I’m honored to be here, and to follow in the footsteps of all those distinguished earlier Hopwood lecturers—Nadine Gordimer, Donald Hall, Mark Van Doren (a professor of mine at Columbia years ago—he taught me Don Quixote, which Van Doren pronounced “Quick-sit”; he said it was such a universal story, that all the world’s nations were free to pronounce it as they saw fit, no need to fake a Spanish accent). John Ciardi was a Hopwood lecturer . . . Arthur Miller . . . Joyce Carol Oates . . . so many extraordinary writers. Unlike them, I am a journalist. And, unlike them (with the exception of Arthur Miller), I write to be heard, not read. And although this is a Hopwood Lecture, I try very hard not to lecture on the radio. I prefer, instead, to share ideas in a conversational fashion. National Public Radio is an institution built on that premise—presenting information in a conversational fashion. And so, even without a broadcast microphone, I’m going to continue that tradition today with you.

We’re gathered here in the service of writing—to honor it, and further it. I thought I’d talk a bit about my kind of writing—writing journalism for radio—among other things this afternoon. I’ll begin with one of my Hopwood Lecture predecessors—Joan Didion. One of my writing heroes, Didion has been a brilliant practitioner of journalism, nonfiction, and fiction throughout her writing life. Some years back, she gave a talk (later published) called “Why I Write.” She began by inviting her listeners to say aloud the title of the talk: “Why I Write.” She began by inviting her listeners to say aloud the title of the talk: “Why I Write.” And then pointed out what all the words had in common: I . . . I . . . I. This was not an exercise in egotism. Not
at all. It was an explanation of her motivation. Didion writes, she says, to find out what's on her mind. She doesn't really know what she thinks about something, she says, until she begins to write it down. Then she starts to explore her thoughts, reactions, psyche, in language. In the course of doing that, by starting with the personal and idiosyncratic, and putting it into words, Didion ends up illuminating our understandings of the world. It would be lovely, I imagine, to be able to do that. Not just to have her remarkable writing skills, but also the permission to operate that way with language—starting with the I. But I cannot. Because in formal, classic, by-the-book journalism, the I is a transgression. It has—or should have—nothing to do with the story. The story is always about you . . . them . . . him. Never I.

Beyond the I and the them, Didion once defined another difference between journalism and fiction. Her definition carries the authority of one who has practiced both. She said what interests a fiction writer is only rarely what interests, in the same situation, a reporter. The novelist's interest in a situation wanes at that precise point when the reporter begins to consider him- or herself competent—when the place is understood. When it begins to come clear. When the remarkable becomes commonplace and the course of a day can be predicted. Didion means that when the ambiguities are gone, the journalist's job is well done. But when the ambiguities are gone, the novelist loses interest. Such an astute distinction! We journalists are involved in ferreting out and reporting what we can best determine as the facts of a given situation. (Although a favorite newsroom joke at NPR is this: never let facts get in the way of a good story. Alas, the facts often do get in the way—but that's another story.) For journalists, the world revolves around a handful of W's and an H—who, what, when, where, how, and, when we can get it, why—whereas fiction is all about the why. Only a fiction writer can really know about the why. Know why people do what they do. What the motivations are. What led up to this. Because in fiction, they can make it all up. Which is why I hold fiction writers in such esteem—and, yes—a certain degree of envy. I wish I could lie the way they do—because their lies—their made-ups—lead, often, to the deepest truths.

Joan Didion's late husband, John Gregory Dunne, was, like
his wife, a wonderful phrase-maker, especially on the subject of writing. In one of my Futures books (the little notebooks journalists—all writers, really—keep, filled with phrases and thoughts that strike us as we read or listen, and may be useful one day), I noted down that Dunne said “I hate writing. I love having written.” (Although when I reminded him of this once, he said I’d gotten it completely wrong. John Gregory Dunne claimed he’d said, “I love writing. I hate having written.” Pesky facts again.) Maybe I’m expressing my own feelings on the matter. I find it very difficult to take pen in hand—or even computer keyboard—and try to put words together in some meaningful, stylish fashion. That’s probably in part because of my esteem for great writing, for the written word, and for the ability to make up compelling stories.

Writing is hard. Thomas Mann put it best—and what he said applies equally to makers of fiction and nonfiction. “A writer,” Mann said, “is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.” Noah Adams, my dear friend and colleague at National Public Radio, has a similar take, about our medium. Noah says, “If radio were easy, everyone could do it.” I cherish that, because the trick, in radio, is to make it sound easy. It rarely is. There’s the tremendous effort of doing the research, the reporting, gathering information, conducting the interviews, putting the questions in just the right way, listening between the cracks to the answers, then writing the story, and then speaking it on the air in a conversational, engaging, and authoritative fashion. Not easy. And what makes it all even more difficult are the constraints of time.

With a novel, you can write as many pages as it takes to tell your story. A good fiction editor (and may their tribe increase) may pinch a bit here, rearrange a bit there, but permit the text to be long, if it should be long. With print journalism, editors will cut and shape of course, but there’s some flexibility and wiggle room. In radio, however, the clock always ticks. You have your allotted seconds and minutes, and then it’s over. On to another story, or a station break, or whatever else there is that dictates the fixed, inflexible time you are given. For example, the most I get on the air these days is seven minutes. Now, in commercial broadcasting—where the end of the world will be announced in a minute and a half—that’s an
enormous chunk of time. But it's never enough. Not really. If my subject is important (and it always is!), I usually think it deserves ten minutes at the least. Preferably twelve or fifteen.

Or . . . all right . . . sixty (but that's another program). So, with only seven minutes (and most reporters get far less than that) you need to write in a particular, highly specific way. Radio writing is like haiku. Or karate chops. Short, quick sentences—sometimes just partial ones—to move the information along as rapidly and efficiently as possible.

To write elegantly, with style, within such constraints, is a special gift. Some of my colleagues are masters at it. About thirty-five years ago, the very first host of “All Things Considered,” a chap named Robert Conley, said on the air that trying to follow the Vietnam peace talks was “like watching a kitten playing under a rug. The minute you think you know where it is, it scoots someplace else, and you lose track.” On NPR Alex Chadwick once described a Presbyterian church in New England as being constructed “of clapboard and dignity.” And Scott Simon described writer Harold Brodkey’s gray beard as being “stapled to his jaw.” (That reminds me of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s admonition to his daughter Scottie, to be mindful of verbs. In one of his loving and instructive letters to her, he said it’s the use and choice of verbs that carry the style of the writing. So in The Great Gatsby Fitzgerald describes a turkey that’s been “bewitched” to a golden brown. A lesser writer would have said “roasted.”) I work very hard on my verbs—with far less success. And I tend to overdo one area which any major writer knows to be a deep, dark, eternally black hole: adjectives. My mantra seems to be—why use one when you can use three? So in my script a singer is small, brisk, and sprightly. Writing is hard. And difficult. And tough. See what I mean?

But it is possible to do it well—albeit succinctly—on radio. And to make every second of your seven minutes count. By the way, here today, talking with you, I’ve been asked to go for thirty-five to forty minutes. Can you imagine what that means to me? It's the equivalent of five or six public radio stories back to back (or, in the commercial world, like announcing the end of the world fifty-two and a half times). Daunting! Because after all these years of having to write to time, the
seven-minute limitation has become almost second nature. It's a terrible stretch to go beyond it.

Years ago, when I wrote my first book, Alan Cheuse, a novelist, a friend, and the book reviewer for "All Things Considered," advised me that for print, my sentences could go longer. I was amazed. Stunned, actually. And while I found it to be extremely useful advice, I didn't much follow Alan's guidance. All those years of radio-writing haiku have become ingrained, I find. It's not a matter of shortened attention span on the part of the radio writer—or the listener, for that matter. It's that we must write to and for the ear. The ear can't absorb a sentence that's too long. The ear can't turn back the page to relisten in the car or the shower. The ear lives in the here (and hear) and now. And so our short sentences—our karate chops—must land quickly and informatively. To test out whether they will, very often we look like crazy people when we work. Our lips keep moving, and we appear to be talking to ourselves. Without cell phones! We're not crazy. We're just making sure we are communicating in our rarified, demanding medium. We also need to keep our sentences short so we have breathing room. If the sentence is too long, we begin to gasp. And so, whether at a typewriter, decades ago, or at the computer today, the moment I finish writing a sentence, I want to read it to you. Aloud. It's the broadcaster's reflex. We write to be heard. And understood, very, very quickly.

There is, of course, plenty of marvelous writing that rests comfortably on the ear, without having been expressly written for the ear. Which brings up the whole notion of reading aloud. A practice I hope you all grew up with—and continue to carry out, with the children (or adults) in your life. I came upon a real-life story a few months ago which I found very moving in the way it mixes reading aloud with writing and radio.

A neighbor in Washington had just started tutoring a little D.C. public-school girl. The child is in first grade. She's lively and quick—"I'm an artist!" she proclaims. My neighbor, Barbara Baldwin, says it's sometimes hard to get the little artist to settle in. She's not a great concentrator—attention-challenged you might say. But the minute Barbara pulls out a book and starts to read it aloud, that child wriggles up close to her, and sits still as a stone. Barbara thinks it reflects the
possibility that someone else is reading aloud to the little girl regularly. And the child associates reading with closeness, nestling. I agree—but to me it also shows the power of story. And of story told out loud. Which, in addition to writing briefly and for the ear, is another part of my job description. As a radio correspondent, I tell stories out loud. To me this is a powerful responsibility.

It reminds me of the lectors. I first learned about them on a visit to a cigar museum in Ybor City, Florida; later there was a report about them on National Public Radio (usually I learn things in the reverse order). Lectors were men who sat up on high stools in the middle of the cigar factories in Ybor City (and probably lots of other places) in the 1920s. In those days before there was very much radio and certainly no television, the lectors read aloud, in Spanish, to the Cuban cigar workers. In the morning, they read the newspapers—local, national, and international events of the day. In the afternoon, they read Cervantes (Don Quick-sit, no doubt), also Dickens, Victor Hugo. There they sat, those lectors, on high stools, reading...reading...reading. No microphones. No air conditioning. Just the sounds of chopping and cutting, as cigars were made by hand. And the voice—reading stories out loud.

The lectors were not hired by the factories—in fact, the factory bosses worried that their workers might get too many new ideas from these readings; they were afraid it might create labor problems. It was the workers themselves who hired them—each man paying twenty-five cents a week (a big part of their salaries, then)—so the lector would read to them—inform them—engage them through their long, hot workdays. Sometimes I think that's not unlike the great privilege that technology has given us as broadcasters. That great gift of radio. Telling stories out loud. And being able, now, to have them cast broadly, across the nation and the world.

Some thoughts, now, on how what gets written moves from the page to the listener. People like to bunch radio and TV together. I want to unbunch them. I think the real media affinity is between radio and print—the newspaper, the magazine—where the means of communication is also language. Language lets you deal with ideas. It helps you to think, to organize experience or action, be rational. Pictures—the moving images of television—prompt emotional reactions
more than they do intellectual ones. It's the difference in how we process information.

I've done a bit of work in television, too, and I'm always interested in the reactions of audiences. When I do something on television people say "I saw you on television." Period. When I do something on radio they say, "I heard you talking about a weird recipe with cranberries and sour cream." In other words, on the radio, content got through. On TV, the impact of the image is so strong, it's hard to get much else across. What registers is that they saw you—maybe your hair was out of place, or your collar was askew. But what you were talking about, why you were there, gets lost. Forgive me, but I'm a radio chauvinist. I was raised that way, listening to stories coming out of the white Bakelite Emerson radio on the kitchen table in our apartment in Manhattan. And trained that way, in the course of these many years behind microphones.

So, I try to fashion language that communicates, coming through the radio, absorbed by the ear and, if it's been effectively written, lodging in the mind. For the stories I write for radio, I work very hard on my very first sentence. I know I must grab the listeners' attention right away. There are so many distractions—traffic, other voices, the ring of the telephone. My challenge is to pierce through all that din of daily life and become the one who's listened to. I try to write, from the top, so you simply have to keep listening. Here are some examples: For a profile of a popular singer, the first sentence was: "Her regular drummer broke his wrist snow-boarding, so Norah Jones put a substitute through his paces." It's not gorgeous writing. But it's unexpected, and, I hope, intriguing enough to make you want to hear more. For a story last February on why the color red is so pervasive on Valentine's Day: "Probably because it's the color of blood." Huh? I hope listeners thought, "what does blood have to do with it?" And then stayed near the radio to hear the rest of the piece.

At the start of the U.S. invasion of Iraq—before this hideous civil war broke out—Anne Garrels put in days and weeks of brave and distinguished reporting for NPR. She was one of the few Western reporters to stay in Baghdad throughout the initial bombing. Listeners were riveted by her stories, and then began worrying about her well-being. We were
inundated with e-mails asking how she was. Radio is such a personal, intimate medium. Listeners develop long-distance relationships with us, wonder about how we’re doing, even (this actually happened to me) send in recipes for—or actual jars of—chicken soup, if we sound as if we have colds. When Annie Garrels came back to the U.S. on a much-needed break, I was asked to go to her home in Connecticut to interview her. I was happy to do so, spent several hours recording our conversation, then traveled back to Washington and began to write the story. My first sentence consisted of two words: “She’s fine.” I wanted to speak, quickly, to listeners’ concerns, and to let them know immediately that she was all right.

In literature, first sentences are also crucial, to keep readers’ attention. I once covered an International PEN Congress in New York. Seven hundred writers came from all over the world to take part. It was like the world’s best faculty of Creative Writing—or a convention of Hopwood Lecturers and Award-winners. Saul Bellow was there. Nadine Gordimer, Mario Vargas Llosa, Günter Grass, Tom Stoppard, and on and on. One of the ways I found to amuse myself, in that dull crowd, was to meander around with my microphone asking authors to tell me their favorite fictional first sentence, that all-important launching pad for a novel or short story. Often fiction writers feel as I do that the first sentence is the toughest one to make. It must grip the reader, haul us into the dream of the book so we will want to stay there for several hundred pages, intrigued and compelled to keep on reading. A surprising number of authors chose the very same first sentence, written by Gabriel García Márquez, for the beginning of One Hundred Years of Solitude. It’s this: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”

E. L. Doctorow helped me cover that PEN Congress by giving me a marvelous interview toward the end of it, summing up the major themes. Last year, when Doctorow won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for his great Civil War novel, The March, I remembered that PEN/Congress “first sentence” story, and inspected the starts of the Fiction Award finalists to see how they launched their tales. Finalist Karen Fisher began her novel A Sudden Country this way: “He carried his
girl tied to his front, the trapsack on his back, the rifle balanced like a yoke along his shoulders.” Now, a sentence like that forces you to ask, “And then?” So does the first sentence of finalist William Henry Lewis’s story “Kudzu,” from his collection I Got Somebody in Staunton. “On that night, years back, we were up until the cardinals started calling.” Again, we’re intrigued. How many years back? When do the cardinals start to call? And for goodness sake, what does a cardinal call sound like?

The great James Salter, who won the 1989 PEN/Faulkner Fiction award for Dusk and Other Stories, started “Comet,” the first story in his newest collection, Last Night, this way: “Philip married Adele on a day in June.” Now, I must say that sounds like radio writing to me, and I did not find it all that compelling. But I persevered. And found more short-chop haiku radio sentences: “It was cloudy and the wind was blowing. Later, the sun came out.” Well, it’s all right, but it’s not in the same category as “She’s fine.” And then James Salter demonstrated why he was a PEN/Faulkner finalist and past winner. Along came this sentence: “It had been a while since Adele had married, and she wore white.” I’d read E. L. Doctorow’s first sentence for The March to you, but it goes on for an entire page, ripping and racing along on commas and semicolons and dashes as it introduces the reader to characters and place and mood. Too much—and too hard—to read aloud. But I’d urge you to get a copy and look it over. And be engaged, absorbed, hooked from the very beginning, and carried through to surprising, elevating, enriching ends.

I wonder, often, about what it costs a given writer to produce that first all-engaging sentence—not to mention the rest of the work. And what happens when it just doesn’t come. Writer’s block—that terrifying black cloud that can engulf anyone who tries to put words on a page. Even without the block, the act of writing can be an agony. George Orwell said it was a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a bout of some painful illness. My heroine, Joan Didion, said that in order to do it, she had to face what she called the “low dread”—and force herself to “go in there”—the room of torture—with no distractions, no telephone, not even a radio! When I sat to write that first book Alan Cheuse coached me about, another author-friend—then–NPR President Frank Mankiewicz—
described the process: sit down at your desk; put a piece of paper into the typewriter (this was a while ago; a show of hands—who here has ever used a typewriter?), look up and think, "There's a draft in here. I'd better close the window." Get up. Close the window. Sit down at the desk again. Look up. "It's gotten very warm in here." Get up. Open the window. Sit down again. "I wonder if we have milk?" Get up. Go into the kitchen. Open the fridge. See the absence of milk. Go out. Buy milk. Put it into the fridge. Sit down at the desk. "I'm thirsty." And on and on.

On NPR, over the years, I've interviewed a broad range of authors about their window and milk compulsions, and other aspects of the writing act. Saul Bellow said shortly after he woke up, and before he ever sat down to write, he would have some preconscious intimations of what the work would be like. "I see faces and scenes," Bellow said, "floors, walls, landscapes. I hear lines of dialogue. And then I get up. If the fates are kind, I'm in a state of some excitement. I have a cup of coffee and sit down immediately to work." Bellow usually stopped around noon. And by that time, he said he was streaming sweat. Anyone looking at him would have thought he'd been shoveling coal, rather than writing words on a page.

John McPhee worked in almost the opposite fashion. McPhee spoke of spending his days doing nothing. Staring out the window. Thinking all day long about what he was trying to write. And then, maybe around five or six o'clock in the evening he would begin.

Hemingway (whom, alas, I never had the chance to interview) used to quit writing at a point at which he knew where the story would go next. Ivan Doig sometimes did the same thing. He'd stop in the middle of a sentence or a paragraph, so he would have something to continue with the next day. Doig also said he felt it didn't matter very much how good whatever came out of his typewriter was. Just as long as something came onto the paper. (John McPhee, by the way, completely disagreed. He said he didn't believe in "laying down a sentence that looks sort of mediocre and ordinary and then doctoring it until it is unique. If you do that," McPhee said, "you're going to create something exaggerated and lifeless." Now, he said that years before we had computers. These days we set down any and all things that occur to us, and then
move it around and try to make it sing. Sometimes that works. I've certainly become an expert cut-and-paster. But I truly believe that the writing I did in my head before I ever hit the keys on my typewriter was far better than what I produce knowing I can easily shift and massage it, without having to use white-out or put a new page in the roller.)

I discovered, in the course of my interviews, some authors who did no agonizing before they took pen to hand. The late science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov, who published well over two hundred books, told me he had no blocks, no anxiety. "Writing is the only thing I'm interested in doing," he said. "It's fun. It's relaxation. It's a vacation. Coming here in order to talk to you, that's work." Asimov said he had no special rituals before writing. "Rituals? Ridiculous! My only ritual is to sit close enough to the typewriter so that my fingers touch the keys."

"And what do you do," I asked, "on the day the typewriter breaks?"

"That's why I've got four typewriters!"

I laughed. "I'd call that a ritual, Mr. Asimov!"

Katha Pollitt's ritual is to change her place of writing on a regular basis. She feels that places get used up. So after she sits at her desk for a long time, she moves to another room and writes at a different table. But biographer Thomas Congdon said he always sat on exactly the same cushion of the same sofa in the same room, day after day after day.

One lesson from writers which I've discovered to be completely true is this: don't talk about it. It's as true for a report I'm about to write as it is for a maker of fiction. And not talking about the story is another ritual observed by that four-typewriter-owner Isaac Asimov. "If you talk about it," he said, "you bleed off some of the internal pressure. In fact, if you talk about something enough, you never write it." Didion again: "If I could tell you my story, I wouldn't have to write it." In radio journalism—that medium of story-telling aloud—I find that if I talk too much about the story I haven't written yet, it goes stale. By the time I sit at the computer, I've already heard it. So why would my listeners want to hear it again?

But as a radio writer, I have an immense advantage over all those authors whom I've interviewed over the years. Since I
write to be heard, by definition I have a very sociable occupation. Any given story doesn’t take me that long to write, so I’m not sitting quietly for days on end. In fact, I don’t sit quietly ever, really, because while I’m writing—or immediately afterward—I read what I’ve written out loud to hear how it flows. Then I read it again to my editor, and then I go into a studio, ask an engineer to turn on my microphone, and we record my story. After that (and this is enough to give even the most ambitious writer lockjaw) it’s heard by some twenty million listeners. All of which is daunting. But it’s sociable. As opposed to sitting in a room alone for endless hours and days, not answering the phone, not accepting invitations, not doing anything except getting out the words. Saul Bellow said it was “hard to see the Chicago streets go bare as people make their way to their jobs, leaving me in this extraordinary position—connected with nothing except my own imagination.”

Novelist Richard Elman, in a poem called “Calliope Song” wrote one of the most astute descriptions:

Writing
is the art of keeping still
indoors for days at a time
while others are out
shuffling papers.

As I said, writing for radio is, by definition, a more sociable activity. And, as you’ve heard from my various citations today, the writing is draped around clips from that basic tool of journalism: interviews. Some observations, now, about that particular art form. And while my focus is on broadcast interviews, I hope these notes will be helpful to those of you who need to conduct interviews before you sit down to write.

Every story reporters tell on the air starts with a series of information-gathering interviews. And most of the work of our hosts (our news anchors) consists of obtaining information through interviews. As someone who spent most of her broadcast life as a host/anchor, once I became a correspondent I was surprised at how different the anchor’s interview is from the interviews done by reporters. The anchor’s interview is conducted to be broadcast. That for-broadcast interview is a conversation designed to be overheard. So the presence of the host is as important, in a way, as the presence of the guest.
Since everything the host says will be heard, he or she must choose words carefully, design questions to convey information at the same time it’s solicited. (Here’s an example: “President Bush, you’ve been in office for six years now, and your critics say the world is far more dangerous now than it was six years ago, and that largely because of the policies of this administration. What’s the worst criticism you’ve heard of your White House years?”) Also, the for-broadcast interview needs to be shaped in advance—as part of the host’s preparation. In this way, it’s not dissimilar to a piece of writing. The broadcast interview should have a beginning, middle, and an end. Except in the case of breaking news, which is presented live, most of what goes on our air is prerecorded and highly edited. Which means you can move questions and answers around to get a better flow. But it’s really important to build in that structure before you begin recording—otherwise there’s too much cutting and pasting later on. And sometimes the rearrangements simply do not work. By comparison, in a reporter’s interview, where just snippets of the answers will be used on the air (sound bites—one of broadcasting’s high-tech terms), the questions can be asked in any order, and then the sound bites are arranged and organized later, in and out of written script.

As to the interviewing itself, there’s no need for elaborate questions. Sometimes the simplest question—why?—will provoke the most interesting answer. You do have to think—in advance—about what you want to get from the interview. If it’s pure information, consider how you can get it economically and clearly, and keep stopping your interviewee if there’s something you don’t understand. There’s nothing wrong with admitting you’re not following what’s being said. NPR’s Supreme Court correspondent Nina Totenberg prides herself on never having gone to law school. Yet she reports on the most Byzantine legal intricacies. She does this by grilling her sources and interviewees. “If I don’t understand it,” Nina says, “how can I explain it to our listeners?”

If I’m heading into an interview that’s intended to reveal personality, rather than simply obtain information, I spend some time thinking about how to make something unexpected happen in the course of the conversation. I’d read that the great actress Helen Hayes adored snacking on M&M candies. So when I went to interview her in her home in Nyack, New
York. I brought along a few bags of candy, pushed the record button on my tape machine, and handed them to her. "Ohhh..." she beamed, "my beloved M&Ms!" And there I had a lovely, character-revealing moment of unrehearsed Helen Hayes.

In July 2001, not long after the Bush Twos entered the White House, I went over to the East Wing to interview Laura Bush. It was so early in the administration (and before 9/11) that she hadn't yet settled into her permanent office. She was known to dislike public speaking, let alone interviews. And each time I'd seen her or read about her, Laura Bush did not seem very interesting to me. Steady, earnest, a leveling force, certainly, for her husband. But maybe not "good tape"—another of our high-tech terms. Not that lively a speaker. Mrs. Bush had agreed to an interview in order to promote her love of reading—it was just before her first National Book Festival. So I carried along with me, into the White House, a plastic Safeway bag containing a well-loved, crumbly edged paperback copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. (Imagine trying to get into the White House today with a Safeway bag and a book!) We began chatting about various matters. Then, in the middle of the interview, I fished out the book, handed it over to her, and asked her to take off the rubber band that was holding it together and turn to the Post-It I'd put on what I had read was her favorite section. Then I asked Laura Bush to read that section aloud for us. She did, with obvious pleasure. Then she said she loved the part that came right after that section and went on to talk about it, too. I thought that was a wonderful glimpse of her personality and character. First of all, she didn't flap or laugh or get annoyed at being asked to take off the rubber band. Then, she knew the book so well that she wanted to talk about several of its sections. And she clearly enjoyed holding it—battered though it was—in her hands. All that came out because I thought ahead of time about making something happen that she would not expect.

Often, in an interview, you have to deal with delicate subjects—a really bad period in a person's life. That was an issue for me in November 2006, when I interviewed Sir Paul McCartney. My first Beatle! A spiritual chorale he'd written was about to debut at Carnegie Hall, and he agreed to talk about it. At that point, Paul McCartney was in the middle of a very
thorny divorce. All sorts of dreadful and embarrassing detailshad come out. I didn't want to discuss any of that with him, but feltI had to acknowledge being aware of it. So I put thequestion this way: “Sir Paul, you're going through a roughdi-vorce right now, harsh accusations from Heather Mills, scan-dal all over the tabloids. Does music provide a refuge for you,in bad times?” You see—I laid out the information, didn't stop tospecifically ask about it, but moved on to a different sub-ject. To let him—and my listeners—know that I knew thepage-one events that were going on in his life, but wanted totalk about something else. And his answer was solid: “Yes,” he said. “Music has been a refuge all my life. If you're not in thegreatest of moods you can go off and find yourself a little cor-ner somewhere, and if you're able to write a song or play some-thing, it's often a great healer. And you've written out youranger, or your grief, or whatever it is.” I told him I thought hewas very lucky to have this ability and talent. We had a nicechat (we were not face to face, alas—he was rehearsing inNew York, I was at NPR headquarters in Washington, D.C., sof we spoke by telephone). And I must tell you, as an aside, thatsomewhere in the middle of it, talking about being a choirboyin his teens, he said, “I'd go across to the church near PennyLane”—and I thought OMIGOD! This is Paul McCartney! Andhe just said “Penny Lane” because he'd lived there! It was likeShakespeare saying “when I was in Avon.” Quite thrilling.

In conclusion (as people say in lectures, but never, never on the radio), it strikes me that I'm talking today about two an-cient forms of communication which are, in some ways, en-dangered. Radio—the old-fashioned kitchen-table and car-dashboard kind. And writing. Radio, in the twenty-first cen-tury, has been subsumed by television as a mass medium andis now being replaced by iPods, iTunes, and a panoply ofspoken and sung words emerging from various sorts of com-puters. Writing, too, is being threatened in this visual anddiigital age. Newspapers are closing one after another. (Al-though the new editor of The New Republic magazine recentlydeclared in a column: “we still believe, more than ever, in jour-nalism produced on dead trees.”) In the world of hard- andsoft-cover books, the self-help ones are outselling the mosttrenchant, carefully crafted fiction. And yet you—and I—are
here together because of our deep commitment to these increasingly anachronistic forms. Why?

Well first, why radio? The quick answer is: to ask Sir Paul McCartney questions. And then to listen carefully to the answers. Radio, to tell lives—tell stories that would otherwise remain untold. Radio journalism's most solemn assignment, to my way to thinking, is to give voice to the voiceless (the old saw is that journalism comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable). That happens day after day on radio—that inexpensive, quick, efficient, marvelous medium. The medium of the human voice. Fred Rogers, by the way, used to say there is something almost primal about the voice, alone, telling stories. Primal, as in—from the womb, the cradle—that mother's voice that strikes right into our storytelling, story-loving hearts.

And don't some of those answers stand for writing, too? The writing of fiction and nonfiction. Don't hearts beat faster, and perhaps even more happily, in response to wonderfully written words? Writing that tells stories that would otherwise remain untold. Writing that enlightens, uplifts, enrages, or engulfs.

One of my most cherished stories is about a fellow who ran up to Henry David Thoreau, the great nineteenth-century American philosopher and writer, and said excitedly, "Mr. Thoreau, Mr. Thoreau! There's a marvelous new invention. It's called the telegraph. It allows someone in Texas to communicate instantly with a person in Maine. Isn't that wonderful?" And Henry David Thoreau listened, smiled politely, and then said, "Yes. But what do they have to say?" I pose Thoreau's question to myself every time I step inside a broadcast studio. You may pose it to yourselves, whenever you sit at a keyboard and begin to compose. When you do that, you might remind yourself, as I often do, of Ernest Hemingway's profound observation, in a 1958 Paris Review interview. Hemingway said, "Sometimes I have good luck and write better than I can."

Permit me to congratulate you, and to wish all of us that kind of luck.