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THE ESSENTIAL WRITERS' COMPANION

CECIL MURPHEY

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[A SNEAK PEEK AT THE BOOK]

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1 - WHY DO YOU WRITE?

Why do you want to write? What pushes or compels you to keep on writing even though you receive rejection after rejection?

Those are the two major questions I've often asked writers at the more than 250 conferences where I've spoken or taught continuing classes over the past thirty-five years.

The conferees' responses vary, but the first ones usually begin with high-sounding tones—as if they want to please me, the teacher, or out of a desire to sound erudite. More than once someone has said, “I want to light the way for others to follow.”

Another said, “I see writing as a high and holy occupation because we're committed to save the world from ignorance.”

That's commendable—and maybe even true—but I knew those weren't the deepest reasons.

“I write to make sense of the world,” one man insisted.

“Sounds profound,” I said. “Perhaps a little too profound for me.”

He added that he had so much chaos in his daily living that writing was one way he could make sense of his life. When I pushed him to explain further, he admitted he had read the statement in a book, liked it, and was satisfied with that as an answer.

A woman at a conference in Tennessee held up a laminated 3x5 card she kept in her purse. She said that the words, a quotation from Henry James, inspired her every time she read them. She later mailed me a copy:

To live in the world of creation—to get into it and stay in it—to frequent it and haunt it—to think intensely and fruitfully—to woo combinations and inspirations into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation—this is the only thing.

I read the quotation many times before copying it here (with her permission). *The only thing?* That statement seems extreme, although I'm sure some people find the quotation inspirational. The words sound noble and probably inspire others, but they don't do anything for me. Perhaps I'm too much of a pragmatist.

To get beyond such lofty language, about five years ago I started opening my lectures this way: "Why do you want to write? While you think about your answer, I'm going to give you several reasons I write. After that, I'll listen to your responses."

As soon as they focused their attention on me, I said, "I write because I'm so full of myself, I believe the world is waiting to read my brilliant thoughts."

They laughed, a few nodded, and all seemed to know what I meant. I went on to explain that I also write because I'm driven to share my thoughts and insights on life.

"I'm a needy guy, and out of my need to feel appreciated, valued, and affirmed, I write," I say. "That's as simple and direct as I can put it. Our needs express who we are, what we lack, what we yearn for. All of us feel deficient in some ways."

I make one additional statement that seems to give several conferees the freedom to speak. "Writing is one way to compensate for my feelings of inadequacy."

The conferees relax. They no longer need to impress me with lofty statements. They're ready to give me gut-level responses.

Sometimes, to push them to think deeper, I add, "I write to resolve issues and explore possibilities. At times, it's a form of therapy. I've learned so much from my inward exploring, I've probably saved half-a-million dollars in therapist's fees by being a writer."

They usually laugh again.

Finally, before I allow them to respond, I write one sentence on the board or flip chart:

I write to find out who I am.

Then I wait.

The hands start waving, and they yell out the kind of things I

like to hear. From my perspective, they finally speak from deep inside themselves. This is no longer an exam where they have to voice the right answer to please the teacher; they don't have to sound noble, sophisticated, or even spiritual.

Occasionally someone will say, "I want to have a book to use as a way to open up a public-speaking career."

That's certainly a legitimate answer.

Most of them, however, have deeply personal reasons for writing.

"I want to share what I know."

"I have things to say to enrich others."

"Writing broadens my life. The more I write and ponder," one man said, "the more I understand human nature, God, and the world in which I live."

"Writing satisfies my creative urge."

"I just have to do it!" one woman yelled. "Many times I tell myself I'll never write another word, but within a day or two I'm pounding the keyboard again."

It's interesting that "to make money" rarely appears on their list of reasons.

Why do *you* write?

"I write to find out who I am," is my primary answer. That may not be an obvious reason or one you'd yell out in my classes, but think about your reasons. You can't answer me, but you can answer yourself: Why do you write?



I know a man who often talks of writing novels, but he's been talking that way for at least a decade. Occasionally, he sets aside a Saturday and stays at his computer for one or two hours, but he hasn't produced anything significant.

I know this much about the man: His father wanted to be a writer but wasn't able to carry out his own dream. Is it possible that the son is trying to fulfill the dreams of the now-dead parent?

In his case, that may be behind his desire to write. Some children unconsciously live out the lives of their parents and don't know how

to follow their own dreams.

Or perhaps my friend gets close to parts of himself that he's not willing to explore further. If so, I don't think he's conscious of it.

Your rational mind prevents your focusing on the real issues—the unresolved conflict you don't want to face. Your many activities and the demands of your job provide you with an abundance of excuses for not writing. You decide you're too involved in other, more urgent responsibilities so that writing becomes “something I want to do one day.”

But someday isn't marked on your appointment calendar.

At one conference, a woman said, “I find fulfillment only in writing.” And she extolled the virtues of writing hours every day.

That statement felt extreme to me. I'm not a therapist or a mind reader, but as I listened, I sensed that she used writing as a means to hide from life. By thrusting her energies into sharp dialog and intricate plots, she doesn't have to look at her otherwise chaotic life. It's an escape from life instead of an entrance into a healthier existence.

She chose the solitary life—and for years has spent most of her days in front of her computer, even though she has sold only a handful of articles. She is, however, highly active on Facebook, Linked-In, Twitter, and several writers' loops.

As I think about her, I assume it's her way to avoid participating in life's issues or to escape from other responsibilities.

That attitude doesn't trouble me, and she's not harming herself, but I believe her life would be richer if she pushed herself to work through her inhibiting issues.

I also have an acquaintance who has been working on one book for twelve years but has never finished it. “I'm polishing it,” he'll say, or, “I've just had an idea on how to enhance the plot.”

Is it possible he does that so he doesn't need to explain the lack of success in the rest of his life?

The above examples are only conjectures, but I hope you'll ponder them as you answer the question for yourself: *Why do I want to write?*

A therapist-friend said recently, “In Los Angeles, every waiter is

a writer.” He pointed out that would-be screenwriters feel drawn to such places, but he says it may be their way for having an excuse for not growing up. He believes many of them carry inside their heads the romantic image of the starving writer or creative person who doesn’t fit into society.

Or do you want to write—really?

- I WRITE TO FIND OUT WHO I AM. -

2 - IS THIS YOUR GIFT?

At the end of the discussion in continuing classes at conferences, I make another point about why I write.

“I write because it is a gift.”

Although it’s difficult for me to say those words aloud, I believe I have an aptitude to communicate messages of encouragement on the page or screen. It’s difficult to say because I don’t want to come across as implying I have a special endowment that no one else does. Yet it’s part of my “divine equipping,” and I want to use it well.

I also have trouble expressing that God would favor me with such an endowment. Even now, after more than a hundred books, I’m still in awe that God would use *my* words to touch other people.

That sense of wonderment is the major reason I *know* it’s a gift. Calling it a gift means it’s not a possession I earned, nor is it an ability I produced by myself. It’s a knack given to me for myself and for others.

My three brothers were gifted mechanics. They understood cars and could do things with them I couldn’t understand. Others paint, learn languages, or play musical instruments. You may not see them as gifts, but you admit, “It’s just something I can do.”

Some of us have that innate ability with words—they flow from us. We express our thoughts easily and from our own style and personality. The ease of the language is characteristic of the gift.

Others try to write and may do so reasonably well, but their prose never has what I call the “ring” or sound of quality. I don’t want to seem smug or condescending, but the ability to write and sell a book isn’t, in itself, evidence of a gift.

From my early days of writing—even back in college—my instructors commented on how well I wrote. I had several classes

under a long-tenured professor in graduate school, who told me, “You write excellent papers.” I don’t recall that he called it a “gift,” but he told me how easy it was to read my papers. Even more important, he encouraged me to keep improving my skills. After I became a writer, he said, “I’m not surprised.”



There’s another element of a gift or talent—always learning and striving to improve. You may have an aptitude for writing, but what do you do about it?

You may not know if you’re gifted because it’s usually a matter of self-discovery. If you have that ability, you’ll improve as you work at the craft—and you’ll probably *want* to improve.

If it’s not your talent, you’ll plateau so that your writing will remain about the same year after year. Or you’ll grow weary and quit.

Many years ago my wife and I took ballroom dancing classes and did extremely well. People often asked me if I was an instructor because I looked good on the floor. I had what they called a “good frame.” I became fairly good, but never outstanding. One evening Shirley and I were dancing and I realized that I probably wouldn’t improve much. I could learn new steps, but I would never be good enough to win the gold medal in a competition.

I accepted that. Although I enjoyed the movement and learned to stay in time with the music, I felt no compulsion, no drive, no intensity to push myself.

If you believe you have a gift to write, consider it the foundation on which you build. You still need to learn the skills to express what you want to say. Polish your grammar; learn good sentence structure. Those aren’t automatic or part of the divine endowment: They’re the skills gifted writers work to acquire. And if you don’t have that flair, you’ll never really get it.

Knowing you have a gift can do wonders for you. I’ll explain it this way. In order to get into graduate school, I had to take a series of I.Q. and personality tests. When I returned for the read off, Dr. Bovee, the examiner, told me that I had scored high and shouldn’t have

trouble in my studies.

“I have one important question,” I said. “I’ve always done well in school. When I was in college, my friend Al kept saying it was because I worked so hard.” I explained that Al insisted my good grades weren’t because I was bright, only that I put so much effort into my studies. “Was he right?” I asked.

Dr. Bovee laughed. “If you weren’t smart, it wouldn’t matter how hard you worked.”

He said more, but that statement helped me immensely. I didn’t feel I was smarter than others and I’m certainly not. But it did tell me (and my I.Q. score agreed) that I was intelligent. That was what I wanted to know. The knowledge of my intellectual ability gave me an immense boost of confidence in both of my graduate schools.

It works the same way when it comes to writing. To be able to admit, “I have the ability to write well” boosts my confidence. I know I can improve because I have the foundation of talent on which to build.

Like many others, for a long time I didn’t recognize the ability as a gift—and I doubt that most writers do. We learn and appreciate our ability only as others respond to the words that come as a result of our labors.



Although I’ve written in the previous chapter about the reasons for writing, I still come back to one significant fact. If it’s not part of your commitment and your divinely given talent, you won’t pursue it: Write to find out who you are.

Writing isn’t formal therapy, so you don’t reach the place where you turn off your computer. Even though writing may have a therapeutic effect, you don’t suddenly awaken to the reality that you write because you didn’t get enough love in childhood and now you can focus on more appropriate ways to satisfy your yearning for affection. In therapy, you can probably get well enough to stop needing the sessions, but writing is different. Instead of stopping, you learn to feel your pain, write through your angst, grow through the

lofty and low experiences and—if you stay at the craft—see it as an opportunity to enrich others.

The type of writing you do isn't crucial; it is essential that you discover the areas that touch your passion. You can learn and grow through writing novels, how-to books, curriculum, or instruction manuals. The genre isn't as important as what you put into it.

If you're a serious writer, like others, you hurt and sometimes the pain becomes intense as you touch parts of yourself that you'd prefer to ignore or deny. Serious scribes keep on writing anyway. Maybe it's because they have to, and it feels like compulsive behavior. Or maybe it's some kind of inner wisdom that whispers, "This is the way to wholeness."

I've often wondered if one of the reasons for the high level of alcoholism among successful writers doesn't center on their discovery of needs and inner hurts. They feel the pain and agony, but instead of facing their issues, they use alcohol or drugs to deaden their suffering.

One friend, who admits to being a highly insecure author of eleven books, says nothing gives him more joy than when he reads a good review of one of his books. "But then I sink into depression when I read a bad one."

When I asked why reviews affected him so strongly, he said in what I considered a rare moment of insight from him, "I have to have everyone's appreciation. If I think people don't like me, I get depressed." He held up his hand. "Okay, my writing and I are supposed to be separate, but they're not."

He had moved into the realm of self-discovery.

A woman who had published four sci-fi novels said, "In my most honest moments, I admit that I write to compensate for what I don't get in the real world. I can live a wonderful life through my fiction. I can write about my tragedies or my imagined ones and turn them into happy endings."



I don't want to discourage you from writing. If you understand the forces behind the burning desire to express yourself with words, you

can become more productive and your manuscripts take on fuller meaning. Even if it's not a gift, you can still write and produce readable prose. You can also say to yourself, "I gave it my best."

Or you might stop writing.

Or worse, you might never start and always wonder if it was something you should have done. Some individuals are haunted by unconscious desires or needs that block a gift of creativity.



You may write for a variety of reasons. You may never fully understand your motives, but it's still a good question to ask yourself regularly: Why do I write?

The reasons vary, but they don't have to stop you. If you're truly a writer, you'll go deeper and your writing gets clearer.

- I WRITE BECAUSE IT'S MY GIFT.

THE MORE I WRITE, THE MORE I KNOW WHO I AM. -

3 - BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF

What's wrong with being exactly who you are? Who says you have to morph into becoming someone else?

Too many read books by experts who suggest you should become different or urge you to become different. The pundits probably don't say you should remake yourself to become successful, but their instructions imply you're not good enough as you are.

If you heed their words, you may end up trying to be somebody you're not. To follow that advice not only weakens the power of your words, but the writing doesn't ring true because it no longer comes from deep within.

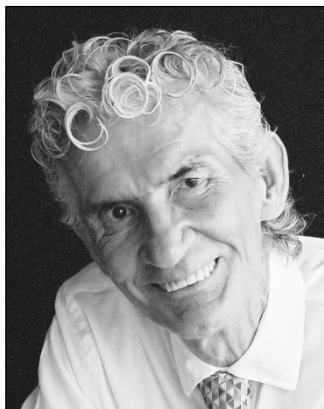
You can change, and most of us can, but you don't change much. And who says you have to become different? Those who pound out the message that you must constantly push yourself to be better, stronger, wiser, or healthier often imply a subtle, negative message: "You're inferior, but I can help you improve."

Here's the primary reason I push being real: *Everything you write reveals something about who you are—even your attempts at self-concealment....*

**Read On to Find Out Why
Who You Are
Determines What You Write.**

UNLEASH
THE WRITER WITHIN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CECIL (“CEC”) MURPHEY can’t recall when he didn’t want to write. Although he tried to get published first at age 16, he had nothing accepted until he was 38—“only after I’d learned a few things about the publishing industry,” he says.

After Cec sold at least 20 articles, he made a double commitment to God and to himself: to never stop learning and improving as a writer, and to do whatever he could to help other writers.

Thus began a lifetime commitment and passion to share with other writers what he’s learned along the way. *Unleash the Writer Within* is his passion and legacy to all writers in the trenches.

Since his writing career launched, Cec has written or co-written more than 120 books, including the *New York Times*’ bestseller *90 Minutes in Heaven* (with Don Piper) and *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* (with Dr. Ben Carson). His books have sold millions of copies, been translated into more than 40 languages, and brought hope and encouragement to countless people around the world.

Cecil Murphey enjoys speaking for churches and for events nationwide. For more information, or to contact him, visit his website at www.cecilmurphey.com.

Cecil’s blog for male survivors of sexual abuse: www.menshatteringthesilence.blogspot.com.

Cecil’s blog for writers: www.cecwritertowriter.com.

For more on *Unleash the Writer Within* and Cecil Murphey: www.oaktara.com