PICO IYER

The Mystery of the Desk

Write not what you know, but what you don't know: that is my cardinal principle as a writer. Write about the excitement of discovery, of burrowing into a question, of wrestling with an uncertainty that you can never get the better of. Write about what haunts you and confounds you and leaves you turned around; about what you met just yesterday, and sets you alight.

I'm speaking polemically, of course, aiming only to provoke; I'm doing what many of us do when we pick up the pen and imagine a reader we wish to engage, not with our personalities, but with our ideas. A writer's first job is to grab a reader, and though this may often come by seducing the reader, making yourself irresistible to the stranger who has no prior interest in you or your story, it may also come by annoying her, by perplexing her, or giving her something to refute. There's a reason Beatrice and Benedick seem to play their debates out in every other Hollywood movie. Friction is just as exciting a form of relationship—as Hunter Thompson knew well—as warm complicity.

So I'm not being entirely honest or true when I tell you not to write about what you know. Writing, indeed, is partly how you find out what you know, and care about; it's a way of excavating the deepest issues inside us, and finding, to our surprise, often, what are the otherwise unremarkable-seeming marks of people who still live inside us, who sting, what questions we are carrying with us through all our days. Knowledge is what brings tension and electricity to our thought. But the simple adage "Write what you know" does too little justice to the power of first encounter.

Indeed, a better way of putting it, perhaps, is that when a writer talks about writing of what he knows, he is not talking about knowledge in the conceptual sense—the filing cabinets we all keep inside our heads—but rather of knowledge in the more intuitive sense, as a way to describe what we feel at home with. Writing about what you know may take the form of writing about a geisha house in Kyoto in the '30s—if you're a male in Brookline in 1995—or writing about the Civil War when you are in the 21st century. It may

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take the form of writing in a male voice, as a woman, or staking out a territory that you have no ostensible connection with at all. The obvious connections are rarely the interesting ones, and the unobvious connections are the deep ones, which writing in fact helps to uncover. Writing about what you know has nothing to do with the data-bases we keep in our memories, and a lot to do, perhaps, with "knowledge" in the Biblical sense: write about what you love, what you're drawn to, what you feel a mysterious connection with, the way you feel you know a stranger whose eyes catch yours across a room at a party (but you may not know your mother or brother at all). That stranger we might call your voice, or the fictional terrain that is yours to colonize, your "knowledge."

I learned this unlikely lesson in that graduate school of writing, *Time* magazine. A weekly newsmagazine is not the ideal training-ground for every kind of imaginative or emotional writing, but it is an ideal place for learning about clarity, concision and communication with the outside world, especially if you're coming, as I was, from a graduate-school background in which you are expected to believe that only two people (maybe one—professors are not always conscientious) will ever read what you are so painstakingly composing. Writing for 30 million people reminds you that your first obligation is to the reader, that said reader has no conceivable interest in the acrobatics of Pico Iyer's prose style or even in his life-story, but that the reader is picking up a piece because he wants to know about Lebanon last week—thoroughly, quickly and impartially. To write, as I often did, in a state of ignorance (let's call it openness) not very different from the reader's—two steps ahead of him, perhaps—is to have no trouble reaching back and leading him by the hand through the intricacies of the week's events in Paraguay. Yet to write from a knowledge that is really just a fancy word for prejudice, familiarity or too much experience is a recipe, often, for disaster—certainly, for a piece that will be partial, congested, often contradictory, as confused as the feelings one has for what one knows. I could write better for *Time* about Ciskei, of which I'd never heard before, than about England, where I'd spent the better (or was it the worse?) part of 21 years.

In later times, I would write long essays for *Harper's* or *The New York Review of Books*—a form that requires one to be engaged,

involved, imbalanced and aflame, and begs for one not to be omniscient, lucid and compressed, as in the haiku-like pages of Henry Luce's little red book. But the lessons I learned there were more valuable than any of those I formulated for myself. Finding out what is distinctive in your make-up, experience and interests that will allow you to say something about motherhood or the Taj Mahal that neither Toni Morrison nor Don DeLillo nor Thomas Hardy could (finding a voice, as it's called) is something I did when I was at *Time* magazine by seeing what my voice wasn't (by impersonating many others voices), then by traveling around the great sights of Asia—the Forbidden City, Ryoanji, the Taj Mahal—and realizing that wiser and more eloquent heads had written on those places for centuries, and a kid in his mid-twenties who had never studied them and spoke none of their languages could not add much to the store of accumulated knowledge about the history of China or Japan or India, until he found what was his unique stance (hidden, inevitably, among the many stances by no means unique to him).

Can I speak of the Kentucky Fried Chicken joint in Beijing? It was the largest in the world then (1985), large enough to seat 3000 people at one time (the one in Tiananmen Square, which I stumbled upon as I stepped out of the Forbidden City). Chinese workers were spending a whole week's wages to enjoy a single meal at what to them was as expensive and as exotic as that Shanghai Palace just down the street might be to us. The placemats recorded Colonel Sanders's status as Communist Worker Hero, rising from the humblest of origins to a state of spreading his secret recipe and its beneficence across the globe; diners had cameras with which to catch their loved ones at the feast.

It wasn't anything like a KFC you'd find in Kentucky, or California, and yet, of course, it bore only the most tangential relation to Tiananmen Square, and everything around it. It was something new, uncharted, as unhymned into being as the Forbidden City was photographed, reprinted and transcribed. Part of what made me notice this unexpected, mongrel coproduction was surely the fact that I was an unexpected mongrel coproduction myself. A fried-chicken parlor isn't what we all imagine when we think of autobiography—there weren't even any madeleines on offer—and yet the smallest, least prepossessing things can help us explain ourselves to

ourselves. The madeleine, as Proust told us, was only a fancy way to open a highly unfancy door.

This searching for the new, what arises out of the first meeting, is a way of saying that the reader will only be excited if the writer is, and the writer's duty is to ensure that he is always as engaged in the project as he wants his consumer to be. To that extent he has to keep looking not just for new subjects, but for new ways of writing, so as to keep himself always on his toes. I, for example, after writing maybe twenty or thirty pieces about wandering around foreign countries, to the point where I began to fear that I was exhausting my limited bag of tricks, and knowing where I'd end up before I'd even begun, decided to go and spend two weeks in and around Los Angeles Airport, treating what was down the road from me as a foreign country, and confident in the expectation that it would force me into thinking of exoticism in new and enlivening ways. After I'd done that, in a book of essays about some of the poorest countries in the world—Haiti, Yemen, Cambodia, Tibet and elsewhere—I deliberately included a long chapter on the state of jet lag, which is sometimes to me the most foreign land of all, and one in which I will spend much more of my time than I spend in Bolivia or Ethiopia.

The state of jet lag is unexplored territory in part because it's so new, but also because we take it for granted; writing is not a matter of searching for interesting subjects, necessarily, so much as of bringing interested eyes to everything you see, even the most unremarkable and everyday of situations. When we talk about "finding a voice," what we are really talking about are two things: first, finding what is peculiar in your take on things, your taste and inclination that will allow you to see things that a John Updike or Jane Smiley or Thomas Pynchon never could (there's always something, though it's often hiding out under the many subjects on which your take is quite conventional); and the process of getting lost, forgetting yourself on the page, as you may forget yourself in conversation with a friend and getting so lost inside the conversation that you lose all sense of who or where you are and things come out of you that you never would have guessed you had inside. That point of surrender is when your voice comes out in spite of all your attempts to smother or suppress it.

To look for what is deepest and most private in you is often to look for what is new to the world; that place in us unseen even by ourselves may be the one unseen by everyone. Writing about what you know may take the form, too often, of writing what we all know; writing about what you have just discovered can partake of the energy of first love, even if what is being revealed is nothing exceptional. It is the spirit we bring to things that lights them up, and that spirit has more to do with us, again—our preparedness, our openness, our readiness to leave our assumptions at home—than with the thing itself. My neighborhood fast-food parlor is a thing of fascination to most visitors from Ethiopia, from Guatemala or Vietnam, as the KFC in Beijing was to me. Interest lies not in an object but in the uniqueness of our relation to it.

Maybe that's what "looking for the right angle" really comes to mean: finding the exact mathematical slant that will shake something out of an object that would otherwise remain trapped inside it. Locating the keyhole that will somehow allow you to see the whole room, better than you could if the door were wide open. See Japan, for example, through the lens of baseball—an exercise that, happily, requires no Japanese at all—and instantly you can see something about how home and Other are wooing one another, colonizing one another, leaving their imprint on the other. All the esoteric stuff of centuries of trade wars and political misunderstandings may come out just in the way the coach from Yokohama tries (and fails) to restrain the latest refugee from the California Angels. And it's a story available to everyone who turns on his TV in a tiny guest house in northern Hokkaido. Writers don't look for stories, they look for the eyes with which they can find stories everywhere.

I wrote a book once about a woman I met in Kyoto and all the experiences that came upon me in my first year wandering around Japan. I took pains to label it "nonfiction" because it was a book, really, about serendipity; that is, about the secret design that sometimes only becomes apparent to us when we start, at our desks, unthreading the patterns that make up our lives. I have a dream tonight, and tomorrow it comes true; I meet a woman, and she mentions her favorite book, and as the months pass, I see that we are essentially characters in that book, as if she were creating us in her imagination. This stuff sounds too good to be true: the person last seen in

Shanghai who ends up in the room next to us in Santa Cruz; the stranger met in a coffee-shop in Kyoto who just happens to be your mother's student.

Too good to be true, indeed: when the book came out, I found it referred to as a novel (despite its factual subtitle, and maybe because I had given all its people noms de plume), and placed between *Gulliver's Travels* and the Narnia stories. It was as if I and the woman I loved, all the stuff of my life, had been converted into make-believe. Our only sin, I guessed, was to trace out a story, as with so many stories in real life, that bore the curious order, the sense of shape and symmetry that we associate with art.

I wrote a book three years later, after a forest fire that had taken away everything I owned, and turned me into a novelist. For years I had been working on a nonfiction book about Cuba, drawn from the five trips I had taken there in quick succession, and a young man who had invited me into his life and then into his dreams of coming to America. I had followed his story, first as observer and then as participant, and finally I had helped him escape his home and come to America as a political refugee. As I was working on the early stages of the book, beginning to make sense out of the 600 pages of notes I had taken about Carlos, I went upstairs and noticed 70-foot flames curling around the living room. I jumped into a car, and tried to drive down the mountain road, but for three hours I could not move. For the last of those hours, I watched the flames work systematically through my house, turning my book into cinders, licking at the next room, where my notes and hopes were, watching every project and memory and idea I had ever taken returned to dust.

No more hesitations about trying fiction, therefore; it would have to be the way I came to terms with the country that possessed me. Out went Carlos (and, in fact, the orderly shape of my career), in came a highly disagreeable photographer and a romance I'd never known in life. When the novel came out, inevitably, I saw it always characterized as memoir, and its drunken, dissolute, defensive and predatory main character identified as myself.

It made a sort of sense, I suppose: when I'd gone back to the island for a final trip to check on the details of the novel I'd just completed, I found that the blue I remembered so precisely was in fact green. The streets I knew by heart, having walked down them so often, stubbornly refused to conform to the ones I'd wandered

into on the page. The trees were in the wrong places and a lamppost had come up I'd never seen before. Factual evidence is as unreliable a narrator as what we think we're making up from scratch.

To find the larger story: that's what I was trying to do in every case. I couldn't tell the story of Cuba, since I knew little of its history or its politics, had never made its study my occupation. But I could talk about the dance of cynicism and hopefulness, about the play of dreams in a culture where material goods were in short supply; I could write about the lure of the Other to ten million people cooped up in a small space with the same boss for all their lives. Places, like people, like everything, are parables as much as they are living spirits.

The aim, as I say, is to win the reader over not to yourself, but to your vision, your story; to woo her with what is invisible to you, and perhaps mysterious. A nice man often makes a version of himself on the page that is snarling or brutish or cruel; that is because he knows that niceness will not carry the day. A parent often has to turn herself into a monster if she is to prevent her child from becoming one.

It's all mysterious, which is the joy of the procedure: you drive out into the dark, and are startled by what leaps out at you, clearly from yourself. You lay yourself open at your desk, and things you would have never guessed were central to you come down and make merry in your hands. I'm not that person, you say, and you're right; but you're certainly not the person you thought you were.

Someone comes into the room, and you put on a face, make yourself up, as it were, to be seen by the world; but that's no more you than the you you were a minute before. You begin to doubt whether you can know anyone, you're so shocked by what you find inside yourself, and you take this mystery to be an invitation. Nor does it really matter whether you call the work fiction or nonfiction: you know the person you've never met and have not a clue about the one you keep company with daily.

The only mandate is to find the place in your life that speaks to every other life, to grab the reader with specifics and then usher her into a world she sees as universal. I turn myself into a cartoon character, often, or a figure out of fairytale, when I'm writing; I become an Everytourist, blundering foolishly around the back streets of

Bangkok, or a guinea pig from a study of jet lag writing passionate letters to people I've never met. The writer throws himself into the flames, in a sense, sacrifices himself at the altar of his desk; he'll never be liked or trusted in life again, he says, if only he can win the reader's suspension of disbelief—her leap of faith—on the page. Everything is material for the fire, and when he looks up, at the end of his days, he finds that there's nothing of himself left in life. He's given it all to his books.

Why, in the end, do we write? It seems to take us away from the world, not deeper into it; it sustains us, in practical ways, less than a job as a busboy might (I say as one who has enjoyed two jobs in life, busboy and writer); it is as good a way as has been invented of alienating and estranging family and friends. If you write to get famous or become rich or to marry Marilyn Monroe, you will nearly always be disappointed; but if you write to create and uncover a Fort Knox within you, you will nearly always be fulfilled.

I write to make a clearing in my life, to sort out the tangle in my head and make a sense and shape of it, even a stained-glass whole. It is, in that simple way, how I find what I believe. Writing, for one who travels a lot, is how I anchor and steady myself, a still point in my otherwise turning life. I go to my desk every day the way some people meditate or practice yoga; it becomes the retreat outside the world that allows me to see the world more clearly (and re-enter it more hopefully). A large part of writing, as every writer knows, takes the form of not writing, wanting to write, wishing you were doing anything but writing. You go to your sanctuary and everywhere else suddenly looks more appealing. You pick up papers, put them down. You stare out the window and pace the room. You reach for the newspaper you've so happily put aside. Very soon you wonder why you would ever subject yourself to this discipline of doing nothing for days on end.

And then the next day the sentences pour through you like golden rivers.

The Muse, in my limited experience, is like the most infuriating—because most irresistible—kind of friend or lover. She keeps you waiting day after day till you have acquired a graduate degree in patience. She never tells you when she is coming, and you have to second-guess her every movement. And then, most exasperatingly

of all, when she does come, she proves to be the best companion you've ever had. Her movements are uncharted, and her guiding spirit is caprice, and you have to go to the desk every day on the slim chance that she will deign to visit.

One of the mysteries of writing is that it introduces us to ourselves, and to precisely those selves inside of us that we never knew existed, and half-hoped didn't exist. Each one of us, I believe, has a single question or koan we carry through life that we never solve but that is, in some respects, as precise a formulation of who we are as any. Each of us has a story, a central dynamic, that we keep returning to as we proceed through life, always catching it in a different light. And yet this governing theme—this vibration at the center of our being—is often impossible to see when we're in the thick of it, as hard to discern as the fire when I was a few feet from the flames. Yet when you write, you find the strangest and most unexpected things coming up again and again. You are rooted in your imagination by what you might never think of.

I have had my share of drama, as would anyone who is at the midpoint of his life. I've had people very close to me go mad for years at a time, and others attempt suicide in my room. I've had near-fatal car crashes in Cuba and Bolivia and Morocco and Egypt, and been down the street from bombings at the Olympic Games. I have been rich in the kind of experience that propels well-meaning friends to say, "You should write about that! What a story!" Yet put me at my desk, in the company of such dramas, and nothing comes out. I have nothing interesting to say about them; none of them engages my imagination. And yet I cannot stop thinking of a morning when I walked along the seafront in Havana, eight years ago, and nothing happened. I am back in a small room in Tibet in 1985, shafts of high sunlight flooding into a chamber where a monk is chanting amidst the fluttering butter-lamps. I recall a night when I never slept, so excited was I to fall in with a new friend.

This is the case with every writer you happen to pick up; each of them—V.S. Naipaul, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth—is ruled by his obsessions, which change very little as they go from book to book, or travel from youth to middle-age, and on. They may try to shake themselves up by changing dramatically their seeming subject, their location, their form; but always the defining marks of their subconscious are apparent. Amy Tan strikes a universal chord, transcends

herself and becomes something stunning, whenever she writes about a mother figure; writing of herself, she is far less exceptional. Tim O'Brien diligently addresses high school and Minnesota summers and issues of the bomb, yet nothing, one feels, will ever touch him so deeply as his experiences as a foot-soldier in Vietnam. That is the story that he was born to tell, and continues to tell as no one else could. Kazuo Ishiguro probably never knew how large a part in his life regret played, and how much he was thrown off-course by his family's moving from Nagasaki to England when he was six, until he looked at his books, and saw the evidence staring him in the face.

No writing I have ever done has been wasted, even if it was burned to cinders, or is buried in a vault or was replaced by a second draft and another. The engagement with the page always brought something that wasn't there before. Even in gross practical terms, the words are how you open doors as well as windows. Languishing in graduate school in my mid-twenties, sure that I didn't want to profess literature and knowing that I had few other options, I returned home in my first summer vacation, and went to the alternative newspaper, offering to write, unpaid, any articles its editors wanted. The next summer I wrote parts of three guidebooks, again making no real money out of it, the next summer I wrote parts of four other guidebooks. And my final summer in grad school, when opportunity suddenly appeared—in the form of a man from *Time* magazine looking to hire a writer—I was able to show him the clips I'd assembled, and they could tell him as much about who I was and what I could do as articles from *The New Yorker* would.

Not long ago, I had the honor of being the guest editor of *The Best American Travel Writing* volume, part of the distinguished series that Houghton Mifflin has published for 90 years, collecting the finest work in various fields done in the previous year. A series editor, attached to the book every year, culled 150 pieces to send to me, from which I was to pick the 20 or so that would appear in the year's anthology. Very quickly—sitting on my terrace in Japan, receiving 30 or so entries every few weeks—I realized that I had to include a piece by Joan Didion, mistress of the controlled tremor, and John McPhee, peerless in his reporting. I chose something by Adam Gopnik and by Roger Angell. Soon I had accumulated a number of pieces from the usual sources (*The New Yorker, Harper's, National Geographic*). Then the series editor sent me a piece by a woman we'd never heard of, from

a website I'd never heard of. Unpromisingly, it was about her falling in love with a stranger on a Pacific island (she didn't even name the island), material almost impossible to make new.

I began making my way through it, with heavy heart, and by the third sentence or so I was completely gripped. I couldn't stop reading. I saw what she loved about the island. I understood what she loved about the man who wandered into her life. Most of all, I could see what he loved about her, so sensuous and candid and intuitive did she seem, tiptoeing through a minefield where it's very easy to fall on your face. I hadn't read so fresh and exciting a piece all year.

I instantly selected it for the volume, and the series editor confessed that he had been silently rooting for it, too. When the book came out, every reader who went through it seemed to respond most urgently to this entry. "Who is this Heather Eliot?" a celebrated editor and writer from the East Coast wrote me. "How did you find her?" A university president invited me to be on his television show and seemed eager only to talk about Heather Eliot's piece. An NPR host, discussing the book, started with Heather Eliot and seemed more than ready to end with her, too.

By chance, at a reading a few months after I made my selection, I met the author of the piece, who was quite different from the worldly-wise professional I imagined from her essay. She was a graduate student, about to go and do post-doctoral research, she said, and had never really thought of herself as a writer. And yet—as I told her and told her—she had a gift that any of the rest of us would envy. She had no reason to set out on paper a memory that was probably complex, even painful. She got no money for it, I'm sure, when she sent it off to the small website, and it must have kept her away from all the more urgent, practical things she was supposed to be doing. She had every reason not to write a long, long piece that could not expect to find many readers.

Yet by taking the time and trouble to do so, she had made an imprint on uncountable lives. A small piece of her imagination had become a small piece of ours, and of those of the tens of thousands of readers who would pick up and read the anthology that year. She had taught many of us who thought we knew how to write. Thank heavens for Heather Eliot, I felt like saying, and the element of surprise that emerges every time we walk out into the unknown.