

Living Revision: A Writer's Craft as Spiritual Practice

Introduction

Writing creatively helps us come alive. The thrill of discovery, of growing in awareness, of forming ideas into language and image and story, of ourselves being formed in the process . . . *this* is why we first began writing, and what prods us to continue. Writing feeds the spirit. How and why this is so remain a mystery, but I'm convinced of it regardless: Writing is one way we humans enter, and invite others to enter, a fully textured, openhearted engagement with life.

How easily we forget this! Too soon, other agendas take over. We want an audience, a stay against mortality, revenge, fame, the comfort of being heard, the MFA degree; we want to record the past, sing praises, make a difference, make Art, make waves, or any number of shifting, contradictory ends. Especially after the first draft is complete, after we've reveled in its brilliance and despaired at its defects, we sense that something more is possible, for ourselves as writers and for our project. Surely this story can be better. Surely we can transform our writing from private ramblings into influential prose, from a record of events into an engaging narrative, from a simple idea to a smart, nuanced exploration. We long for artistic fulfillment—for arrival, which we often equate with publication.

Ask most writers, editors, and agents how to get there and they'll give the same answer: revision. Writing *is* revision, the professionals claim; writing is the gut-wrenching, revelatory, dogged work of developing a story.

Yes, writing is revision. But I'm here to say that revision is not just for the professionals or those wanting an audience. **At its most basic, revision is seeing anew.** Revision is the complicated, profound work of creation—an act that simultaneously creates within and through the creator. Revision changes the writer, deepens the writer's work, and infuses that work with

the potential to move readers. Revision addresses our innermost longings. At its core, **revision is the spiritual practice of transformation**—of seeing text, and therefore the world, with new eyes. Done well, revision returns us to our original love.

Why then does the suggestion of revision make most of us cringe? Revision, we've been taught, means bleeding red ink on the page, "killing our darlings" as William Faulkner so unpleasantly put it, and years of Herculean labor. Revision implies that our first, muse-bestowed inspiration is (don't say it!) flawed. Revision asks us to gamble an initial attempt on the chance of something better.

It's a rare writer whose heart doesn't plummet when faced with revision. Case in point: After plugging away at this book for six years, I got a sudden sparkling insight that reframed everything. In a passion, I rewrote the introduction and sent it off to my writing group for their approval. They slammed on the brakes. Sure, it was a good idea, but what about . . . ? Once again I swallowed my pride, considered their questions, and began again.

How do writers do it? How do I—how does anyone—muster the stamina, the innovation, and the heart to revise? Why bother?

"You can fall in love with your first draft," the poet and memoirist Jorie Miller likes to say, "but don't marry it." We enter mature and lasting relationships with creative work through revision. Like any healthy commitment, revision demands of us practices that commonly make us groan: balancing the joy of spontaneity and inspiration with the efficacy of restraint and discipline. Attaching ourselves wholeheartedly to the work while also holding it lightly. Exercising humility. Listening deeply. Seeking what's true and naming it as best we can. Facing the full range of our humanity, from utterly broken to fabulously beautiful. Being willing to grow. Practicing patience, discernment, compassion. **Revision requires inner work and thus is**

a spiritual practice. Through revision's grueling demands and absorbing joys, we come more alive.

Most people don't want to make this effort because they don't realize revision is the work of learning to love. Love isn't just a feeling; it's an act of will, consent, and surrender. Love takes time. Love is what brings us and our writing to fruition.

This book is an introduction to the long-term practice of enlivening yourself and your writing. It will teach you what commitment looks like in the literary world—how to take your head-over-heels romance with an idea through development into maturity. On the surface, much of this book looks like lessons in craft—how to discover your story's structure or develop your themes or use the reflective voice. Literary techniques are essentially tried-and-true methods for engaging the human heart within and across the page. If you want to develop your work, whether for your own sake or for that of an audience, here are the tools you need. This book will help you thrive on the long road to completion. With a new relationship to revision and some tools under your belt, you can manifest the full potential of your project. Anyone can; everyone can.

Look beyond the craft lessons, however, and you'll find here a reliable framework for personal growth. **Writers' journeys toward self-discovery and the evolution of their craft are inseparable.** Our capacity to transform our writing is intricately connected to our willingness to change how we see our subjects and the world. If you write for personal exploration, here you will find the tools you need to bring discipline and depth to this practice. Revision exercises spiritual muscles. It strengthens our relationship to the creative source.

So take heed: Revision, like love, is not for the fainthearted. **For your writing to change, you must change.** In these pages I won't offer you blithe literary exercises to help you manipulate your text. I'm not interested in aesthetics for aesthetics' sake. I want you to write

with spirit and power, to write as though your life is on fire—which it is—and to write to a world thirsty for truth. This book is an invitation to open your heart wide, for the sake of your creation and all creation.