

Writing Is a Communal Act

A student said, "I'm reading so much Hemingway, I'm afraid I'm beginning to sound like him. I'm copying him and not having my own voice." That's not so bad. It's a lot better to sound like Ernest Hemingway than like Aunt Bethune, who thinks Hallmark greeting cards contain the best poetry in America.

We always worry that we are copying someone else, that we don't have our own style. Don't worry. Writing is a communal act. Contrary to popular belief, a writer is not Prometheus alone on a hill full of fire. We are very arrogant to think we alone have a totally original mind. We are carried on the backs of all the writers who came before us. We live in the present with all the history, ideas, and soda pop of this time. It all gets mixed up in our writing.

Writers are great lovers. They fall in love with other writers. That's how they learn to write. They take on a writer, read everything by him or her, read it over again until they understand how the writer moves, pauses, and sees. That's what being a lover is: stepping out of yourself, stepping into someone else's skin. Your ability to love another's writing means those capabilities are awakened in you. It will only make you bigger; it won't make you a copy cat. The parts of another's writing that are natural to you will become you, and you will use some of those moves when you write. But not artificially. Great lovers realize that they are what they are in love with. That is what happened to Allen Ginsberg when he wanted to write so that Jack Kerouac could

understand him: ". . . being in love with Jack Kerouac he discovered he was Jack Kerouac: that's something love knows."⁹ You are Ernest Hemingway on a safari when you read *Green Hills of Africa*, and then you are Jane Austen looking at Regency women and then Gertrude Stein doing her own Cubism in words, and then you are Larry McMurtry in Texas walking to the pool hall in a dusty town.

So writing is not just writing. It is also having a relationship with other writers. And don't be jealous, especially secretly. That's the worst kind. If someone writes something great, it's just more clarity in the world for all of us. Don't make writers "other," different from you: "They are good and I am bad." Don't create that dichotomy. It makes it hard to become good if you create that duality. The opposite, of course, is also true: if you say, "I am great and they aren't," then you become too proud, unable to grow as a writer or hear criticism of your work. Just: "They are good and I am good." That statement gives a lot of space. "They have been at it longer, and I can walk their path for a while and learn from them."

It's much better to be a tribal writer, writing for all people and reflecting many voices through us, than to be a cloistered being trying to find one peanut of truth in our own individual mind. Become big and write with the whole world in your arms.

Even if we go off alone to write in the wilderness, we have to commune with ourselves and everything around us: the desk, the trees, the birds, the water, the typewriter. We are not separate from everything else. It's only our egos that make us think we are. We build on what came before us, even if our writing is a reaction to it or we try to negate the past. We still write with the knowledge of what's at our backs.

It's also good to know some local people who are writing and whom you can get together with for mutual support. It is very hard to continue just on your own. I tell my students in a group

Writing Down the Bones

to get to know each other, to share their work with other people. Don't let it just pile up in notebooks. Let it out. Kill the idea of the lone, suffering artist. We suffer anyway as human beings. Don't make it any harder on yourself.