

Writing, part deux

If you keep composition simple, you can afford the rare miscreance

By Marvin Olasky

ELEVEN MONTHS AGO I wrote in praise of simple, straightforward writing and elicited numerous responses ("The write stuff," May 10, 2003). One from Peter Irvine "wondered about words like ... well, rapsallion and eviscerated and diaphanous and somnolent and pithy and turgid and rapacious and imprecation and enigmatically and miscreant: Aren't they simply wonderful words, beautiful words? Must we really say goodbye to them for short, clean, economical action sentences that feel like cold steel to the soul?"

No, Peter, and let me offer an analogy: By economizing much of the time, a man is able to spend money at the right time. By not eating sugary junk every day we are free to eat an elegant piece of cheesecake. Write with strong nouns and verbs so that when you want to throw in an adjective like "diaphanous" it will stand out. Mark Twain said it well: "When you catch adjectives, kill most of them -- then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together; they give strength when they are wide apart."

Here's slightly overstated advice from George Orwell, and if you follow it 99 percent of the time you can find the joy of exceptions: "Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print. Never use a long word where a short word will do. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. Never use the passive where you can use the active." (Essayist Sheridan Baker noted similarly, "Never use a long word when you can find a short one.... Pick up every sentence in turn, asking ourselves if we can possibly make it shorter.")

William Zinsser's books on writing are also worthwhile. Here's his prime directive: "Look for the clutter in your writing and prune it ruthlessly. Be grateful for everything you can throw away. Reexamine each sentence that you put on paper. Is every word doing new work? Can any thought be expressed with more economy? Is anything pompous or pretentious or faddish? Are you hanging on to something useless just because you think it's beautiful? Simplify. Simplify." Do that almost all the time and you can get away with the occasional chocolate mousse.

Here are three thoughts for what this all means about teaching writing. First, emphasize quality rather than quantity: Better to have one telling bit of specific detail than 12 nothings. (Cervantes's worst nightmare: "Let every man ... not set down at random, higgledy-piggledy, whatever comes into his noddle.") Second, have students write about what they know, not just what they feel like pondering. E.B. White advised, "Don't write about Man, write about a man."

Third, realize that content and style cannot readily be separated, and giving them separate grades creates mistaken impressions. Look what happens to this romantic image when we couch it in math-book prose: "The long-separated lovers raced across the grassy field toward each other like

two freight trains, one having left Cleveland at 7 p.m. traveling at 50 mph, the other from Topeka at 4 p.m. at a speed of 40 mph."

Advanced students who are thinking about becoming professional writers need to add temperament to talent. Novelist Isaac Asimov, commenting on a classic editor's statement -- "We don't reject writers; we reject pieces of paper with typing on them" -- added, "Don't stay mad and decide you are the victim of incompetence and stupidity. If you do, you'll learn nothing and you'll never become a writer.... Don't make the opposite mistake and decide the story is worthless. Editors differ and so do tastes and so do magazines' needs. Try the story somewhere else."

Mark Twain suggested this way of discerning a calling: "Write without pay until somebody offers pay. If nobody offers within three years the candidate may look upon his circumstances with the most implicit confidence as the sign that sawing wood is what he was intended for."

The way not to learn is to assume that friends who say "you're great" have good judgment. Young writers need true friends who are willing to make them cry. They need teachers and editors willing to tell the truth, even if it hurts. All are hard to find in this age of inflating grades and emphasizing self-esteem rather than offering tough honesty.

Finally, for those who persevere, what Ptahotep wrote in ancient Egypt can be true: "Be a scribe! You sit grandly in your house, beer is poured copiously. All who see you rejoice in good cheer." Yes, but you must be prepared to give it up. Ptahotep noted, "Happy is the heart of him who writes; he is young each day." Yes, but only if he writes from the heart, and not just for copious beer.

World. Volume 19: Number 4. April 10, 2004. Page 48.