and the utility of words, but I too know the limitations of words and how meaningless words can be at times. The language used to dispense hatred is problematic, but what I find far worse are actions which are hateful. Actions impact people's lives more deeply, more personally and more intimately than do words. Actions, as the cliché says, speak louder than words. What is the most prolific hateful action in our society do you think? To me the most hateful actions are those which are not acknowledged as hateful actions. Is there an unseen hateful action we support in our society, which we refuse to acknowledge? There are more people enslaved in the world today than there ever have been before. Slavery doesn't always kill or maim as some hate crimes do, but slavery will do this too. Being an American I put a high price on the individual life and for the individual human being. One of the most hateful of actions is to steal someone's life from them—for your profit. Think about all of the jobs American companies have outsourced in the last 23 years (since NAFTA began). Those jobs were outsourced because those companies found it more profitable to not pay employees a living wage. Many of those jobs were outsourced to countries where slavery is not only allowed, but rampant. *Any job that is outsourced to a cheap or slave labor market is a hate crime.* If you genuinely want to take a stand against hatred, don't passively stick a sign in your front yard saying hate language is bad—do something real, be active, be a proactive consumer and boycott products made by outsourced jobs.

Spring is one of my favorite metaphors. Nature coming back to life and being born anew is an idea I love and look forward to every year. It offers hope of a new beginning for myself and for society. Spring is prolific with change. Change however can also be frightening, as there is a degree of uncertainty involved in all change. Spring does not frighten us because even though it is change, it is a change we have come to understand, are accepting of and expect. It too could be argued because we expect it and know it will happen—it is not change in the same way other types of change can be.

Most people I know don't like things to change, at least not too much. People get use to things as they are and if they change we have to make adjustments in our life and possibly our lifestyle. If the change is drastic enough it can cause us to have to rethink who we are and what our life may mean or not mean and most people tend to be closed off to this type of change. However, I see change as an organic and necessary part of life. Change and the inherent uncertainty it contains is *the way of life*.

As an organic writer, I try to not fight change. Without change life would be dull and tedious. I too understand life is a process so it is in constant change. The life I best understand (or think I do) is my life. How I choose to deal with change and the uncertainty of change in my particular life is in large part a reflection of who I am and who I will continue to become throughout my life. My choices, as I see it, are to either fight change or accept it. However, there is a third choice, but this choice requires more courage than the other two choices. Some change is not really change, but merely superficial distraction (novelty or excitement). Genuine change can be painful and difficult, but it too can offer important and profound ways of learning and enrichment, of growing and understanding. Genuine change can also challenge us in ways in which we don't want to be challenged, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. If I want to utilize change in its most significant and profound ways, which I do, I want not only to accept change—I want to *embrace change* and make change apart of who I am.

Shakespeare was not only a unique writer, but he too was born at a unique time. Theatre in Elizabethan England was coming into its own and audiences had a hunger for “new” plays. The Renaissance was late in coming to London. London was a place of much financial activity, but culturally it was a bit of a backwater and by the time Shakespeare was writing plays Londoners had begun to understand this. Shakespeare’s audiences didn’t go to see a play—they went to *hear* a play. One of the reasons for London’s cultural growth was the expansion of the English language. New words were all the rage. One of the reasons audiences went to hear a play was to hear these new words in action. In the 21st Century new words are still being invented, especially words growing out of technology; however, the number of different words we use daily is shrinking. This is largely due to all of the TV we watch. What we hear on TV is an ever shrinking selection of words. TV is not about language, but it does affect our language. TV is about profits and profits are about the number of eyeballs watching the advertising and then buying what is it is trying to sell us. In order to increase their audience, TV continually *writes down* to the lowest common denominator and the lower the common denominator gets, the lower down TV writes. There is also what our government does to our language: words such as “waterboarding”—a form of torture, not a beach sport—are consciously manipulative. Shakespeare was not a manipulator, though some of his characters were. Shakespeare was an innovator, a psychologist and an interpreter. Shakespeare used language to help people better understand themselves, their lives and the world they lived in. Shakespeare reflected the world back to his audience, so they could better understand and deal with the challenges before them. Shakespeare understood words and language are meant to communicate, not obfuscate.

Life is always unfolding and it will continue to reveal things to you as you get older. Some of these things may have always been there but you somehow missed, misunderstood or did not pay close enough attention to, to see them. Getting older has its drawbacks, but it too has a few advantages so it is important to utilize those advantages when they present themselves. Many people I know think they have “a good life” and maybe they do, but as I’ve grown older my standards of what “a good life” entails continues to be challenged and continues to change. The last couple of years, my life has been challenging in some difficult and unexpected ways and among the things this has revealed to me is I have an awareness of a lack of something deep and essential in my life.

A question occurred to me the other day—what does it mean to be alive? I’m not talking about being a living, breathing creature, but to be *fully* alive, to be *fully* connected to your self, to all of Nature and to all of Being. Some people may never experience this, but being in the arts I’ve been fortunate enough to have had the experience of being fully alive (or at least what I take to be being fully alive). It seems to begin with a connection inside of me, as it emanates from a place from deep within. The deeper question is: what is it, where does it come from, or more importantly—how do you get there?

I may not understand this well enough to convey what I’m seeking, but I think being fully alive is an art form. Being fully alive requires being present and sincere. It too is something we learn from the original life we are given, the life we live and the life we make from this original life. I find it easier to connect within my self when I’m alone and certainly time alone for a writer is important. However, we are a society and we interact with people. If you are being fully alive, fully present, deeply sincere and the person or people you are interacting with are not fully present—can you remain fully present? Or do you meet them at their level of presence? When we are with others, do we individually *make* the level of presence or do we simply *participate* in a generic level of presence communally made? Or is the level of presence and sincerity in our culture so low, so limited and so restrained we have trouble discovering, understanding and connecting with our own presence and sincerity?