

ROADS TAKEN (AND NOT)

It seems appropriate that the subject I plan to discuss today is journeys, since being here is the culmination of several journeys of my own—geographical, professional, intellectual, moral, and emotional.

To be here today as the Hopwood lecturer suggests to me a few things—one, that Meryl Streep was booked, and two, that I have traveled full circle in the most fulfilling and gratifying sense. This is quite a homecoming for me, and there is probably nothing in life more evocative and significant than a homecoming. I was advised to tip my hat to Homer at some point during this lecture, so here's my Homer moment—we have the *Odyssey* to thank for establishing homecoming and the passage to it as the template for the human experience. In fact, all writing seems to me a commentary and reflection on the experience of a journey—the process of traveling from birth to death, from innocence to wisdom, from ignorance to knowledge, from where we start to where we end. Even writing that doesn't seem to be about a journey has embedded within it the writer's own voyage into an idea and toward a grasp of it, and toward the experience of telling that idea to the world.

When I was a student here, I remember hearing about the Hopwood Awards each year; to me, they were just as awesome as the Nobel Prize—something simply unattainable, momentous, and vaguely Scandinavian. Okay, maybe not Scandinavian, but certainly of the greatest consequence, particularly to someone like me, who even then, at that tender and naïve

The Hopwood Lecture, 2005. Presented at the University of Michigan on April 19, 2005.

time in my life, dreamed of being a writer. And when I say "dreamed," I really do mean dreamed. Throughout my college years, and for all the years before that, starting when I first learned to read, I had a vivid and fully developed desire to be a writer, with no clue whatsoever about how one went about becoming such a thing. Wanting to be a writer seemed as far-fetched and magical and impractical as wanting to be, say, an Olympic weightlifter or a Christmas elf. Wanting to be the kind of writer I wanted to be seemed particularly hopeless. Much as I loved fiction and spent my four years in Ann Arbor happily immersed in reading great fiction and poetry, I wanted to be out in the world reporting on people and events.

The trouble was I knew that I didn't want to work for a newspaper. I didn't have the expertise to cover a beat; I didn't have the single-mindedness to be an investigative reporter; I didn't have the impatience and snoopiness to look for breaking news; I was too equivocating to be a critic. I didn't care about wanting to know things before other people knew them. Instead, I had this notion that I wanted to describe the people and places around me, particularly the ones that were least likely to be noticed otherwise. The nooks and crannies of the world, the odd rhythms of people's lives, and the passion that we all bring to those small things that matter to us—the way we try to make our lives make sense and the way we struggle to fit ourselves into the world—these were the subjects that fascinated me and seemed worth trying to portray.

Even more, I felt drawn to a sort of mission: to describe ordinary life in a way that revealed its complexity and poetry. And in addition to that, I wanted to draw readers in and convince them to appreciate these things, which were most likely subjects they didn't think they cared about or would find interesting, at least not at first. To the best of my knowledge there were no jobs available like this—for writers who wanted to write long stories examining everyday life and that contained no urgent news, no celebrity dish, and no analytical breakthroughs. It was the sort of job description that made career counselors—not to mention my parents—blanch.

So by the time I left Ann Arbor I had resigned myself to life in the graveyard of writing dreams—by that I mean, of course, law school. I diligently but joylessly prepared myself for this inevitability—in fact, before leaving Ann Arbor I even

took my LSATs and wrote away for law school admissions material, which was for me the emotional equivalent of shaving before being led to the guillotine. I applied for paralegal jobs to bide my time before law school.

And then I got lucky. I stumbled into a writing job—propelled only by my sheer irrepressible desire to be a writer, rather than any experience or evidence that suggested I could be one. It was not a fancy job. It was at a tiny magazine, staffed by people as green as me, read by an audience that could be best described as undersized. My weekly pay was quite a bit less than what I would have earned as a babysitter. What mattered, though, was that I got to write. I didn't know what I was doing; I made lots of mistakes; I was gimmicky and self-conscious, but I was writing. It was thrilling, frightening, challenging, vexing. And I was absolutely ecstatic. Since then, except for a short stint waiting tables—a skill I'm quite proud of and one that I highly recommended to all writers looking for a reliable paycheck—I've been writing, and most of the time it's been those un-urgent, non-newsworthy stories I dreamed of having a chance to learn about and tell.

Here's the first of my tips for aspiring writers—which every Hopwood lecturer is duty-bound to provide: When you start on your journey of life, go by car. I left Ann Arbor in the fall after I graduated and drove across the country on the fretwork of highways that runs from Michigan to Oregon, where I had decided to spend the year before what I thought would be my entry into law school, and I dawdled creatively along the way, which was about the best training I can imagine for the profession I was actually about to embrace. The only thing that would have been better would have been to walk.

But at least I didn't fly—I didn't catapult myself breathlessly and seamlessly from one piece of my life to the next, from one region to the another—instead, I eased my way slowly, from my Midwestern roots to my West Coast branching-out, poking into every corner I could en route. I walked on the sand dunes in Indiana and around the Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota, and stopped at broken-down diners in North Dakota. I pulled in at the largest truck stop in the world, in Little America, Wyoming—which as far as I can tell is also the largest brothel in the world, where a long-haul trucker offered to put my car on his empty truck and let me

piggyback the rest of the way. I hung out with Air Force officers and hippie carpenters in Montana; I stopped for lunch in Atomic City, a weird, dismal little town in southern Idaho, where I was sure I was being irradiated merely by setting foot within the city limits. And I had dinner with cowboys and Indians at the Pendleton Rodeo in eastern Oregon.

At the time, I had just recently finished reading Dante's *Inferno*—that little travel guide to hell from the thirteenth century—and *The Canterbury Tales*, the account of an excursion made by a motley crew of pilgrims one spring in the fourteenth century. And most meaningfully to me, having spent many wonderful hours studying William Faulkner here in Ann Arbor with the great Joseph Blotner, I had also recently finished *As I Lay Dying*, the narrative of a rather macabre expedition by the Bundren family to take the body of their matriarch, Addie, to her chosen burial place. Those were my touchstones, so not surprisingly, the inbuilt emotional arc of a trek and the serendipity of encounters along the way were very much on my mind, and the importance of the journey—any journey—to the writer's enterprise was clear. This was the first time I was living it, though, rather than studying it.

And as I traveled from Ann Arbor to Oregon the book clutched to my bosom was another traveler's saga—Tom Wolfe's 1967 book, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which documented Ken Kesey's trip across America with the Merry Pranksters. I worshipped that book. It wasn't just that it was a hysterical, seductive read and a brilliant evocation of the birth of hippie culture—it proved to me that nonfiction writing could be as alive and vibrant and as imaginative as fiction. That was my inspiration as I made my own journey from kid to semi-adult, from college student to person with a paycheck, from someone who was just dreaming about being a writer to someone who was suddenly wrestling with the very real challenges of interviewing, reporting, composing leads, figuring out structure, concocting endings, and deciding what was worth writing about.

My advice about that passage in a writer's life? Choose your models carefully, but definitely choose them. There is nothing better for a writer to do than read. Faulkner once said, "Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it." To that I would add, read, read, read,

and, at least in the beginning, imitate—by that I mean use great writing as a form to follow, and eventually you will be able to discard that form when you've found your own.

Some writers even go so far as to suggest that you copy out, by hand, any writing that you admire, so that you will actually know what it feels like to write a great sentence. I'm enough of a believer in neurolinguistics to believe there may be something to that—just as we now know that the act of smiling actually puts you in a good mood, even when you don't feel like smiling, writing someone else's great sentence just to see what it feels like might indeed help build neural wiring and encode your brain so that you can write your own great sentence. Of course, you should then crumple up the paper you wrote it on and throw it away. But I leaned heavily on my favorite writers to learn how to make sentences. I'm glad I went through my Tom Wolfe phase and my John McPhee phase and my A. J. Liebling phase and my Joseph Mitchell phase—I picked my role models and used them as teachers, then slowly came to feel I could lean on them less and stand more on my own.

Taking that stand requires another series of choices and another journey. I'm speaking now of the moral journey every writer needs to take in order to answer one profound question: What is the true, ethical responsibility of a writer? And in particular, what is the responsibility of a nonfiction writer? A nonfiction writer, after all, is offered not only the imaginative options that a fiction writer has but also faces the concrete decisions that arise when you are out in the world gathering facts and assembling them for readers—in other words, interpreting the world for them. In that case, every single aspect of your work raises moral questions. What do you choose to write about? How do you write about it? What do you bring to the reader's attention? What effect do your choices have? How do you live with the discomfort of using sources, of exposing people and subjects to public examination, even in a benign and sympathetic way? And how do you make peace, on a personal level, with the process of cultivating relationships for your stories and then very abruptly ending them? What principles guide you through a profession that gives your private thoughts and interests a public forum?

This is a very freighted set of questions, much debated and much analyzed, and without simple answers. When I threw myself into being a writer, I hardly considered any of them. It was difficult enough to figure out how to write and how to get published; I rarely gave the big questions of morality a thought. But I do believe that the minute you publish a word, you are engaged in an enterprise that demands ethical decisions, whether you are prepared for that or not.

My first few published pieces happened to be reviews. They didn't have a wide reach. But even so, writing a review communicated a certain approval or disapproval that had consequences, even though I was writing for a tiny magazine with a readership that would have fit comfortably in a bus shelter. For a twenty-three year old, this was heady and wonderful, but it was also sobering. I don't think I had ever done anything before that felt like it really had weight in the world. As children and even as students, we are preoccupied with achievement, with developing as people, with enjoying ourselves—we don't imagine ourselves as having impact beyond our own success and failure and amusement.

But being a writer is altogether different. It is a conversation, multiplied and amplified. It is, in a sense, yelling fire in a crowded theater, every time you publish. Very soon, I was writing for magazines with a national readership—while I was in Oregon I had a piece in the *Village Voice* about the Bhagwan Shree Rajshneesh, who had established a huge and very controversial community on a derelict ranch in the eastern part of the state. The stakes of my ethical choices quickly became much higher and more challenging because more people were reading what I had to say. Still, no matter what the context—whether you're writing for a tiny magazine or the *New York Times*, whether your book has a handful of readers or is a bestseller—how you conduct yourself, and the principles you live by professionally, matter.

I started my writing career at a time when celebrity journalism was in full flower. The fastest way to edge into magazines was to put yourself at the service of that form of writing—it seemed like there was no end of publications needing yet another Tom Cruise profile or Rolling Stone interview or celebratory piece about Julia Roberts or Elton John. For a

young writer, those assignments were almost irresistible—after all, it was a lot of fun to have entrée into the upper reaches of pop culture, and it was certainly easier to present yourself to editors as someone who knew how to crank out a solid story about a well-known person than someone who wanted to try writing eccentric, subtle slices of life. Celebrity journalism wasn't what I thought I wanted to do, but it was so much simpler than trying to find individual stories that captured ordinary life in a way that could be moving and meaningful, and so much easier than explaining to an editor why a story with no news peg and no glamour was a story that should be told.

So I took those celebrity assignments, and I enjoyed doing them—they're painless and entertaining if you don't think too much about why you're doing them. I even came to believe I could make something more of them than what they are—and what they are is a mutually exploitive short-term relationship, in which the publication gets material that will attract readers, the celebrity gets publicity for his or her latest project, and the writer gets a paycheck.

But I finally came to a turning point. I had an assignment from *Rolling Stone* to profile Tom Hanks. He is a very nice man, and we hit it off quite well, and during our conversation he confided that he had always considered himself ugly. I went back to my office gloating, because I thought I had connected with him in a real way, not just the celebrity interview way—after all, why else would he have revealed such a personal, painful fact to me? At that time, I was sharing an office with a writer who was on the staff of *New York* magazine. He was working on a Tom Hanks profile, too, and had done his interview the day before mine. When I got back to our office, I mentioned to him that my interview with Hanks had gone very, very well—I believe the words I used were “we really made a sort of personal connection.”

“Oh, that's great,” my officemate said. “I just got the usual stuff.”

I asked him what he meant. “Oh, you know, he told me how he'd always considered himself ugly.”

If that hadn't been bad enough, my officemate's wife walked in a little while later. She was a writer for the *Daily News*, and as it happened, she was doing a story on Tom Hanks, too, and

her interview with him had taken place that afternoon, shortly after mine. "Guess what?" she said to us as she came in. "Tom Hanks just told me that he always felt he was really ugly."

I consider myself lucky for having had the experience. It provided me with an undeniable object lesson—a reminder of why I had wanted to be a writer and what I didn't want to become. I wanted to be a writer because I believed, and wanted to demonstrate, that an ordinary life closely examined could reveal itself to be exquisite and complex and exceptional, and embody both the heroic and the plain. I believed that writing about such things was important—that it was a small effort to make sense of the human experience, and more importantly that it might bring a reader to understand and appreciate and maybe even empathize with a life or setting that initially seemed strange or unsympathetic or impenetrable. I didn't want to serve as a de facto publicist for movie stars. I didn't want to fool myself into thinking I was delving deep into a personality when in fact all I was doing was receiving clever prefabricated comments.

I have certainly done my share of celebrity pieces after that Tom Hanks encounter, but I have, ever since, done them consciously, wittingly, and understanding the limits and the built-in accommodations that come with that sort of journalism. I am not saying that celebrity journalism is immoral, but just that it needs to be recognized as a kind of exchange of services, a quid pro quo that the writer accepts by taking part in it. It is entertainment, which is fine, but it can't be confused with journalism, and certainly not with literature.

For that matter, though, journalism never allows for easy moral choices—just look at the debate about the work of photojournalist Sebastiao Salgado, who documents the misery and harshness of life in developing countries. His photographs of victims of the famine in West Africa are so beautiful that they seem to almost revel in the ruined people they portray. Ingrid Sischy, one of his chief critics, wrote in the *New Yorker* about him some years ago, "Salgado is far too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures—with finding 'grace' and 'beauty' in the twisted forms of his anguished subjects." Whether you agree with Sischy or not, it is worth noting that simply choosing painful or difficult subjects doesn't answer the question of what moral stance a writer should take.

Maybe it's a question that should remain a constant. Maybe you just have to keep reviewing and reconsidering it the whole time you take part in the multiplied and amplified conversation that being a writer entails.

It might seem curious for me to be railing against writers servicing the needs of Hollywood—after all, I've had several pieces I've written made into movies, and one book of mine, *The Orchid Thief*, took a most unusual journey from my desk to the screen, carrying me along with it.

So just to clarify: I love movies. I like and admire actors. And I have been happy to see stories of mine inspire films, no matter how eccentric the films they inspire might be. What I'm saying about celebrity journalism is not an indictment of the movies or of actors—it's more a comment on the system that promotes them through journalists, and it is a call to writers to take stock of what we write and why we are writing it, and who we're serving by writing.

One more thing—my tip regarding Hollywood is: If anyone approaches you and asks you to be a character in a film who will be portrayed as a drug addict, a murderer, and an adulteress, says yes. It will be a surreal journey, and you'll be glad you did. If it makes you uncomfortable, remember that no less than F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner did stints in Hollywood, although it was for both writers a fraught decision and frankly an economic one.

In his great book *Here is New York*, E. B. White wrote:

I've been remembering what it felt like as a young man to live in the same town with giants. When I first arrived in New York my personal giants were a dozen or so columnists and critics and poets whose names appeared regularly in the papers. I burned with a low steady fever just because I was on the same island with Heywood Brown . . . Robert Benchley . . . Dorothy Parker . . . Ring Lardner . . . This excitation (nearness of giants) is a continuing thing. The city is always full of young worshipful beginners—young actors, young aspiring poets, ballerinas, painters, reporters, singers—each depending on his own brand of tonic to stay alive, each with his own stable of giants.

That excitation that White refers to is, indeed, a continuing thing. It certainly was for me when I moved to New York and

started writing for the *New Yorker*, and was able to look up at my own admired giants. They continue to be models and inspirations for me.

I would add that the excitation that White refers to is not only brought on by being around the great writers, but can also be brought on by being around aspiring writers like those of you here today, and by anyone who has the passion to write. One remarkable thing about being a writer is being part of this enormous and enduring tradition. The world changes, the media we have evolve, the ways we communicate transform, and yet still, people want to write, and people want to hear what writers have to say. It persists and endures, as some sort of primal human need to record feelings, observations, emotions, and to transmit those to people around us.

Being part of that tradition is thrilling. There isn't a day when I'm not amazed and grateful that I get a chance to do this for a living, and I hope that journey continues forever. We are all part of an incredibly fickle culture, after all. Writing is a performing art, and writers can definitely have their moments and then fade, just the way bands flame and then fizzle, and movie stars ignite and then cool off. No one has described that process of being a disposable commodity better than, of all people, Burt Reynolds, who saw his own career come and go and then come and go again. As he once told an interviewer, "First it's 'Who's Burt Reynolds?' Then it's 'Get me Burt Reynolds,' then 'Get me a Burt Reynolds type,' then 'Get me a young Burt Reynolds.' And then it's 'Who's Burt Reynolds?'"

The ultimate journey that any writer takes is an emotional one, and that is what informs the geographical and professional passages you undergo, the moral development you attempt, the intellectual maturity you reach for. Being a writer is exhilarating, demanding, fascinating; it is the most wonderful life, but it can be terribly lonely. In fact, I am still surprised each time by how singular and private the experience of writing is—how this big conversation the writer conducts, and this desire to gobble up the world comes down, finally, to a quiet moment alone.

When I'm writing, the people I have met and the experiences I've had along the way recede, and what I'm left with is

just the moment I captured of them and then tried my best to explain. But soon the next story presents itself, and I embrace that, and for the moment that is what the world is made of. The journey begins again, the story starts over; I gather myself and go out to see what I can see and simply try to tell it as well as I can.

What we write is not what we feel and see, but what's left behind, the flotsam and jetsam of life, the stuff that drifts out of our heads and into history—plucked and pressed between pages, so it will stay fresh forever and never slip away.

