because you have to: a writing life

JOAN FRANK

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2012 University of Notre Dame
Preface

Against All Odds

When you become a writer,
it changes you forever.
—Thaisa Frank

We live in a fast-forward world.

Media’s avalanched our eyes and ears and, too often, our hearts. Speed and glitter, serving big profit, reshape our perception of the world to a kind of never-ending, NASCAR free-for-all. The phrases a life of letters, a life of the mind, interiority—these sound as fusty and obscure as old gramophone recordings. (Younger readers will stop here and look up gramophone on the internet dictionary.)

Paradoxically, there have probably never before existed so many books about writing. There are how-tos, step-by-steps, guarantors of fame and fortune or at least a robust second income. There are books (and periodicals and pricey software) advising on writing as a fulfilling hobby, diversion, or pastime, like starting an aquarium, cooking, or ham-radio operation. We find “survival guides.” We also find a welter of very serious, smart books out there about craft and craft analysis.
I’m not interested in those.

My interest, in the pieces to follow, is in the emotional and physical and dream-life of writing (and reading) as an inescapable calling, and in ways of inhabiting that life. Writers write what they know, and many of the topics that follow pressed themselves deeply into my experience and, by consequence, my thinking. Yet they’ve often also struck me as screened off from the general dialogue, treated as unsavory—like that hidden little back room where the car salesman ducks away, to discuss your proposed purchase price with his “boss.”

I wrote these essays in the grip of them, as serial obsessions. Some were published years ago in various journals; others are more recent. You will notice certain overlaps and repetitions, patterns revealing my own concerns and biases. You may notice that these biases suggest a quality of fanaticism: the determination to make art against all odds. These reflections are not meant to prescribe, though at times they may sound that way. They’re meant to declare here is how it has been for me. My hope is they will form a coherent vision, one that may provide some communion. In the end, of course, a writing life is yours to invent. If you’re a working writer you’ll know this already. If you’re just starting out, you must take it on faith (oh! as with so much else) that you’ll find your way—that is, discover after a number of years that you’ve built the life piece by piece, without quite being aware of it.

Some of these essays focus on reading, which, for a writer, carries a slightly different weight than it may for others. Author Antonya Nelson once said that after you become a writer it changes forever the way you read, that a certain loss of innocence is involved, which is true. At the same time specific pleasures obtain, that might never have been grasped in prior innocence.

That trade-off would apply, I expect, to the life itself.
Sincere thanks to Robert Bly, Baron Wormser, and Thaisa Frank (no relation) for permission to quote from their writings and commentary.

Thanks to early readers Ianthe Brautigan, Bob Duxbury, Joann Kobin, and Jack Pelletier. Ongoing thanks to Bob Fogarty for unflagging support.

I am especially grateful to editor Stephen Little for patient diplomacy and guidance.

“Never Enough” was first published in *TriQuarterly Online*, a publication of Northwestern University (Winter 2010–11).

“A Hand in the Game: Reviewing” appeared in *Author Magazine* (July 2010).
“If You Really Want to Hear About It” appeared as a guest blog in The Well-Read Donkey for Kepler’s Books, Palo Alto, Calif. (June 2010).

“The More We Typed, the Better We Felt” appeared in Jabberwock Review (Summer 2009).


“The Impenetrable Phenomenon” appeared in Confrontation (Spring 2002).


Madness in Method
Few things have become harder to do at our moment of the new century, I think, than to think.

By thinking, I mean to sink, at a deliberate and comfortable pace, into the dense, measured, deep-roving consideration of all that has lately or long ago happened: all we’ve observed or read or felt or thought or done—what we’d perhaps like to do or think next, in result.

Writing is thinking on paper. And many writers undertake the craft in the first place because it allows them to think their way through to some new understanding or new question or problem—watch it unfold, feel it lead them, in the lines and paragraphs taking form before their eyes. It’s a journey in the realest sense, often without a map. And despite the overwhelming, constant, clamorous interruptions of job, travel, family, friends and lovers, fatigue, depression, illness, all the relentless chores and emergencies of life—you do whatever you must to forge time to think and to write.
Since I became a writer, I’ve conducted an unscientific survey of how other writers manage to clear a space for their craft—ergo, to think. Most share the same woe: never enough time. They have to earn money, be parents and mates. They grapple with the old, old nightmare, the cake-and-eat-it riddle: they want to live, as well as to write. Old news—but when it happens to us, it feels new: this terrible battle of needs. Hair tearing—impossible to withdraw from one camp or the other. How quickly, too, it’s over—one’s life, I mean. And who amongst us has not examined her soul in the unforgiving hours, wondering what her mere existence might add up to?

Not everyone commiserates. Some seem to have the situation neatly pocketed (though these types raise my brows—Shakespeare reminds us that things are never what they seem). A teaching mentor during an MFA program once wrote to me, in calm response to my own bewildered longing for time:

“One has plenty of opportunities during the day to write.”

I wondered, at the time, what on God’s green earth he was talking about.

Was he mocking me? Should I start searching for some secret hidey-hole of time that I’d stupidly failed to see? I considered the source. This man, a venerable name among modern writers, taught and wrote. He’d written dozens of books in a popular genre, which I assume earned him bread-and-butter money. He wrote poems and short stories for perhaps less money—but he always wrote (or so it seemed to me) with the compulsion of his art. He had a wife who also brought in an income, and three growing children with all the usual growing-children needs. Therefore I had to assume he had contrived a schedule that gave him a living, while satisfying both his family (more or less, because families are insatiable) and his need for time. It must have been a schedule that enabled him to sink each day into that deep-duration time (thank you, Sven Birkerts) every writer so covets. I assumed that this man had mornings free to write—a very bottom-line yearning among writers. Free mornings, like any spoils of war, seem mainly to go to the unemployed, the retired, the already-wealthy, or those argonauts who’ve achieved Oprah-level recogni-
tion. Mornings tend to be our best hours—for clarity, energy, access to dreams. It’s also most reliably the first portion of the day to be snatched away by the world.

Well, hurray for him, I thought. One can’t waste time wondering where the hidden dues of an apparently perfect life may lurk. Each writer’s choices for survival are assimilated from unique conditions. Though writers obsessively compare methods for getting it done, no one can really prescribe for another. We can suggest like mad, emulate, but rarely prescribe. Managing time is part of the authority we each finally have to grab for ourselves: no one will ever confer it. Perhaps all that writers can ultimately offer each other by way of ballast, consolation, or buttressing, is a kind of sympathetic witnessing: I know it’s hard. Keep going.

Rougher therapy might borrow the blunt Nike slogan: Just do it.

Compare my mentor’s blasé comment with this rueful description by novelist Jane Hamilton, in her introduction to a directory of artists’ colonies:

Rilke said that in order to write he needed “unconfined solitude . . . (a daily routine) without duties, almost without external communication.” As a mother and the wife of a farmer, those specifications for the writing life have alternately made me want to weep into a five-gallon drum and laugh my head off.

For any artist, there is the profound problem of integrating the life of the imagination with the noise, the mess, the details, and the relationships of real life. . . . Whether an artist has a job or a family, or both, on top of the responsibilities to the artist’s real work, there are always the incessant demands of the ordinary world.

Without money for time and space, there were weeks, months, years when I had to hold that thought. And then, eons later, there was the bitter work of trying to find the
thought that had seemed important—No, that was important! Wasn’t it?—on the scrap of paper, on my desk, in the bedroom, where there were also piles of laundry, bills to be paid, shoes to be taken to the repair. Better to look on the floor, where the scrap surely had fluttered among the dust and catalogs, unread books, last year’s tax returns. . . .

. . . It is not always easy to believe that our lone voices matter or are being heard in the modern age. Above all, what [an artists’ colony] gives the artist, for the weeks or months we are staying, is the confidence that anything, all things are possible. If we are lucky, we carry that priceless feeling back to real life.

I found myself rereading this testimony with a rush of gratitude. *I haven’t been crazy. It has been hard for others, too.* Sanity-bending, satire-defying hard. For some reason, though, it has traditionally seemed a hushed topic among writers, something averted by way of courtesy—lest you be considered a whiner, lest you perhaps somehow infect your listeners with the problem by speaking of it. Yet there it sits like the famous elephant in the room—a hairy, smelly one. And unless one disavows one’s beloveds, or disavows eating and sleeping, it doesn’t go away.

For years my late best friend and I traded ideas for how to deal with it. The amount of time and energy we gave to scheming was probably shameful. Get up an hour early. Stay up an hour late. Cut your hours at the office and accept a smaller paycheck. Sneak off to a secluded spot in the car at lunch hour. Park somewhere quiet on the way home for half an hour. Lie to friends and family and hide out somewhere. Take the laptop to a hotel (immediate problem—expense), very well then, to a remote corner of a library. I’ve turned off the phone, locked the doors, pulled the shades; I have indeed parked the car several blocks from home. Once I posted a sign on the front door: *Unavailable. Please leave a phone message.* (That offended a couple of people, but I don’t hold with unannounced drop-ins in the first place.) My most precious steam-valve has been vacation time at a writers’ colony for a couple of
weeks. But at a ratio of two weeks to fifty, that’s a lot of waiting. And in latter years I acquired a husband, who—go figure—feels zealous about taking vacation time together.

Author Heidi Julavits began writing in the kinds of secret spurts I practiced—but admitted it was hard to “write something narrative and linear [when] not living in either a narrative or a linear fashion at the time”:

Essentially I ran six years of controlled experiments on myself. And finally, I figured out, OK, I can’t drink coffee, I can’t write at home, I can’t talk on the phone before I write. Things that you don’t know until you’re faced with trying to figure out how you work. I found that I can write about a thousand words a day, but not really more than that. . . . You have to figure out at what point you use up whatever gas you have, and [that] to push yourself any further just doesn’t make any sense.

Julavits finally decided that she worked best by waitressing at night so her mornings would be free. Please know I am not recommending Julavits’ solution. Nor, thank heaven, is she: “Figure out how you work,” she writes, “and what you need to give yourself the time and emotional space to write. Then get a job that enables you to have that. That way, you’re not under any pressure, and your life is set up so everything is complementary. Otherwise, I think writing can be very frustrating. It can become a thing that gets squeezed out of your life pretty easily.”

I might mildly add that at the time this statement appeared Ms. Julavits was quite young. And though her advice is serenely logical, implementing it may prove, let us say, challenging.

Since my youth, I’ve worked full time to earn a living. When I finally declared myself a writer I was a midlife bachelor, so for the first few years I could write without apology in any scrap of time around the job.
A pause now, to clarify a sore point: Unlike many writers, I chose to avoid teaching. No full-time teaching jobs existed in my area for people who didn’t already have significant teaching experience. I knew I could not survive on part-time teaching—or part-time anything—in my high-rent region. Most crucially, I sensed that the profound demands of teaching would drain me of what I needed to make good writing: private, autonomous dream-time. Working for businesses having nothing to do with literary matters protected that privacy. If these day jobs punished me in other ways, they also never failed to provide a trove of material.

During those early, bachelor years, I wrote (or edited drafts) while doing yogic stretches on the living room carpet in the morning, a cup of coffee safely out of the way of bending and flexing limbs. I wrote against the steering wheel of the car at stoplights and in traffic jams. I jotted notes in bed at night before sleep, my tired legs propped on pillows, or when dreams woke me, or in that strange half-consciousness just before rising. Soon—with the terrible urgency of late arrival to the life—I learned to write in little blurs during the job whenever I could steal a few moments.

This practice has been a fraught, tense, treasonous business, and over many years I’ve refined it to a kind of double-agent ballet. I became expert at keeping papers turned facedown, flushing away whatever was on-screen the instant I felt anyone’s approach. I developed such high-frequency body radar for people’s footfalls—my hearing more acute than a hunting dog’s—that when anyone did manage to surprise me I jumped so far as to cause them genuine horror. It took a while to calm my prickling adrenalin.

My jobs, usually front-desk positions, forced me to invent a rhythm of writing amidst perpetual interruption: the muscle for it (write-stop, write-stop) thickened and grew strong. It functioned like the hinge on a well-used cat door. I literally swung in and out, body, face, mind: from inside the writing on the screen and deep dream of it, the black dimensional cave of it—back out to the coworker needing help, the boss assigning a task, the insistent, bleating phone. That sound, added to the other demands, became a kind of hilarious torment. Hello, brring, brring, can I help you,
brring, brring, certainly, no problem, brring, brring, I’ll have it right back to you, brring, brring, brring, brring. My hands and arms flew from phone to desk to keyboard, like those of some many-armed Hindu goddess.

Somehow I actually got writing done in the midst of all this for the better part of twenty years—stories, essays, reviews, bits of novels. The experience made me a kind of quarterback for navigating the assaults of business life. I danced and sidestepped, karate-chopped and ploughed through them, smiling and quipping, clutching the precious writing dream to my chest like a baby held above the flood. My mission: to press the dream from heart through wrists and hands, into the keyboard and up to the computer screen before it (the dream) melted—before it evaporated—or as author Anne Lamott once horrifyingly phrased it, “I had a song, once.” I learned to look people in the eye and make delightful noises at them while the essence of my mind operated light-years elsewhere. Most of the time I got away with it, though I didn’t make many friends. It wasn’t friends I was after. By day’s or week’s end I had a draft in hand to work with at home, evenings and weekends.

In this way I cobbled together a body of work.

When I moved in with a man with a ready-made family (and eventually, reader, I did marry him), the writing stakes shot past the ozone. Since then, the tug of war between love, art, and paycheck, described so ruefully by Jane Hamilton, has never relented. I live like a piece of malleable taffy between the demands of the beloveds, the business world, and the true work—the writing which craves long, silent hours. The bad joke, of course, is that writers must so often repudiate the world of the living in order to clear time and space to depict it. For those of us unable or unwilling to turn away too long from the living, the conflict feels as incessant, exhausting, and messily painful as the most disastrously risky adulterous affair.

When I was offered the first of the above-described office jobs many years ago, it also happened to be exactly the moment when I understood I had to begin writing in earnest. My parents were
dead. There was no one left to offend, no one who’d try to stop me. I wavered, wondering whether I should not hold out for some more Julavits-like arrangement with paying work that would not directly interfere with writing. But I was too old by then to waitress or do a night hotel clerk stint. And lack of sleep would ruin thinking. I called my oldest friend, my high school English teacher, a patient coach and advocate who had urged me kindly but firmly at every turn to write, damn it. I worried aloud to Jack, on the phone, that I wasn’t sure this new office job was the right thing to do; unsure it would allow me to advance the writing.

Jack thought a few moments. Then he spoke carefully:

“Well, Joan, at least you will be able to get something down.”

Those words hit target. They urged me to become a good pirate, a creative thief, to throw time on its back like an alligator and write on its writhing underbelly when no one was looking. The words struck deep and held. I know I made an odd spectacle at the job, eyes riveted to the screen, responses dazed. Coworkers resented my puzzling elsewhereness, of course. They disliked the haze in my eyes, the delayed attention; I was not fully present for them, and this infuriates people like little else. I was accused of not being proactive. One colleague told me I’d erected a force field around my desk that effectively turned it into a bull pen.

I won’t pretend the writing has not suffered. No matter how I enthuse about trapdoors and muscles, let’s be clear: solitude, peace, and privacy are the holy of holies. No use pretending that silent, rested, solitary time, with velvet quiet and physical ease and no interruption or threat of interruption (almost as bad), has any relationship to the sort in which you sit in the midst of pandemonium, tensed and vibrating with dread of discovery or demands. I’ve known it both ways. I’ve worked at home, alone. I’ve worked in an isolated studio at colonies in Virginia, Vermont, and the New Hampshire woods (a total of five residencies in some twenty-five years). For all the rest of the time I’ve snuck out bits of work at home, evenings and weekends—and at the office. The difference between these scenarios is so stark as to feel—as it struck Jane Hamilton—tragicomic. Who knows how I might have writ-
ten had I been cozy all those years in a calm room eight hours a day, say with a view onto woods or an empty beach, with someone leaving a basket of lunch outside the door and tiptoeing off—to work without my back and shoulders clenched? It doesn’t take a behavioral scientist to surmise what’s better for writing.

But. I was getting something down.

If it must be a bad version or no version, I’ll take the bad.

Now: if the words getting it down became a mantra for me, I must also confess that from time to time I misplaced them. Often I felt crushed. My love for a few human beings and my ordinary need to pay bills seemed at times to cut away every last speck of access to writing—to trap me inside a culture that seemed fiendish in its ability to kill every attempt to rope off a few quiet hours.

Yet as we grow older, the aphorism If not now, when? no longer serves as some self-help cliché. It is knowledge that enters as physical fact.

*One has plenty of opportunities during the day to write.*

Perhaps my shrewd mentor was offering a mantra.

And maybe he was only saying, shut up and do it.
Presuming here shares the stage with making presumptions about sex. Unless one’s a doctor or has just had a heart attack, one doesn’t tell other people what to do with their own bodies (and even then, risks trouble). But a couple of things bear considering.

The brain is part of the body. (You’d be astonished how many people, particularly writers, willfully under-appreciate this.) The romance of Balzac’s dying of caffeine poisoning, or of Dylan Thomas falling off his barstool after twenty-six whiskeys to expire on the White Horse floor, or of Fitzgerald and Agee and calamitous numbers of others drinking themselves to early ruin and death, no longer compels. Caring for health enhances odds for making good work, and possibly extends time on earth in which to make it. (Martin Amis: “Death is not a rumor.”)

But there’s something else: the body informs the writing. One remembers, imagines, and generates through the senses, as much as through ratiocination.
One of the passages in contemporary fiction that stands out for me is from Siri Hustvedt’s lovely novel *The Sorrows of an American*, in which a mother is comforting her teenaged daughter following the girl’s emotional breakdown (partly from having witnessed 9/11 firsthand). The mother embraces the girl almost an entire day as they talk, so intent on maintaining physical contact she keeps the girl’s arms around her even while she makes sandwiches for them. I could see and feel this. Writing that matters is grounded in the body, in the life of the body.

Writing also comes from the body’s thwarted life, or its differently-abled life—from trauma, damage, or illness. (In prior eras, it’s been pointed out to me, one couldn’t justly claim a writing vocation until one had first established oneself an invalid.) Proust would not have been Proust, we may argue, had he not been so hobbled by ailments that he confined himself, supine, to his famous padded room. The late Reynolds Price wrote from a wheelchair, as did the late Andre Dubus. Nancy Mairs has written memorably about living with multiple sclerosis. Some of our best work comes from the writer’s struggle with the body, one’s furious will to document its refusals, failings, and rarified needs. Perhaps the most wrenching and inspiring model is that of the late Jean-Dominique Bauby, a magazine editor to whom remained, after a stroke, only the movement of his left eyelid: he blinked out the words through a special, invented alphabet, transcribed by a devoted nurse, that allowed the writing of his slender, excruciating memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. These exemplars, living and dead, inspire mindfulness and compassion.

I once read a slender tome called *On Having a Heart Attack*, by teacher and author William O’Rourke. He simply described the experience, which happened to him at age forty-five or so, all the way through to a quadruple-bypass operation. At book’s end, without making any grand claims for himself, O’Rourke laid down a handful of sane guidelines, entitled “The List.”

Everybody, he suggested, has a list.

One wants to live. One lives to make art. The body is the instrument.
Striving
Recently mulling over the boxes and files of correspondence I’ve kept over the years, printed faxes or e-mails with my late best friend—a body of work that far outstrips that of any encyclopedia set or the Oxford English Dictionary or Joyce Carol Oates—I had a frisson of horror.

Those letters between us functioned as journals. Talking on paper or screen about reading and writing kept us alive—a secret oxygen tube enriching the thin air of day jobs and chores. We talked minimally of our own work, because we didn’t want to jinx it. Instead we talked of what we were reading, of inspiring quotes from other writers, their work, their techniques and choices. We traded literary gossip and family problems and sympathy and advice, and lamented the usual gross offenders: a mad national culture, costs of living, assaults to writing time.

From time to time I had supposed that, down the road, scanning those reams of letters would teach me something.