

Taking pen in hand: A writer's life and faith

by [Parker J. Palmer](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue



My desire to write surfaced when I was in my twenties. I did what I thought an aspiring writer should do: I began reading the biographies and autobiographies of writers I admired so that I could imitate—well, not their writing, but certain features of their lifestyles: the kind of tweed jacket they wore, the beer they drank, the pipe tobacco they smoked or the typewriter they used. I did that for a year or two. It was fun but I was not writing much. Then one day I read someone—I think it was Hemingway—who said, "A writer is distinguished by the fact that he writes."

"Whoa," said I, "I think this guy is on to something!" His words freed me not only from the tweeds and the tobacco but from the paralyzing notion that a writer is distinguished by the fact that he or she gets published, sells a lot of books and gets great reviews. I came to understand that it's the faithful doing of the thing, the willingness to work hard at the craft without worrying too much about outcomes, that makes you a writer.

The paradox is that you are more likely to get outcomes when you let go of getting outcomes: it frees you from the ego's grip. There is a parallel here to the faith journey: seek your life and you will lose it, lose your life and you will find it.

But I was too insecure to believe that I could ever write a book. So from my mid-twenties to my mid-thirties, I wrote dozens and dozens of essays, a form that gave me freedom to explore things that intrigued me and freedom from the burden of having to write a few hundred pages of well-joined ideas. From time to time one of those essays got published in some small, offbeat journal with a tiny readership. But for the most part they simply filled up the drawers of a filing cabinet—until grace arrived in its usual odd way.

From my mid-thirties through my mid-forties, I served as dean of studies at Pendle Hill, a Quaker living-learning community near Philadelphia. My students were adults, ages 18 to 88, who were not looking for grades or credits or credentials, none of which Pendle Hill offered; they were looking for meaning in life. In the spring of 1977 I taught a class on Thomas Merton, whose work has been a source of great meaning for me. For our final session, I planned to show a film of Merton's last talk, given just an hour or two before a freak accident took his life.

A week or so before that final session, I called the Abbey of Gethsemani to make sure the film I had reserved was on its way. "Whoops," said the fellow on the other end, whom I now call the Netflix Monk. It turns out he had double-booked the rental

of the film. "I just sent our only copy to the other party." After recovering from the shock of learning that monasteries had bureaucratic screwups like every other organization, I sat down to sketch out a lecture on Merton. I got so engrossed that instead of writing an outline, as I normally did for my classes, I wrote an essay that I read to the group at our last session.

Several of my students asked for copies of that talk. A few months later, I got a call from an editor at Ave Maria Press at Notre Dame. He said his niece was one of my students, and she had sent him my essay. He liked it and wondered if he could publish it in an Ave Maria newsletter that went out to 10,000 or so people. Of course, I was delighted.

A few months after that, the editor called again: "We've received a lot of good comments on your essay," he said. "Have you written other essays on related topics?" "A few," I said modestly. "Send them along," he said. And so I did, thinking that I might make one or two more appearances in his newsletter.

A few weeks later he called again. He had chosen seven or eight of my essays that had the theme of paradox running through them. He wanted to put them together in a book and wondered if that was OK with me. I asked for some time to think about it, blinked and then said yes.

So sometime in 1979 I got a look at the first copy of *The Promise of Paradox*. As I held it in my hands, I had a revelation that had not come until that moment: I can write a book! I can because apparently I just did! I must have believed it, because within the next four years I wrote two more, *The Company of Strangers* and *To Know as We Are Known*.

So here's my own Zen koan: we can do things we don't think we can do if we don't think about doing them. I also learned that if you can't write a book, write a lot of essays. If you can't write an essay, write a lot of paragraphs. If you can't write a paragraph, write a line or a word. And if you can't do that on the page, write your truth with your life, which is far more important than any book.

Here too, of course, is a parallel with the life of faith. The faith journey is less about making a big leap of faith than it is about putting one faithless foot in front of the other, and doing it again and again. What happens as you walk that way is sometimes transformed by grace.

And grace is sometimes evoked by screwups, like that of the monk who double-booked the Merton film. Romans 6:1 asks, "Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound?" The correct answer, of course—the one found at the back of the book—is no, to the best of our ability. But it sometimes helps if other people don't know this rule, like that monk who sinned in a way that jump-started my writing career. I hope God has forgiven him by now. I suppose that depends on what God thinks of my writing.

The German novelist Thomas Mann said that "a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." In truth it is so difficult for me that I cannot honestly call myself a writer: I am a rewriter. I toss out a dozen pages for every one I keep, and I don't think I've ever published anything that went through fewer than seven or eight drafts.

My problem is not perfectionism, which I gave up on long ago. I am happily imperfect in everything I do and am. My incessant rewriting is all about curiosity: what lies around the next bend of words, of ideas, of this convoluted world, of my own convoluted mind?

Writing is not about getting a headful of ideas lined up in an orderly fashion and then downloading them to the page; that is not writing but typing (which reminds me of a great quip that once appeared in a book review: "This is the kind of book that gives typing a bad name"). Writing for me is a process of thinking and feeling my way into things that baffle me, discovering more about those things—and about what is inside me—at every step of the way.

I am often surprised by what I find, barely recognizing it as my own thought because I stumble across it around the next turn as if it had been sitting there waiting for me to come along. This explains why time after time, when someone says to me something like, "I really like what you said on page 42," then reads it aloud, I will say (at least to myself), "Did I really even think that, let alone say it?"—followed by a feeling of being either amazed or appalled.

This image of finding what is around the next bend and stumbling across it as I write brings me to a question that is at the mysterious heart of the journey called writing and the journey called faith. As we work our way into that empty page—or into the unknowable future as we live our lives on faith—do we discover what is there or do we invent it?

My guess is that the answer is both. That is an important answer not only because I believe it to be true, but because it helps keep us humble about our thinking, our writing, our faith.

What do I mean when I say that writing is both discovery and invention? When I was a kid, we had great fun taking a piece of paper and writing secret messages on it with a thin brush dipped in lemon juice. When the juice dried, the page looked blank. But if you held the paper close to a source of heat, like a lightbulb, the words magically appeared.

These days when I write—at least when I write well—I have the feeling that the words I put on paper are encountering realities that are already "out there" but will remain invisible until someone's words give them visible form. When I am not writing well, the converse of that is happening. I am trying to use words to reveal something that is not really there, or I have not yet found the words that have the power to reveal what is.

So when I am not writing well, which is most of the time, I have to be willing again and again to commit what someone has called "conceptual suicide." I need to be willing to tear up the pages I've labored over for the past few days or weeks and begin again from scratch—because what I've written, no matter how elegant, is not bringing reality into view. It's as if I were a kid holding a piece of paper near a lightbulb, but no hidden messages were emerging from that blank space.

For a happy marriage between reality and words, reality must be honored with words that reveal its nature. Even the simplest realities won't reveal themselves in words that do not fit—and even the cleverest words can't make reality into something it is not. As is true with any marriage, we try as we go along to meet in the middle that way, a way that feels just right when we get there. Then we drift off from that just right place and have to work to get back there again.

My incessant rewriting is a sign that I drift away pretty often. But after many years of writing, I more or less know when I do or can acknowledge the fact when someone I trust points it out to me. And I'm willing to commit conceptual suicide again and again and again to get back to a place where my words and what's real can have a live encounter.

This is the point at which my faith journey and my journey as a writer converge. As a young person growing up in church, a verse from 2 Corinthians commanded my

attention, and it has ever since: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." What that verse meant and still means to me is simple and yet demanding. Every container we create to hold the sacred treasure is earthen, finite, limited and flawed—and it is never to be confused with the treasure itself lest we confuse God's power with our own. These containers include everything from the words and propositions that constitute our theologies and creeds, to the forms our worship takes, to the way we organize and govern our church bodies, to our conceptions of ministry. This is even true of the Quaker form of worship, which is silence: it is an earthen vessel. From time to time, Quakers need to be reminded, in the words of one Friend, "We don't worship the silence. We worship in the silence."

All of our propositions and practices are earthen vessels. All of them are made by human beings of common clay to hold whatever we think we've found in our soul-deep quest for the sacred or in its quest for us. If our containers prove too crimped and cramped to hold the treasure well, if they domesticate the sacred and keep us from having a live encounter with it—or if they prove so twisted and deformed that they defile rather than honor the treasure they were intended to hold—then our containers must be smashed and discarded so we can create a larger and more life-giving vessel in which to hold the treasure.

Doing that is called iconoclasm. It is a good thing to do when it needs to be done. Failing to do that is called idolatry, which is always a bad thing. So even in the church, we need to commit conceptual suicide again and again—if we are serious about the vastness of the treasure in comparison to our flawed and finite words.

When people of any religion insist that the treasure cannot be carried except in *their* earthen vessels, they get into serious trouble—with themselves, with others, with the world and, I suspect, with God. Christians should know this: we have done it throughout history. Why do we do it? Because we are afraid. And what we are afraid of more than anything else, I think, is what might happen to us—what demands might be made on our lives—if we set the sacred loose, free it from domestication, and release it back into the wild.

Of course, we can never imprison the sacred. But the illusion that we can dies hard. There's an old Celtic story about a monk who died and was interred in the monastery wall. Three days later, the monks heard noises coming from inside the crypt. When they removed the stone they found their brother alive. He was full of wonderment,

saying, "Oh, brothers, I've been there! I've seen it! And it's nothing at all like the way our theology says it is!" So they put him back in the wall and sealed the crypt again.

The constant challenge of both faith and writing is to hold this great paradox of the treasure and the earthen vessel in a respectful way. The vessels deserve our respect because they enable us to preserve the treasure over time and pass it back and forth among us. But if we become attached to the vessel in ways that obscure the treasure, we must discard the vessel and create one that reveals more than it conceals.

If we fail or refuse to do that, we are failing to respect the treasure, which is not our possession to have and to hold; it is the love and the power that has and holds us. To forget that fact or to defy it is the ultimate disrespect, and it leads not to life but to death, for individuals, for religious communities and for the world.

"Why write," said José Ortega y Gasset, "if this too easy activity of pushing a pen across paper is not given a certain bullfighting risk and we do not approach dangerous, agile and two-horned topics?"

And why believe in God if the God we believe in is so small as to be contained and controlled within our finite words and forms? The aim of our writing about faith, and of our living in faith, is to let God be God: original, wild and free, a creative impulse that drives our living and our writing but can never be contained within the limits of who we are or what we think and say and do.