

On Apprenticeship

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EVERY TIME I run a workshop at a writing conference and every time I make small talk at gatherings of professors or family or old acquaintances or friends I'm reminded how little our culture appreciates artistic apprenticeship, how little we writers (members, after all, of an unappreciative culture) admire our own apprenticeships, how much, even, we hate them.

At a Christmas gathering back home in the flatlands of Connecticut I got stuck at a house party talking to a real estate lady and her banker husband. Nice folks. She had read my book, a memoir called *Summers with Juliet*, which chronicles eight summers spent traveling with my now wife, the painter Juliet Karelsen. He had not read the book, even grinned admitting he hadn't actually read a whole book since college. Maybe not even in college, ha ha.

And she said, "We could have written that book."

"Yes!" he cried, "All the adventures we've had!"

"And a long courtship, too," she said.

I liked her. Who wouldn't? Lovely, intelligent, active, charming, successful.

He said, "Always wanted to take off a month and write the darn thing!" He really said this. A pleasant banker who hadn't read a book maybe ever.

"This is before we settled down," she said.

"Rent a little cabin, write the darn thing," he said, dreamily. Some of his rough edges, most of the possibility of personality, had been rubbed off by banking, but not all. There was enough of a man left there to take him seriously.

I smiled, said nothing. I'm not entirely churlish and I know people say dumb things sometimes. I do have a sense of humor. And I have had such conversations before:

Graduate Student in English: "When I finish my dissertation I'm going to write just such a book! I've got a whole summer before I'm off to Oxford."

Zoology professor: "So, you see, my story is just as interesting as yours: I'll get it written when I finish my treatise on color distribution in weasels."

Nearly everyone: "If I only had time like you!"

Folks don't quite see the difference between the story and the work of its telling. People don't quite see the enormous price of all that seeming free time.

A physician at a conference I won't name in Montana (and a doctor at Stonecoast and a doctor at Steamboat Springs and a doctor at every conference I've ever braved teaching—doctors are famous offenders) strode up to me during cocktails and announced that—now that she was established as a



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surgeon (in fact, perhaps a little bored with it by now, the glamour having worn off)—yes, now that she had control of her time, she was going to take six months off and write her story. Mine had inspired her, she said.

I said I was pleased to be an inspiration. I wished her luck. Then there was a pause. The rattling of ice cubes. I knew how smart it would be

to keep silent, but I gulped my drink and said, "You know, you've inspired me! I'm going to take six months off and become a surgeon like you, since I admire you, and since neurology seems most up my alley—after all, I work with my brain practically every day! Yes! That's it! Now that I'm established as a writer, I think I'll just take six months off and heal a few brain wounds!"

She didn't get the joke. Didn't even smile. "You can't become a doctor in six months time," she said.

I just looked amazed at her news and watched her walk away.

BUT EVEN among the enlightened, among the best students I have had, among the best new writers I have talked to (and certainly within my younger self) contempt for the many years of apprenticeship (fully equal to the years required for an M.D., usually twice again more) seems a devastating undercurrent. We've all of us internalized our parents' question, our dentists' question, the competitive question at conferences: "Oh, you say you're a writer." Wry face. Then: "What have you published?"

And no matter if you've published two feeble stories in the *Wrinkly Elbow Review* or ten spectacular books: "Why no, I haven't heard of that one."

The next question (we don't ask doctors this!): "Huh. How much they pay you?"

And bless you if you haven't published at all. The smirk, the little anecdote about the aunt who thought herself a writer (before her suicide, poor thing), about the strange brother that wrote stories no one could make the least sense of. The anecdote about that spy writer guy who made ten million on his first book. Why don't you write about spies?

So it's no wonder that the first question many a new writer asks of her (usually struggling) teachers is: "How do I sell this thing?"

CONSIDER the apprentice glassblower. No one condemns her. No one says she should be blowing spy figurines. She's paying to learn, hoping to reach the point where she can earn wages as a journeyman so that after a prescribed number of years she'll be a master at her craft and able to make a real living. If you ask her what she's sold, she'll look puzzled, tell you (with aplomb and a little pity at your ignorance): Sold? I'm an apprentice. Sold? I'm proud to be able to sweep up around here. Sold? I know I'll be able at length to blow the perfect lamps the masters blow now. Oh, god, let me show you the lumpy vase I've made

before I smash it to make shards to melt for the next try! I'm working on necks, now; I'm working on making my vase necks perfectly graceful.

Imagine the glass apprentice taking vase-marketing courses before she's learned to make the glass. Imagine an entire Book-of-the-Minute Club devoted entirely to books aimed at glass apprentices and titled "Selling Your First Weak Attempts at Glasswork." First—and any apprentice to any master can tell you this—*learn the craft*. (And where does one find a master when it comes to writing? In the library, for starters.)

We've heard that writing is a talent, that one is born to it, that it can't be learned. Malarkey! Imagine the glass apprentice's parents saying: "Glassblowing? Glassblowing takes *talent*! You can't learn glassblowing." Or the medical student's: "If you can't do a heart transplant when you're in high school you'll never do one." Every apprentice in any endeavor arrives with certain talents, certain facilities, all intermixed with flaws. One hopes to hang onto talents while correcting deficits. Perhaps our glassblower is lucky enough to be naturally good at goblet stems (goblet stems are hard!). Should she quit because she's bad at vase necks?

No. She goes to work; she learns. And when she fails she smashes the faulty lamp or pitcher or goblet, musters all she's learned, and tries again. No one suggests she keep working on the flawed apprentice work, just as no one suggests that a medical student continue to work on her assigned cadaver until it comes to life. (Or worse, that she try to sell the bestitched and bloodless thing, or send it a bill.)

Here is the only rule I'm willing to make about writing: Honor your apprenticeship. Call yourself a learner. When your goblets are good they will sell (first at yard sales, then in better and better boutiques, then to the fine museums). Before that time, smash them and use what you've learned to make the next. One day, people will clamor for what you do. But first you must—we all must—learn to write. When some well-meaning banker asks what you've published, look shocked. Say, "But I'm an apprentice!" Be proud of this, be glad of it. Buy yourself a beer. Write yourself an acceptance letter. Cultivate patience. Quote Shinryu Suzuki: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

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