kroeker & craig

ON BEING A WRITER

12
simple habits
for a writing life
that lasts

masters in fine living series

BROWSE ON AMAZON

ON BEING A WRITER

ann kroeker

&

charity singleton craig

masters in fine living series

T. S. Poetry Press • New York

T. S. Poetry Press
Ossining, New York
Tspoetry.com

This book includes various references from or to the following brands & sources: Brooks is a trademark of Brooks Sports, Inc.; *LABYRINTH* is an annual literary magazine sponsored by the Hutton Honors College of Indiana University; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, Warner Books Edition (1960); Magic Tree House series by Mary Pope Osborne, Random House, LLC (1995-2014); Post-it is a registered trademark of 3M; MacBook® is a trademark of Apple Inc.; *BuzzFeed* is owned by BuzzFeed Inc.; National Public Radio®, NPR®, and NPR program names are service marks of National Public Radio, Inc., its member stations or the Content Providers; Kool-Aid is a trademark of Kraft Foods Group, Inc.; GOODWILL® is a registered trademark of Goodwill Industries International, Inc.; Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) is an American nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C.; iPhone® is a registered trademark of Apple Inc.; Marguerite Henry is the author of *Misty of Chincoteague*, *Justin Morgan Had a Horse* (Aladdin 2006), and *King of the Wind: The Story of the Godolphin Arabian* (Rand Mcnally & Company 1948); NANCY DREW is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.; The Bobbsey Twins, most titles published by Grosset & Dunlap (later books published by Simon and Schuster), and authored by several people under the pen-name Laura Lee Hope; Trixie Belden® is a registered trademark of Random House Publishing; This American Life is a registered trademark of This American Life; *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard, Harper & Row (1974); *The Indianapolis Star* is owned by Gannett Co., Inc.; *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, Bantam Books (1983); *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, Bantam Books (1987); Pepto-Bismol® is a trademark of Procter & Gamble; Microsoft, OneNote, and Excel are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies; EVERNOTE, the Evernote Elephant logo and REMEMBER EVERYTHING are trademarks of Evernote Corporation; Google Drive™ is a trademark of Google Inc.; *Seven Storey* Mountain by Thomas Merton, Harcourt Brace & Co. (1998); *A Girl Named Zippy* by Haven Kimmel, Doubleday (2001); *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, Scribner (2005); *Not So Fast* by Ann Kroeker, David C. Cook (2009); *Louisville Courier-Journal* is owned by Gannett Co., Inc.; Google and the Google Logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc.; Pomodoro Technique® and Pomodoro® are registered trademarks of Francesco Cirillo. The Pomodoro Technique® is run by FC Garage GmbH, Berlin, Germany; Facebook is a registered trademark of Facebook, Inc.; Guitar Hero® is a registered trademark of Activision Publishing, Inc.; HGTV is a trademark of Scripps Networks, LLC.; *Writer's Market 2014* edited by Robert Lee Brewer, Writer's Digest (2013); *The High Calling* is a program of the Foundations for Laity Renewal; *The Saturday Evening Post* is a publication of the nonprofit Saturday Evening Post Society; The Diane Rehm Show is produced at WAMU 88.5 and distributed by National Public Radio, NPR Worldwide, and SIRIUS satellite radio. All WAMU trademarks, service marks, and trade names are proprietary; PLAY-DOH is a registered trademark of Hasbro; *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George, Dutton (1959); SCRABBLE® is a registered trademark in the U.S.A and Canada by Hasbro Inc., and throughout the rest of the world by J.W. Spear & Sons Limited of Maidenhead, Berkshire, England, a subsidiary of Mattel Inc. Mattel and Spear are not affiliated with Hasbro; Barnes & Noble is a registered trademark of Barnes & Noble Booksellers, Inc.; Starbucks and the Starbucks logo are registered trademarks of Starbucks; Airstream is a trademark of Airstream, a subsidiary of Thor Industries, Inc.; Oprah is a registered trademark of Harpo, Inc.; Twitter is a registered trademark of Twitter, Inc.; Pinterest is a registered trademark of Pinterest Inc.; *Real Simple*, Time Inc.; *The New York Times* is owned by The New York Times Company; Netflix is a registered trademark of Netflix, Inc.; Elk Pattern for Origami references Irish Elk, Opus 537, folded and composed by Robert J. Lang Origami (2008); Dodge is a registered trademark of Chrysler Group, LLC; Kool is a support brand of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

Cover image by Claire Burge claireburge.com

ISBN 978-0-9898542-4-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:
Craig, Charity Singleton and Kroeker, Ann
[Nonfiction.]
On Being a Writer/Charity Singleton Craig & Ann Kroeker
ISBN 978-0-9898542-4-5
Library of Congress Control Number: 2014952756

To Daniel, Nathalie, Sophie, Isabelle, and Philippe,
who bring laughter and meaning to my life and writing.

Ann

To Jacob, Caleb, and Nicholas,
who put the "life" in my writing life day after day,
and Steven, who believes in me.

Charity

Table of Contents

Introduction

Is your writing life all it can be? Have you wondered when you'll discover the secrets to find inspiration, improve your skills, get published where you wish, and be part of a real writing community?

Writers can feel both excited and confused about where to start, what to do, how to keep writing. Deep inside, a story itches to be told through personal narrative or fiction, ideas beg to be explored in essays, images ask to be played with, and conflicts yearn to be expressed. We want to do the work—to write—and one day find our words inked on a page or shared at a space online where we know others visit and read. In her book *The Forest for the Trees*, Betsy Lerner quotes John Updike as he recalls his childhood wish to write, to enter "some transfigured mode of being, called a 'writer's life.'"

How do we enter in? How do we experience that transfigured mode? How do we live a "writer's life"?

Because we come at this business from several angles—author, editor, writing coach—people often ask us about that. They want to hear about our writing lives and get a vision for their own. *How did you find your publishers? Should I self-publish? How do I write a query and proposal? What about agents—how do you get one?* And, *I want to be a writer. How do I get started?*

Great questions. People dream of writing and wonder how to launch. Some are drafting manuscripts but don't know how the publishing world works. Others have finished a project and want to take the next step but the process seems confusing. Some writers reach a plateau—they may have published an essay in a journal, or found a publishing home for a book, arrived at

some level of online success—and still, they have questions about sustaining themselves over the long haul and creating a writing life that will last.

With this book, we offer a mini-conference to encourage and point the way to a long and productive writing life, by modeling that life and, chapter by chapter, suggesting habits to develop. As authors and editors, we'll be by your side on every page, like your very own writing coaches.

Whether you're developing a corporate, literary, or web-based (blogging and microblogging) body of work, we think you'll benefit from thinking broadly about your writing life and how to organize the rest of your life around your writing goals in a sustainable way. You want the writing life to last your whole life, right? Let's think that through. Together.

Why Another Writing Book?

A sustainable writing life is built from more than the construction of sentences and paragraphs; it emerges from the slow accumulation of days and years lived intentionally through the habits of the writer. This book enumerates, elaborates, and encourages writers regarding key habits. It aims to inspire you toward a writing life that's about more than publishing a book or accumulating by-lines. Though we hope this book will help you find your way toward productivity and publication, we also hope these words help you understand yourself better, learn to set limits, and find rest.

The content of this book was originally developed in a workshop that Ann and Charity led for a group of 12 writers at various stages in their writing lives, all trying to make progress.

An unexpected thing happened while we were leading that workshop. We, too, made progress in our writing lives. Ann transitioned from writing and editing to also coaching others. Charity planned, prepared, and quit her day job and now works as a full-time freelance writer and editor.

We aren't promising you'll make the same moves as a result of buying this book. What we hope is that you'll make the progress you want by reading this book, doing the exercises, and thinking deeply about the writing life you already have.

Who Are We?

Ann Kroeker graduated from Indiana University as an English Major with a creative writing emphasis. She launched her freelance writing career as a young adult and has been working for over two decades as a writer, editor, and most recently as a writing coach. Author of two books and editor for *Tweetspeak Poetry* and *The High Calling*, Ann is a sought-after resource for editorial guidance. She continues to explore new writing opportunities, speak in a range of venues, maintain connections in the publishing world, and work with writers to help them take the next step in their writing careers.

Charity Singleton Craig graduated from Taylor University as a Mass Communications Major with an emphasis in print media. After a brief stint in newspaper journalism, Charity worked in several other industries, all while attempting to live the writing life. She is a freelance writer and editor, serving as a content and copy editor for *The High Calling,* a contributing writer for *Tweetspeak Poetry*, and a staff writer for *The Curator*. She also serves the communication needs of various corporate clients.

How to Use This Book

The book is divided into twelve chapters, each representing habits of the writing life. You might be tempted to think the chapters represent a linear progression toward a successful writing career, and for some people, that may be true. Still, if the writing life were a cake, every slice you'd cut would contain a bit of all twelve layers.

As you read, you'll notice a few components to every chapter. First, the Stories. In the beginning of each chapter, Ann and Charity explore the theme through their own writing lives. We've indicated who is writing within the first or second paragraph in parentheses. When the first narrator is finished, you'll see a divider, then the second narrator will begin. We hope our stories will model the nuances each person brings to the writing life.

After the stories, you'll find an exploration section. Here we suggest opportunities to contemplate, write about, and develop the various habits of the writing life.

Live: Each chapter's exploration begins with *living*—an activity to get you moving and interacting with your writing life. We hope this reinforces the idea that the writing life is wholistic and organic, not compartmentalized, like a job or a hobby.

Respond: A journal prompt gets you writing about what you're thinking and experiencing through the chapter. By responding in a journal first, you can work out your thoughts in a private space that won't be edited or shared.

Write: A writing prompt is offered to help you develop a project to consider sharing on a blog or submitting for publication. If you're reading this book in a group, the prompt might be something you share with other members. For short stories or es-

says you're writing on your own or planning to submit for publication, aim for a word count of 1,000 words or more. If you're participating in a group and will be reading each other's work, 500-word essays or short stories would be a reasonable goal. Sometimes, we suggest writing a poem. In that case, the word count could be considerably shorter.

Bonus: For writers at every stage of the writing life, we offer another living or writing activity to help you dig deeper into a chapter or topic that really captured your imagination.

Discuss: Finally, in each chapter we provide a few questions to encourage self-reflection or group discussion. These are also useful as additional journaling or writing prompts.

A few ways you might consider engaging with this book:

- Read it with your writing group
- Read a chapter a week, committing to do all of the explorations as you go
- Read straight through and do all the explorations later
- Invite a friend to join you
- Create an online writing group, read the book together, and post writing explorations as a blog link up
- Use it as your personal writing coach, encouraging you to make progress in tangible, practical ways

1

Identify

I am a writer.

If you wish to be a writer, write.

—Epictetus

Stories

Most mornings, I (Ann) pull on shorts and a tank top, lace up my Brooks® trainers, and head out the door. I don't follow a plan to improve my pace or hit particular goals; I'm just trying to stay fit and healthy. Am I a jogger, or can I call myself a runner?

In the past, I've signed up for races and committed to speed work, hills, and tempo runs to work toward a personal best. When I took the activity more seriously, did that make me a runner? Even when training, I was slow—so slow that during a half marathon, I was passed by a much older woman who was power walking. Can a runner call herself a runner if she's passed by a walker?

My husband, who straps on an athletic heart monitor to pace the intensity of his workouts and follows a disciplined training plan, thinks of himself as a runner. Still, people debate definitions. Some would argue that he is a jogger because his pace is

too slow, while others would say he's a runner as long as he identifies as one.

What criteria apply here? Is it about speed? Giftedness? Goals? What makes a runner a runner?

I'd like to know the same about writing. What makes a writer a writer? Is it about giftedness? Goals? Is it about output or a byline? If measured by output, does daily blogging count? Are you considered a writer only if you are published, even if you've turned out dozens of unpublished poems and essays? To be an official writer, does someone have to pay you for your work?

I came across a description of "runner" on a discussion board that referred to characteristics of intent and effort. A runner demonstrates intent by entering a race and seeking to finish it strong and fast. To do so, that runner will exert effort by logging many miles in preparation, strengthening his muscles, stretching, eating well, getting appropriate rest. Prioritizing these activities and committing to making them happen separates the recreational or fitness jogger from the serious runner. I read that to my husband, and we agreed that while I'm in it for fitness, he models intent and effort with his running every day. Given that, I'm a jogger and my husband is a runner.

Applying similar criteria to the writing life, however, I model intent and effort every day. I launch projects with intentions that require effort to complete. I plan, research, write, and edit, always seeking to improve. I prioritize these activities and commit to making them happen. Whether or not I earn a byline or paycheck, I continually demonstrate the intent and effort of a writer.

Some people, however—despite their intent and effort—still struggle to identify as a writer. Maybe they believe it takes more. Or maybe they fear friends will think it's frivolous and family will

disapprove. Maybe they're missing that moment or event they can point to that says, "That's when I knew I was a writer."

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott points to that writing-conscious moment in her life. She describes how her second-grade teacher singled out Anne's poem about John Glenn and read it aloud to the class:

> It was a great moment; the other children looked at me as though I had learned to drive. It turned out that the teacher had submitted the poem to a California state schools competition, and it had won some sort of award. It appeared in a mimeographed collection. I understood immediately the thrill of seeing oneself in print. It provides some sort of primal verification: you are in print; therefore you exist.

While I have demonstrated intent and effort for decades, I do find myself pointing to a moment like that, in college.

In my creative writing course, I was churning out poems based on childhood memories, one after another. One afternoon, the teacher dismissed the class but asked me to wait. After the other students grabbed their backpacks and cleared the room, she suggested I submit some of my work to *Labyrinth*, our university's undergraduate literary journal. A literary journal sounded too fancy for me. I wrote poems about window wells, communion, and my grandmother's calico cat. Still, I listened as she told me where to buy a copy. I thanked her, grabbed my backpack, left the room, and headed straight to the Student Union feeling flushed, nerves prickling both arms. I found the current edition

of *Labyrinth* sitting on a small table in the bookstore. I felt the glossy cover and flipped through its pages, scanning some poems. I hesitated. *Labyrinth* seemed reserved for smarter, more academic people.

Couldn't hurt to buy it, though. I plopped down my money at the counter and carried the journal back to my room. I found instructions for submission printed on one of the inside pages, and with a wild fear surging all the way to my fingertips, I retyped my favorite poems, printed them off, and tucked them in an envelope. My earthy work in a literary journal? Crazy. And yet, I found the *Labyrinth* office and dropped off the envelope in a metal in-box marked "Submissions."

The journal contacted me and asked to publish four poems. *Four.* A hush of awe, even shock, stunned me silent. Then I turned giddy. The publisher asked for a bio, so I looked at examples from that last edition. The poets talked about why they write. Without over-thinking it, I scribbled out, "I write, because no one listens to me."

Within a few weeks, the next edition of *Labyrinth* published. When they sent me a package of complimentary copies, I pulled one out and ran my fingers over its slick cover. I flipped through and found my poems about window wells, communion, and my grandmother's calico cat.

I felt it inside: *I am a writer.*

If you demonstrate the intent and effort of a writer day after day yet hesitate to refer to yourself as such, take time to reflect on your journey. You might realize you've crossed a threshold, or identified a moment, or experienced an event that affirms you in this role. Whether it was the moment you plopped down money to subscribe to a literary journal, emailed a query to an

agent, or received that first acceptance letter, there comes a time when you feel like a writer.

Maybe that moment is now. You bought a book called *On Being a Writer* because you're ready. You've invested in your writing life, showing intent. I'm guessing you've already demonstrated effort. If you haven't felt it or said it, it's time. Say it: "I am a writer."

~

"You're a writer?" my (Charity's) stepson asked me before I married his dad. He was 11 then, and had never met a writer. He was a bit awestruck. Then, the question: "So what do you write?" In that moment, I fell abruptly off the pedestal he'd briefly set me on, knowing that unless I was someone he had heard of or read, like Mary Pope Osborne writing volume after volume of the *Magic Tree House* series, *writer* wouldn't hold the same allure.

I didn't mind. I've been a writer for a long time, and I'm comfortable with having to qualify what I mean.

"Have you written a book?" some people ask—not necessarily because they think all writers write books, but because they would like to know someone who has written a book. I usually tell them "yes." Occasionally, I also confess that the two books I've written have never been published. That's changed with the release of this one.

I honestly don't remember when I started calling myself a writer. I know it was after I had already been a staff writer for a newspaper, after I had written dozens of newsletter articles for various organizations, after I had submitted queries to a dozen or

more magazines and been rejected, after I had starting writing a book, after I quit my job to try to write full-time, after I had submitted a successful query to a magazine I loved, and after I was published several times. Needless to say, I could have started calling myself a writer much sooner.

The most difficult part of taking on the identity of writer came during a season when the words dried up and my confidence shriveled.

It started with a rejection, a big rejection for a book I thought was going to be published. In my tailspin, I didn't write anything but a blog post or two for a whole summer. An article I was supposed to be writing at the time, for which I had a lovely outline and a killer thesis, remains largely unwritten to this day.

In the midst of all that non-writing, something else happened. I stopped telling people I was a writer. I began to believe I didn't have what it takes. Not only did I lack the talent needed to be published—the languishing book proposal made that clear—I also seemed to be missing the heart of a long-term writer.

What is required to call oneself a writer? Is it enough simply to put down words? Does a publishing credit or two, or a book in print allow us to claim this title? What of those writers who composed a bestseller and then didn't write again? Could Harper Lee, who wrote the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* but little else, be called a writer?

Questions fly when we wonder what to call ourselves. After the questions and doubts come, hopefully so do the words. That's what happened when I stopped calling myself a writer. Eventually I started writing again: a blog post every few weeks, then a magazine submission. Other writers I knew encouraged me, link-

ing to my blog and asking me to join collaborative projects. About two years later, I found myself in a group of new acquaintances, admiring a piece of artwork one of them created. My comments on the painting caused one man to wonder about my artistic abilities.

"Are you an artist?" he asked, innocently.

"Oh no, no," I said, embarrassed. "I'm not an artist. I just like to paint and draw now and then. But," I added as an afterthought, "I am a writer." He nodded politely. He, of course, asked me what I write. I answered in the usual way: blog posts, online articles, and always a book in progress.

The significance of the moment passed right over him, but to me it was a bellwether.

I lived a writing life long before I ever called myself a writer. But in the last few years, as I have firmly grasped my identity, I have found my life taking the shape of a writer. It's different than I imagined when I was 14, then 22, then 32, dreaming of a life with words.

It's my writing life, and I wouldn't trade it.

Exploration

Live

Says Betsy Lerner:

> To be a writer, to come out of the closet, is to announce that you are different in some way. Until a writer is established and thus somewhat protected by the veneer of success that publication brings, his life and his struggle to emerge

> can be fraught with humiliation….Calling attention to yourself, especially within a family dynamic, may involve more scrutiny than a writer can bear. Is there anything worse than being introduced, at a family wedding, for instance, as "our daughter, she's trying to be a writer." Or having some drunken uncle slap you on the back and ask with a loud laugh how the book's coming along?

Fear of this kind of humiliation can keep us from from taking on the writer's identity. Today's *Live* exploration calls you to try on the identity in a low-risk way.

• If this identity as writer feels new...

Tell someone supportive—someone you trust—that you're a writer. Be prepared to explain your new identity.

Then tell someone whose response you're nervous about. Maybe this is your boss, parent, or a friend who is also a writer, and you don't know how to initiate the conversation. If this person is local, meet him for lunch and tell him your hobby has grown and you're doing more with your words than musing in journals. "I want to share this news with you because of how important you've been to me, investing in my creative life." Or share something you've written and explain that you've been a writer secretly for a long time. Whoever it is, you can say, "Thank you for being part of my life and contributing to this writing identity." Stay strong, in case they criticize. Just you wait. Soon enough, these people will start introducing you as their writer-friend.

• If you already identify as a writer...

Think of someone you could affirm as a writer. Contact this person and refer to something he or she has written—an email, blog post, or poem—complimenting the writer's ability and identity.

Respond

Depending on the *Live* assignment you completed, use the appropriate response below to write a journal entry.

Prompt 1: When I told _____ I was a writer . . .
Prompt 2: When I told _____ he/she excelled at _____, he/she . . .

Write

Write about your identity as a writer in personal essay format. Address questions such as: When did you start calling yourself a writer? If you don't yet, what keeps you from it?

Bonus

In your journal, respond to this question: How does rehearsing your story (see: *Write*) help you understand yourself as a writer? Do you feel more like a writer? Or less?

Also, begin writing childhood memories all this week. Start with your earliest memories and capture scenes in descriptive detail that taps all the senses. When you've exhausted the preschool years, move on to the elementary grades.

Discuss

For self-reflection or group discussion.

1. What comes to mind when you think *writer*?

2. When did you first call yourself a writer? If you haven't yet identified as a writer, why not?

3. What other identities have you embodied? Do those identities conflict with the writing life?

4. To what extent do others view you as a writer? How supportive are they of your writing identity? How does outside support—or lack of it—affect your writing identity?

5. Does the kind of writing you produce affect your ability to identify as a writer? Do you feel you need to transition to a more substantial project or different subject matter?

6. Why do you write? What motivates you? How does that influence your identity as a writer?

7. Do you distinguish a difference between an author and a writer? If so, explain the difference and how your identity is affected by those differences.

2

Arrange

I organize my life—
my time, my space, my priorities—so I can write.

The secret of all victory
lies in the organization of the non-obvious.

—Marcus Aurelius

Stories

Crumbling foundations are all that remain of the ancient Puebloan village in Petrified Forest National Park, but just a few steps away, myriad whimsical images cover huge rocks as high as a person can reach. As I (Ann) attach my long lens to get close-ups of these petroglyphs etched into stone, a man standing nearby announces to anyone within earshot, "Someone sure had a lot of time on his hands!" He repeats it, because no one responds. "Someone sure had a lot of time on his hands!"

I know he's trying to be funny, but I ignore him, trying to capture as many digital images of these figures and shapes as possible. Then, as I shift position to focus on a grouping that includes footprints and spirals, I wonder if the man is right: maybe the artist was someone with lots of time on his or her

hands, free to make any design that struck a fancy. Or maybe, someone had to *make* time after returning from a hunting or fishing expedition.

We don't know. All we can see is that someone from the village prioritized the making of art. The buildings—necessary for shelter at the time—have crumbled; the art remains.

To make *my* art—writing—I have spent most of my life working around day-to-day family obligations, writing in available slivers of time or slipping away for a while to enjoy an uninterrupted space for creativity. I like to imagine someone from this ancient village doing the same, slipping away after the morning meal or the afternoon washing to put the finishing touches on the outline of a bird or the last swirls of a spiral design. If those artists could pull it off in these dry, barren conditions a thousand years ago, surely I can finish my writing projects in my comfortable, 21st century American abode. Inspired, I resolve to continue arranging my life to accommodate my art.

In the former dining room, I sit at a rolltop desk next to a tall bookshelf. This area dedicated to my work represents and celebrates my priority. This writing life is not an afterthought; it is who I am and what I do. As a result, I occupy a prominent room on our main floor.

Because I work from home, I have to navigate around the family, powering up the computer to write during pockets of time that open up in my day. I remember envying author rituals Barbara Kingsolver describes in *High Tide in Tucson*, like William Gass devoting a couple of hours each morning to photographing his city, and Diane Ackerman arranging flowers, listening to music, and then speed walking for an hour—all preparation for writing. These rituals created space and rhythm.

Kingsolver jokes that her muse "wears a baseball cap, backward. The minute my daughter is on the school bus, he saunters up behind me with a bat slung over his shoulder and says oh so directly, 'Okay, author lady, you've got six hours till that bus rolls back up the drive. You can sit down and write, now, or you can think about looking for a day job.'"

I'm like that, too; I can't wait for inspiration to hit. When I have a few minutes, I have to tap out words. For years, when my kids were young, I felt like Lucille Clifton. When asked "Why are your poems always short?" Kingsolver says that Ms. Clifton replied, "I have six children, and a memory that can hold about twenty lines until the end of the day."

I can't even hold that many lines all day, so I use technology—simple as a pen or high-tech as a voice note—to capture the gist of an idea when continuous writing is not possible. Facing big deadlines, however, I do carve out blocks of time to work, away from the hubbub (or I send the hubbub away). In fact, when working on books, I've been known to schedule a weekend hideout, ensuring uninterrupted time to churn out as many chapter drafts as possible.

Through it all, I try to maintain physical health, because I've learned from personal experience and from research that wise dietary choices, hydration, adequate rest, and especially exercise not only counterbalance the hours I sit in a chair to write, but also ignite creativity. John Medina reports that exercise energizes us:

> From an evolutionary perspective, our brains developed while working out, walking as many as 12 miles a day. The brain still craves that ex-

> perience, especially in sedentary populations like our own. That's why exercise boosts brain power . . . in such populations. Exercisers outperform couch potatoes in long-term memory, reasoning, attention, and problem-solving tasks.

Information like that inspires me to arrange my life to include exercise like jogging and—try not to laugh, because I swear it loosens my back after long hours in the chair—hula hooping. Physical activity boosts my brain power and keeps me fit to pursue the writing life now and for the years ahead.

Healthy choices like exercise and rest aren't the only things that can increase my creative and cognitive potential. When my schedule is more leisurely, I've experimented with process, space, and time of day for optimal writing output. I drink coffee, I try tea. I read somewhere that chewing helps concentration, so I pop a stick of gum in my mouth. I've tacked up a whiteboard to track to-do lists and later tried sticking Post-it® notes all over my desk. I've used outlines for some projects and then tried freewriting my first draft for others.

Some people insist on writing longhand—I find it effective for poetry but not for nonfiction. Others enjoy the nostalgia and mechanical response of typewriters. In fact, actor—and writer—Tom Hanks claims to be a typewriter man. With apologies to Tom, I prefer the computer. I don't care if my MacBook® keys sound wimpy as I type—on a keyboard, my fingers can keep up with the ideas spilling out of my brain. On a typewriter, they cannot.

William Zinsser observes we all work differently. From his classic book *On Writing Well*:

> [T]here isn't any "right" way to do such intensely personal work. There are all kinds of writers and all kinds of methods and any method that helps people to say what they want to say is the right method for them.
>
> Some people write by day, others by night. Some people need silence, others turn on the radio. Some write by hand, some by typewriter or word processor, some by talking into a tape recorder. Some people write their first draft in one long burst and then revise; others can't write the second paragraph until they have fiddled endlessly with the first.

Reading Zinsser makes me feel better about rearranging for my ideal conditions. Regardless of the specifics on any given day, arrangements continually evolve to prioritize writing, which pulls me to the computer again and again to say what I need to say.

~

Part of the process of calling myself (Charity) a writer was actually making time to write. In nearly every book I've read about writing, the author would always claim the only way to get better and to create a body of work was to write every day.

But I was single and worked full-time and had to care for the apartment on my own. Friends and family needed my attention, and I happily gave it to them. I also enjoyed going to movies and reading books and volunteering in the community. In other words, I had a lot of things to do every day besides write.

I wanted to be a writer, though, and I wanted to build a body of work. So over the years, I have made lots of choices that reflect writing as a priority. I have done what I could to make my full-time work correspond with it. Early on, I longed for a job that would provide opportunities to practice my craft. For a year and a half after college, I wrote every day as a newspaper reporter. It didn't take long for me to tire of the news cycle and the veil of objectivity that required me to write the news and only the news, leaving my opinions out of it. I enjoyed working on feature stories, but I formulated too many obituaries and covered too many county commissioner meetings in those 18 months to see a long-term career emerging.

After that, I envisioned a career that would provide something important to write about. I enrolled in graduate school, toying with the idea of becoming a university professor. I worked at a church overseeing children's and women's ministries. I spent two years employed at a small urban college as a residence hall director. These jobs offered many rewards; some of the relationships I built there continue. My writing, however, suffered.

Eventually I learned the full-time work that best complemented my writing didn't involve writing or interacting with a lot of people at all. Whatever part of me I draw on to motivate and inspire me could not be busy eight hours a day and then be expected to produce my own writing in the mornings or evenings as well. I just didn't have that kind of creative energy.

When I took a job working with databases, running queries and creating spreadsheets and macros that aggregated revenues, I realized these exercises in math and logic required a creativity of their own but didn't draw from the same spring as my writing. After a full day of work, I still had something to give.

I've also experimented with my work schedule. My employers have been flexible, allowing me to come in early and leave early so I could write in the afternoons—or come in late and leave late so that I could write in the mornings. When I moved an hour away from the office, I began working part-time from home three days a week, freeing me up for freelance writing and editing. Finally, after a lot of planning and saving, I am self-employed, spending all my work days at home.

Work life aside, there are other ways I have attempted to arrange my life so I can write. I regularly decline commitments to friends, community organizations, family, and others—even commitments I want to make—in favor of more time to write, especially in the face of deadlines.

Sometimes, I wonder whether I lead an indulgent life, neglecting other good work or allowing relationships to suffer for my art. It's possible, but on the flipside there are times when the writing must wait because I choose to spend the evening with my husband, or I must go visit my uncle in the hospital, or I have to do the grocery shopping so we can eat breakfast the next day.

How to find balance?

In his essay "The Specialization of Poetry," Wendell Berry talks about this pull we feel between our daily lives and the work we do, especially as artists.

> The conflicts of life and work, like those of rest and work, would ideally be resolved in balance: enough of each. In practice, however, they probably can be resolved (if that is the word) only in tension, in a principled unwillingness to let go of either, or to sacrifice either to the

> other. But it is a necessary tension, the grief in it both inescapable and necessary. . . . The real values of art and life are perhaps best defined and felt in the tension between them.

As a full-time writer, I wrestled this weekend with the tension of giving myself fully to the work or fully to my life. Yesterday, instead of working on this manuscript, I took the day off to enjoy dinner and bowling with my husband and sons. Today, however, I am working, and they are all huddled around the television for a movie without me. Yesterday, I felt the tug of work, today, the tug of family. As the years come and go, I continue to make adjustments to schedules, adding or subtracting commitments, letting the writing lead me in how much time I should spend. But always, always, I am attempting to arrange my life in such a way that this writing life is more than just a dream.

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives," Annie Dillard says in *The Writing Life*. "What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time."

I arrange my life so I can write.

Exploration

Live

Do you have a writing space? Do you have a set time, set hours? Does your space, time and hours match your inner rhythm and personality? Your answers to these questions reflect the degree to

which you have prioritized your writing life and honored how you work best.

Evaluate your writing space. What's working, what's not? As much as possible, remove the things that steal your energy, distract, or frustrate you (an outdated photograph, a pile of unsorted papers, the mass of cords jumbled at your feet, the stack of unpaid bills staring you in the face). Then, rearrange what remains to improve productivity and inspiration. Finally, decide if you need to add something—anything from a bookshelf to an ergonomically designed desk chair (you will, after all, spend hours in it); from a piece of art or a plant to a new printer—and incorporate it into your space. Write in your new space this week and make adjustments as needed.

Now consider your schedule. What other commitments keep you from writing? What simple adjustments could free up at least 30 minutes to write each day? Maybe you could delegate a household chore to someone else, or skip a TV show? Could you reduce social media time or cancel one outing? Maybe you could set your alarm clock to wake up 30 minutes early or stay up a little later, adding 15-30 minutes to the phase when your body rhythm is peaking?

How flexible is your lifestyle? What time of day best complements your personality and energy levels? Try to accommodate activities so that writing occurs at a peak time for maximum productivity.

Schedule "Writing" on your calendar. Commit to it. Tell others about it. When the schedule says to write, write. Stick with your new habit for one month and see how it goes. Some days will go better than others. When you wake up later than intended or spend your time clicking through *Buzzfeed* slideshows, try again

the next day, and the next, until writing in that 30-minute window becomes a habit. If you find after several weeks it really isn't working, experiment to find a time that will work better for you. This is your writing life; you'll need to find what fits you.

Respond

As you consider how to rearrange your space (see *Live*), freewrite for ten minutes responding to this prompt: "My perfect writing day would . . ." Include as much rich sensory detail and specificity as possible. Think more broadly than your physical space to include how you would arrange your daytime hours, your activities, your weekends.

After you rearrange, live with, and work in the new surroundings for a day or two, write about it in your journal using the prompt: "My new writing space . . ."

Write

Write a short piece about jealousy regarding other writers—how you envy their eclectic, organized writing spaces that look far more inspiring than yours, perhaps, or maybe their part-time job that gives them full afternoons to devote to writing. If a short essay doesn't express the emotions or intensity of what you need to say, try writing a poem.

Jealousy is a powerful emotion to stir up in any stage of the writing life; yet, expressing these thoughts can help identify your deepest desires about the writing life and how you wish you were living it. Use the jealousy as a teacher and a source of beginning to change, rather than letting it trap you in guilty feelings you may have been taught to associate with the experience of jealousy.

Bonus

What long-term commitment can you make to cement this writing-life arrangement? Have you been considering writing full-time? Have you thought of a plan to move forward? Some may need to hire a babysitter once a week; others may need to sell their house and move into an apartment to simplify life. Decide what makes sense for you and write those ideas down. Create a plan that moves you closer to that vision. Whether you pursue that plan all at once or in stages, ensure you make progress this week.

Discuss

For self-reflection or group discussion.

1. To what extent have you arranged your space and time to honor your writing?

2. How does your schedule support or challenge your writing life?

3. What are your challenges and successes in the area of time management? How about project and task management?

4. What tangible arrangements can you (and your family or roommates, if applicable) make to allow you to pursue the writing life more easily and productively?

5. Do you think it's necessary to write every day? Why or why not?

6. If you do write daily, what do you feel it accomplishes in your writing life: improvement of the craft? Adding to your body of work? Professional discipline?

3

Surround

I surround myself with people,
activities, and books that will
influence my writing.

If you have other things in your life—
family, friends, good productive day work—
these can interact with your writing
and the sum will be all the richer.

—David Brin

Stories

It was a Wednesday evening and my new husband and I (Charity) were home by ourselves. My slow adaptation to married life and motherhood now that I was a stepmom to 10-, 12-, and 14-year-old boys frustrated me. I was 42, and married for the first time.

"Would you be interested, or at least willing, to go to an exhibit at the art museum Saturday?" I asked my husband. Part of my difficulty in adjusting to marriage was the realization that I had set aside everything I liked to do to fit into my new role. I was living someone else's life, one that wasn't satisfying to

me personally, and it was choking out my writing life. All I was writing about was motherhood and marriage during those first few months. Where had the rest of my life gone?

"Sure," he said, willing, even eager. He mentioned, as well, an art fair in the same city going on that Saturday. Almost a year earlier, he had taken me to an art exhibit on our second date. He remembers, maybe better than I do, who I was—and still am.

On Saturday, we drove to the art museum and not only took in the Ai Weiwei exhibit but also became members of the museum, a commitment from both of us that we would surround ourselves with what inspires me to write. It worked. Within a couple of weeks, I wrote on my blog about that conversation we had in the kitchen, submitted a review of the exhibit to *Tweetspeak Poetry,* and planned two more articles based on the museum membership.

Writing requires a flow both inward and outward of ideas, thoughts, and stories. Each time I write an essay or an article, I gather together everything I know, think, and experience about the topic, sorting and synthesizing, squeezing together bits of inspiration and searching for just the right combination of words. Sometimes, when I'm done writing a piece, I discover a quote or a story that didn't quite fit. Perhaps it is enough material for one more piece.

Eventually, I'll have to write about something else, and if I'm not surrounding myself with people and books and experiences that inspire and connect with me, I may be left wondering what to write about. If I'm surrounding myself with people, books, and experiences that drain me or leave me lifeless, I will have only that to write about. Even worse, if the bits and pieces of my daily life leave me uninspired, I will have nothing left to write.

In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard talks about the importance of surrounding ourselves with whatever inspires us. The writer, she says, "is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know." If we write about and become what we surround ourselves with, it would make sense to actively choose in particular directions.

In her essay "The Writing Life," author Geraldine Brooks talks about the experience of writing her first novel. She had intended to write about her homeland of Australia, but instead she found the stories of England she had read and dreamed about her whole life were waiting for her pen.

> It was to have been set in Tasmania, amid the wild temperate rain forests of Australia's southernmost state. Instead, I found myself writing about Derbyshire. The fictional voices in my head were English voices, and they kept shouting the Australians down. There was a story that had intrigued me for years, of a village that voluntarily quarantined itself to stop the spread of bubonic plague. It was this tale, rather than the Australian one, that most wanted to be told.

Brooks, like Dillard, knows that what she surrounds herself with is what she writes. That's why she says if she is ever going to write about Australia, even though it's her homeland, she will need to study. "I will have to learn it, like a foreigner, like a migrant, leaf by leaf, from seed to blossom to bough."

In *The New York Times Opinionator* blog post "Should We Write What We Know?" Ben Yagoda believes this is the beautiful freedom of the "write what you know" motto. It's true, he says, that "writers who are intimately familiar with their subject produce more knowing, more confident and, as a result, stronger results. . . . but that command is not perfect, implying, as it does, that one's written output should be limited to one's passions."

"Fortunately, this conundrum has an escape clause," Yagoda continues. "You can actually acquire knowledge. In journalism this is called 'reporting,' and in nonfiction, 'research.' I don't write fiction, but I'd think that a rigorous combination of observation, reflection and directed imagination would have a similar result."

I have been married about two years now. I watch far more sports and reality television than I ever did, but I also have begun reading more again and going to art exhibits and listening to National Public Radio in the mornings when I work. I've filled my office with things that inspire me: newspaper articles, like the one I clipped about a local sports hero; a Matisse print from the art museum gift shop; and books about birds, trees, and poetry that help me make sense of the world. I have conversations with friends about the economy and literature. Then when I go running—I'm doing that more now, too—I let my brain have time to sort it all out.

These are the things I want to write about, so I surround myself with them.

~

My (Ann's) parents surrounded me with books. Almost every room in the house was lined with shelves weighed down with classics and review copies of books they received at *The Indianapolis Star*, where they both worked as editors. They didn't let me read the hardbound Heritage Editions of the classics that each slid into their own matching cardboard sleeves—Dad, especially, was afraid I'd crack the spine or spill Kool-Aid® on the pages. He was probably right to be concerned. I was allowed to read all the rest, and they bought me children's books I devoured, like Dr. Seuss and the Marguerite Henry horse books. Mom let me read her entire collection of Trixie Belden, The Bobbsey Twins, and her personal copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. Books became friends.

But I wanted to read even more widely, following whims and figuring things out. I craved books on every topic that interested me. With permission to open them wide and read, while slurping lemonade, I needed a library.

Mom regularly drove me to town and deposited me in that dreamy place where I could search the stacks for anything that intrigued. The library gave me the freedom to check out books on any topic, and no one seemed to mind if I opened the spine a little too wide. I began to learn, laugh, and connect with everyone from Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys to *Little Women*'s Jo. From piles of nonfiction books I learned about writing, painting, calligraphy, photography, fitness, terrariums, the care and keeping of crickets, and how to bake homemade bread. Books became more than friends. They became mentors.

When we were first married, my husband set up shelves and I filled them with books collected from Goodwill and Friends of the Library sales. I amassed memoirs, novels, and classics,

especially titles I remembered from the Heritage Editions, so I could fill in those gaps and read what I'd missed along the way. When we had kids, I picked up nonfiction titles on parenting and education, creativity, fitness, and gardening, trying to parent well while keeping my "self" alive in the early days of motherhood.

As I began to build a more intentional writing life, I filled the library of my mind with quality prose and poetry. Often I immersed myself in an author's rhythm, and my own work would include hints of her tone and cadence. Even her content might influence mine. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* offered a literary-rich contemplative model; Madeleine L'Engle's nonfiction demonstrated an intelligent, creative, curious approach to life; Anne Lamott freed me to write honestly; Lauren Winner and Haven Kimmel introduced me to the power of memoir.

Stephen King says, "Reading is the creative center of a writer's life." I believe it. I carry these words, these stories, these ideas and styles in me, and they contribute to an ongoing, internal conversation that inspires and influences my writing life.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy many rich friendships with real-life people who engage me creatively. But a writer needs to surround herself with input and ideas that feed and energize her work, and while friends can often supply that, they shouldn't be expected to fill that role entirely.

This week I pulled off the shelf *Essays of E. B. White*. His writing delights, with stories of pigs, a chimney fire, and Christmas in Florida. When our family was reorganizing the children's bedrooms over the weekend, I found myself reading aloud to my husband White's essay on decluttering his home and how hard he found it to rid himself of trophies and a chip of wood gnawed by a beaver. "This!" I exclaimed. "This is exactly what it's like!"

And this, I thought, *is how I'd like to write.*

I'll finish *Essays of E.B. White* soon, but I want to re-read it to figure out what made each essay work so well. While clearing shelves in the basement, I turned up some art books I plan to leaf through with my son. Perhaps I'll write about that on my blog. Later today I'll ride my bike down the shaded rails-to-trails path that leads over a bridge and then under an overpass, and if I turn left at the ice cream shop, and pass the tea store and then the bank, I'll end up at the library, where, somewhere on the shelves, I expect to collect more books, more ideas, more mentors. I can never have enough.

Exploration

Live

If you write about what you surround yourself with, you can evaluate your life and writing in two ways. First, you could consider what you are writing about and how that connects with the world you inhabit. Second, you could look at the books, people, and places in your life, and how those things are influencing your writing. Are you writing about the things you want to write about?

Evaluate your world: what one thing can you change this week—the things you read, the places you go, the hobbies you enjoy, the conversations you engage in, etc.—that will connect with what you currently are writing or hope to write about? Make that change. For instance, if you are a nurse who spends your days or nights in the hospital but what you really want to write about is antique furniture, are you spending time in antique

stores, do you visit auctions or museums, do you subscribe to *Treasures Magazine*? If not, start by making one change.

Respond

Spend ten minutes journaling about the change you made or are planning to make in your life and how you expect it to affect your writing.

Write

According to Annie Dillard, Ernest Hemingway modeled his work after the novels of Knut Hamsun and Ivan Turgenev. Ralph Ellison looked to Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. Henry David Thoreau was inspired by Homer. Eudora Welty loved Anton Chekhov. William Faulkner owed his literary acumen to Sherwood Anderson and James Joyce. Who are your writing heroes?

Write a short essay about a writer whose work you admire or a fictional character whose writing life inspires you. Include aspects of your hero's life, writing style, form, and voice that you admire and how you would like to incorporate them into your work.

Or, if you prefer, write a short story or poem based on the work of your writing heroes, mimicking style or genre, or using your hero as the main character. Remember, if you aren't currently an expert on this writer's life, you can always research to find the nugget that will inspire your writing.

Bonus

Julia Cameron's "Artist Dates" provide a creative way to interact more directly with the people, places, and events you surround yourself with. Plan an Artist Date this week and write about it. If your writing life has become too serious lately, consider choos-

ing a destination that will allow you to have some fun and inject energy into your writing life. *Tweetspeak* has several wonderful resources to get you started, along with samples of the wide range of refreshing outings that could feed your creative spirit. See Appendix 3 for more details.

Discuss

For self-reflection or group discussion.

1. If you set out to write a novel about a culture you are or would like to be steeped in, where would your book be set? What are some of the things you surround yourself with that naturally make their way into your writing without even trying?

2. People are an important part of what surrounds us, but sometimes including other people's stories in our writing can be complicated. How do you deal with mentioning, naming, or describing other people's actions, circumstances, or conversations in your writing? Do you ask permission or seek their interest before you write about them?

3. What are your biggest concerns with writing about other people? Is family harder or easier for you than friends or acquaintances? How will you resolve these concerns?

4. What limitations have you encountered that keep you from surrounding yourself the way you would like? Financial? Geographic? What realistic steps can you take to make the changes you would like?

4

Notice

I attend to and record what's going on around me.

Try to be one of the people
on whom nothing is lost.

—Henry James

Stories

Years ago, I (Ann) read *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton and wondered how on earth he could remember the details of the green verandah and rocking chairs, the banana trees and oleanders, of an island where he lived as a child. I have also marveled at Haven Kimmel's powers of recall in *A Girl Named Zippy*. How did she remember that the man in her neighborhood, Mr. Kizer, wore blue work pants, a white T-shirt, a brown cardigan, and sock feet on the day she dropped by his house with her sister? More recently, Jeannette Walls' powers of recall that formed *The Glass Castle* seem impossible. Among the hundreds of other