
Bird *by* Bird

*Some Instructions
on Writing and Life*

A n n e L a m o t t



ANCHOR BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

L o o k i n g A r o u n d

Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on. Now, if you ask me, what's going on is that we're all up to *here* in it, and probably the most important thing is that we not yell at one another. Otherwise we'd all just be barking away like Pekingese: "Ah! Stuck in the shit! And it's *your* fault, *you* did this . . ." Writing involves seeing people suffer and, as Robert Stone once put it, finding some meaning therein. But you can't do that if you're not respectful. If you look at people and just see sloppy clothes or rich clothes, you're going to get them wrong.

The writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in "The Farmer in the Dell" standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes. You're outside, but you can see things up close through your binoculars. Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you

are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others. It's simple in concept, but not that easy to do. My Uncle Ben wrote me a letter twenty years ago in which he said, "Sometimes you run into someone, regardless of age or sex, whom you know absolutely to be an independently operating part of the Whole that goes on all the time inside yourself, and the eye-motes go *click* and you hear the tribal tones of voice resonate, and there it is—you recognize them." That is what I'm talking about: you want your readers' eye-motes to go *click!* with recognition as they begin to understand one of your characters, but you probably won't be able to present a character that recognizable if you do not first have self-compassion.

It is relatively easy to look tenderly and with recognition at a child, especially your own child and especially when he is being cute or funny, even if he is hurting your feelings. And it's relatively easy to look tenderly at, say, a chipmunk and even to see it with some clarity, to see that real life is right there at your feet, or at least right there in that low branch, to recognize this living breathing animal with its own agenda, to hear its sharp, high-pitched chirps, and yet not get all caught up in its cuteness. I don't want to sound too *Cosmica Rama* here, but in those moments, you see that you and the chipmunk are alike, are a part of a whole. I think we would see this more often if we didn't have our conscious minds. The conscious mind seems to block that feeling of oneness so we can function efficiently, maneuver in the world a little bit better, get our taxes done on time. But it's even possible to have this

feeling when you see—really see—a police officer, when you look right at him and you see that he's a living breathing person who like everyone else is suffering like a son of a bitch, and you don't see him with a transparency over him of all the images of violence and chaos and danger that cops represent. You accept him as an equal.

Obviously, it's harder by far to look at yourself with this same sense of compassionate detachment. Practice helps. As with exercise, you may be sore the first few days, but then you will get a little bit better at it every day. I am learning slowly to bring my crazy pinball-machine mind back to this place of friendly detachment toward myself, so I can look out at the world and see all those other things with respect. Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don't drop-kick a puppy into the neighbor's yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper. So I keep trying gently to bring my mind back to what is really there to be seen, maybe to be seen and noted with a kind of reverence. Because if I don't learn to do this, I think I'll keep getting things wrong.

I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?

Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at

least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious. Try walking around with a child who's going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!" And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!" I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe. Taped to the wall above my desk is a wonderful poem by the Persian mystic, Rumi:

*God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flowerbed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
now a cliff covered with vines,
now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
till one day it cracks them open.*

There is ecstasy in paying attention. You can get into a kind of Wordsworthian openness to the world, where you see in everything the essence of holiness, a sign that God is implicit in all of creation. Or maybe you are not predisposed to see the world sacramentally, to see everything as an outward and

visible sign of inward, invisible grace. This does not mean that you are worthless Philistine scum. Anyone who wants to can be surprised by the beauty or pain of the natural world, of the human mind and heart, and can try to capture just that—the details, the nuance, what is. If you start to look around, you will start to see. When what we see catches us off guard, and when we write it as realistically and openly as possible, it offers hope. You look around and say, Wow, there's that same mockingbird; there's that woman in the red hat again. The woman in the red hat is about hope because she's in it up to her neck, too, yet every day she puts on that crazy red hat and walks to town. One of these images might show up dimly in the lower right quadrant of the imaginary Polaroid you took; you didn't even know at first that it was part of the landscape, and here it turns out to evoke something so deep in you that you can't put your finger on it. Here is one sentence by Gary Snyder:

*Ripples on the surface of the water—
were silver salmon passing under—different
from the ripples caused by breezes*

Those words, less than twenty of them, make ripples clear and bright, distinct again. I have a tape of a Tibetan nun singing a mantra of compassion over and over for an hour, eight words over and over, and every line feels different, feels cared about, and experienced as she is singing. You never once have the sense that she is glancing down at her watch, thinking, "Jesus

Christ, it's only been fifteen minutes." Forty-five minutes later she is still singing each line distinctly, word by word, until the last word is sung.

Mostly things are not that way, that simple and pure, with so much focus given to each syllable of life as life sings itself. But that kind of attention is the prize. To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that it presents a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one.

B r o c c o l i

There's an old Mel Brooks routine, on the flip side of the "2,000-Year-Old Man," where the psychiatrist tells his patient, "Listen to your broccoli, and your broccoli will tell you how to eat it." And when I first tell my students this, they look at me as if things have clearly begun to deteriorate. But it is as important a concept in writing as it is in real life.

It means, of course, that when you don't know what to do, when you don't know whether your character would do this or that, you get quiet and try to hear that still small voice inside. It will tell you what to do. The problem is that so many of us lost access to our broccoli when we were children. When we listened to our intuition when we were small and then told the grown-ups what we believed to be true, we were often either corrected, ridiculed, or punished. God forbid you should have your own opinions or perceptions—better

to have head lice. If you asked innocently, "Why is Mom in the bathroom crying?," you might be told, "Mom isn't crying; Mom has allergies." Or if you said, "Why didn't Dad come home last night?," you might be told brightly, "Dad did come home last night, but then he left again very early." And you nodded, even though you knew that these were lies, because it was important to stay on the adults' good side. There was no one else to take care of you, and if you questioned them too adamantly, you'd probably get sent to your room without dinner, or they'd drive a stake through your ankles and leave you on the hillside above the Mobil station. So you may have gotten into the habit of doubting the voice that was telling you quite clearly what was really going on. It is essential that you get it back.

You need your broccoli in order to write well. Otherwise you're going to sit down in the morning and have only your rational mind to guide you. Then, if you're having a bad day, you're going to crash and burn within half an hour. You'll give up, and maybe even get up, which is worse because a lot of us know that if we just sit there long enough, in whatever shape, we may end up being surprised. Let's say it's only 9:15; now, if you were to stick it out, the image or situation might come to you that would wedge the door open for a character, after which you would only have to get out of the way. Because then the character could come forward and speak and might say something important; it might even be the thing that is most important to him or her, and your plot might suddenly

fall into place. You might see how to take that person from good to bad and then back, or whatever. But instead you quit for the day, and you feel defeated and shaken and hopeless, and tomorrow is going to be even harder to face because today you've given up only fifteen minutes after you sat down to work. Remember the scene in *Cat Ballou* where a very drunk Lee Marvin goes from unconscious to ranting to triumphant to roaring to weeping defeat, and then finally passes out? One of the men watching him says, with real awe, "I never seen a man get through a day so fast." Don't let this be you.

You get your confidence and intuition back by trusting yourself, by being militantly on your own side. You need to trust yourself, especially on a first draft, where amid the anxiety and self-doubt, there should be a real sense of your imagination and your memories walking and woolgathering, tramping the hills, romping all over the place. Trust them. Don't look at your feet to see if you are doing it right. Just dance.

You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind. The rational mind doesn't nourish you. You assume that it gives you the truth, because the rational mind is the golden calf that this culture worships, but this is not true. Rationality squeezes out much that is rich and juicy and fascinating.

Sometimes intuition needs coaxing, because intuition is a little shy. But if you try not to crowd it, intuition often wafts up from the soul or subconscious, and then becomes a tiny fitful little flame. It will be blown out by too much compulsion

and manic attention, but will burn quietly when watched with gentle concentration.

So try to calm down, get quiet, breathe, and listen. Squint at the screen in your head, and if you look, you will see what you are searching for, the details of the story, its direction—maybe not right this minute, but eventually. If you stop trying to control your mind so much, you'll have intuitive hunches about what this or that character is all about. It is hard to stop controlling, but you can do it. If your character suddenly pulls a half-eaten carrot out of her pocket, let her. Later you can ask yourself if this rings true. Train yourself to hear that small inner voice. Most people's intuitions are drowned out by folk sayings. We have a moment of real feeling or insight, and then we come up with a folk saying that captures the insight in a kind of wash. The intuition may be real and ripe, fresh with possibilities, but the folk saying is guaranteed to be a cliché, stale and self-contained.

Take the attitude that what you are thinking and feeling is valuable stuff, and then be naive enough to get it all down on paper. But be careful: if your intuition says that your story sucks, make sure it really is your intuition and not your mother. "I see this character in a purple sharkskin suit," you suddenly think, and then the voice of the worried mother says, "No, no, put him in something respectable." But if you listen to the worried mother, pretty soon you'll be asleep and so will your reader. Your intuition will make it a much wilder and more natural ride; it may show you what would really jump

out from behind those trees over there. You won't always get a clear, panting, "Aha! Purple sharkskin suit!" More often you will hear a subterranean murmur. It may sound like one of the many separate voices that make up the sounds of a creek. Or it may come in code, oblique and sneaky, creeping in from around the corner. If you shine too much light on it, it may draw back and fade away.

I think a major step in learning to rely on your intuition is to find a usable metaphor for it. Broccoli is so ridiculous that it works for me. A friend says that his intuition is his animal: "My animal thinks this," he says, or "My animal hates that." But whatever you come up with needs to suggest a voice that you are not trying to control. If you're lost in the forest, let the horse find the way home. You have to stop directing, because you will only get in the way.

Writing is about hypnotizing yourself into believing in yourself, getting some work done, then unhypnotizing yourself and going over the material coldly. There will be many mistakes, many things to take out and others that need to be added. You just aren't always going to make the right decision. My friend Terry says that when you need to make a decision, in your work or otherwise, and you don't know what to do, just do one thing or the other, because the worst that can happen is that you will have made a terrible mistake. So let the plot go left in this one place instead of right, or let your character decide to go back to her loathsome passive-aggressive husband. Maybe it was the right thing, maybe not. If not, go back and

try something else. Some of us tend to think that what we do and say and decide and write are cosmically important things. But they're not. If you don't know which way to go, keep it simple. Listen to your broccoli. Maybe it will know what to do. Then, if you've worked in good faith for a couple of hours but cannot hear it today, have some lunch.