

# THE NEW YORKER

- « The Year in Reading: Blake Eskin
- Main
- A “Christmas Carol” Marathon »

December 20, 2010

## An Inspirational Letter to My Students

Posted by *Roger Rosenblatt*

*The following is an excerpt from Roger Rosenblatt’s “Unless it Moves the Human Heart: The Craft and Art of Writing,” which will be published by HarperCollins on January 11th.*

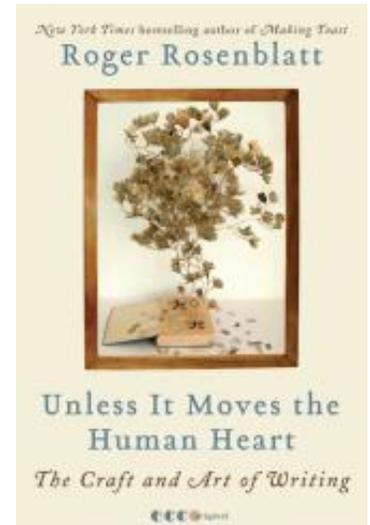
In “Unless It Moves the Human Heart,” I track the progress of a graduate writing course I taught at Stony Brook University in the spring semester of 2008. The course, called “Writing Everything,” had students write short stories, poems, and essays so that they might stretch a bit and concentrate on the strengths of each of the different forms. The following passage represents something that didn’t fit into any of the classes but seemed worth saying.

TO: My ungrateful students

RE: An inspirational letter

Oh, read it anyway. You may not need this postscript as much as I need to give it to you. But there is something about writing I haven’t told you, in part because it smacks of the sentimental and abstract—two of the monsters I’ve hoped to drive from your work. And yet, if I fail to give you this final piece of information, if I let you stride toward that desk of yours thinking that good writing consists only of precision and restraint, and of the right words in the right order, and using anticipation over surprise, and imagination over invention and the preference of the noun to the adjective and the verb to the adverb, and a dozen other little lessons, however helpful they may be, you may conclude that once you’ve nailed these ideas, well, you’re a writer. Well, you’re not. Not yet.

Lewis Thomas said that there’s an evolutionary tendency on the part of the species to be useful. He told me this in 1993, when I was doing a series of interviews with him for a piece for the *New York Times Magazine*. I had known Lewis a little before that, and like millions of others, had much admired his *Lives of a Cell* and *The Medusa and the Snail* and his other books that, thanks to his generous and observant eye, brought science to philosophy with a rich, joyous appreciation of the world. He was dying of lymphoma, and I asked him, since he had shown so many people how to live, if he might talk about how to die. This is what we discussed as we sat in his apartment on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, week after week, in the mornings with the sun blasting the white walls and his wife Beryl nearby and his Yorkie at his feet—the imponderability of death, his wish not to be reincarnated because he’d had so good a life the first time round, his disbelief in an afterlife, which was undercut by his conviction that nothing in nature disappears. But in the fall of 1993, as his stern and handsome face was growing paler and bonier, he paused in mid-sentence and said, “You know, I really don’t want to talk about death anymore. I’d rather talk about life, how to live.” He said he thought that nature was basically amiable—



good-natured. And that the proof of nature's amiability was usefulness. He cited female beetles in an area near Houston, Texas, who lay their eggs in a slit that they cut in a branch of a mimosa tree. The eggs develop and crowd out the tissue of the branch, and eventually the branch falls, but not until the eggs hatch. This pruning keeps the mimosa trees healthy. The trees are useful to the beetles, the beetles are useful to them. "There's an art to living," Lewis said. "And it has to do with usefulness. I would die content if I knew that I had led a useful life."

Toward November, Lewis weakened, just about the time my essay came out in the *Times*. For the next ten days or so, hundreds of letters from Lewis's readers came to the *Times* or to me directly, saying how grateful they were to him, how much he had taught them, and how sad they were to learn he was dying. He read many of these letters, and when he fell into a coma, I continued to read them to him in the hospital. You never know. When he died not long after that, there could be no question in his mind that his life had been useful.

You see where I'm going with this. For your writing to be great—I mean great, not clever, or even brilliant, or most misleading of all, beautiful—it must be useful to the world. And for that to happen you must form an opinion of the world. And for that to happen you need to observe the world, closely and steadily, with a mind open to change. And for that to happen you have to live in the world, and not pretend that it is someone else's world you are writing about. A tendency of modern literature is to claim, "We must love one another or die," or "be true to one another," or "only connect." Sweet as such sentiments may be, they give up on the world and imply that the best way to live in it is to hide from it in one another's embrace. Instead, you must love the world as it is, because the world, for all its murder and madness, is worth loving. Nothing you write will matter unless it moves the human heart, said the poet A. D. Hope. And the heart that you must move is corrupt, depraved, and desperate for your love.

How can you know what is useful to the world? The world will not tell you. The world will merely let you know what it wants, which changes from moment to moment, and is nearly always cockeyed. You cannot allow yourself to be directed by its tastes. When a writer wonders, "Will it sell?" he is lost, not because he is looking to make an extra buck or two, but rather because, by dint of asking the question in the first place, he has oriented himself toward the expectations of others. The world is not a focus group. The world is an appetite waiting to be defined. The greatest love you can show it is to create what it needs, which means you must know that yourself.

Everything contains significance. But some significances are more equal than others. The writers whom we agree are the great ones deal only in matters of proved importance. They are great because their subjects and themes are great, and thus their usefulness is great as well. Their souls are great, and they have had the good sense and the courage to consult their souls before their pens touched paper. Go and do likewise. And do not tell me that greatness lies out of your reach, because that would mean your soul is out of your reach. The trouble with much writing today is that it has been fertilized and nurtured in classrooms like ours, where the elements of effective writing have been isolated and studied in parts. No teacher of writing, myself included, dares speak of the subterranean power available to every writer, if that writer will but take the time to brood on the matter and unearth it. In a way, you and I have been in a conspiracy against each other. By emphasizing the apparent this and that about writing—this verb, that line—we have been ignoring the invisibilities that are the source of greatness in you. We dwell on style. I cannot tell you if Swift or Cervantes was a great stylist. The lesser excellences of great writers rarely occur to us, because their works are overwhelming. When most modern writers come in for our praise, it is because of their little tricks or little twists. When Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, George Eliot, or Chekhov are recalled, it is as if tidal waves are washing over us. We cannot catch our breath. If I have taught you only to write so that your contemporaries may say nice things to you, I have failed you. I should have been teaching you that the one goal you must aim for is the stunned, silent gratitude of history.

I have known several great writers well and have met several others. All have in common a certain innocence of mind that allows them to observe life openly and with a sense of fair play, though not without judgment. Whatever they write, a sonnet or a satire, arises from their liberalism of spirit, which is a restless spirit. They also cultivate their innocence and

rediscover the virtues they believe in every time they sit down to write something new. They may surprise themselves by the insistence of their own high motives and values. Picture Dickens working out his labyrinthine plots on his long walks around London, forever returning to the child of his imagination—Oliver Twist or David Copperfield or Ebenezer Scrooge as a schoolboy—whom he could trust to bring him back to a defense of the just, the right, and the good.

It is your soul I am talking about, I'll say it again. And if, upon examination, you find your soul inadequate to the task of great writing, then improve it, or borrow someone else's. Commencement speakers are forever telling you to be yourself. I say, be someone else, if that other self is superior to yours. Borrow a soul. I am not in the least being facetious. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov says that the soul "is but a manner of being," not a constant entity. Dissatisfied with the makeup of your old soul? Trade it in. But always trade up, and make the new one a great soul, capacious, kind, and rational, for only a soul of such quality and magnitude will produce the work you aspire to. If there is one lesson I hope to have given you in our classes, it is that your life matters. Now make it matter to others.

You must write as if your reader needed you desperately, because he does. If, as Kafka said, a book is an ax for the frozen sea within us, then write with that frozen sea in mind and in view. See your reader, who has fallen through the ice of his own manufacture. You can just make him out, as he flails in slow motion, palms pressed upward under the ice. Here's your ax. Now, chop away and lift him up by the shoulders. And what do you get out of this act of rescue? You save two people: your reader and yourself. Every life is exposed to things that will ruin it, and often do, for a time. But there is another life inside us that remains invulnerable and glimpses immortality. For the writer that life exists on the page, where it attaches itself to every other life, to all the lives that have been and will be.

From time to time, during the months we have been together, it may have seemed that I expected too much of you. In fact, I have expected too little. To be the writers you hope to be, you must surrender yourselves to a kind of absurdity. You must function as a displaced person in an age that contradicts all that is brave, gentle, and worthwhile in you. Every great writer has done this, in every age. You must be of every age. You must believe in heroism and nobility, just as strongly as you believe in pettiness and cowardice. You must learn to praise. Of course, you need to touch the sources of your viciousness and treachery before you rise above them. But rise you must. For all its frailty and bitterness, the human heart is worthy of your love. Love it. Have faith in it. Both you and the human heart are full of sorrow. But only one of you can speak for that sorrow and ease its burdens and make it sing—word after word after word.

*Further reading: Rosenblatt's 2008 piece in the magazine, "Making Toast."*

## Keywords

- MFA programs;
- Roger Rosenblatt;
- Unless it Moves the Human Heart;
- creative writing;
- writing

## POSTED IN

- The Book Bench

## Comments

**SUBMIT**