

They also serve who stand and edit

It was exceedingly kind of you to invite me here, exceedingly gracious of you to endure this address, and I am delighted to share in the celebration of your national anniversary of adjusting your relationship with the British Crown, a feat you accomplished much less messily than my country did.

Coming here gave me occasion to think about who we are and how we came to be who we are.

No child dreams of growing up to be an editor.

There are no Famous Editor trading cards. (“I’ll give you a Max Perkins and two Abe Rosenthals for a St. Jerome.”) And yet we have had the good fortune to discover that the world has not merely a function but a pressing *need* for introverts, bookworms, and teachers’ pets.

I know how the pattern develops—I have lived the pattern. It begins with that first cracking of the code of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, and close upon that the growing recognition that within books there is a whole world—or whole *worlds*—separate from the physical world that surrounds us, worlds that we can step into at will, boundless worlds inviting our exploration.

After the first greedy devouring of raw narration, there dawns a sense of the music within the words, the many voices that intrigue, or frighten, or amuse. As we become experienced readers we grow attuned to nuance, the subtleties of meaning that can be variously expressed by the same words. Once in this world, we are there to stay.

The marks of the potential editor appear early. Once we see the many ways words can be employed and we develop a sensitivity to nuance, we expect to see words used with precision and effect. We are attentive to the details. We are like musicians who wince at wrong notes. We discern the range and scope of that lexicon of which in time we are to become guardians.

Once on that road, we are well on the way to the quiet satisfactions of editing: that inner glow that rises from identifying the mistakes and misjudgments that writers make and correcting them, pruning their infelicities. There is no need to crow about this, to brandish and proclaim other people's mistakes to prop up our sense of self-worth—that would be priggish and disagreeable. It is enough that we find errors or misjudgments and make them right.

In time we make the additional discovery that there are people—writers, publishers, agencies, employers—who acknowledge a need for that ability to recognize and fix what has gone awry in a text, and who are even willing to pay for the exercise of that skill. Though not much. And it is through such work that we experience the craftsman's satisfaction and pleasure in taking a text and leaving it shipshape and Bristol fashion. We make the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

Paradoxically, though so much of this work is solitary, sitting at a desk for hours peering at words on a page or a screen, we also know the satisfaction of collaboration. We are assisting a writer in the accomplishment of their purpose, not substituting what we would have written, but pruning, shaping, polishing, and clarifying what the writer brought to the table. I once edited the reviews of a critic at *The Sun* that had to be tightened to fit the available space, which meant I had to identify what could be sacrificed or recast without compromising the meaning or the integrity of the text.

This critic told me more than once, “You made it say what I meant better than I did.” No editor ever hears higher praise.

Not, mind you, that we are all paragons. If I can be indulged in talking a little theology—and who here is going to stop me?—editors are deeply, deeply Augustinian. We believe that human beings have an inborn propensity for error, ourselves not excepted. We know that, like surgeons we wield the knife, and that every time we open a text to fix some error we run the risk of creating another. I have a mental inventory of the worst mistakes for which I was ever responsible, and I run down the list as I lie awake on still winter nights. Likely you harbor similar lists.

Moreover, I have known editors—not a multitude, but more than a handful—who conform to our worst stereotype: humorless, tin-eared, ham-handed, mechanical enforcers of stylebook minutiae and zombie rules who will slap a coat of battleship gray over every text that comes through their hands.

I trust that no one here today fits that description.

The quality more commonly on display among us is generosity. Writers can be competitive, consumed with jealousy, jockeying for position—think of Hemingway forever measuring himself against his fellow writers, sometimes literally. But our sense of collaboration, developed in our conversations with writers, carries through to our relationships with our fellow editors.

I think of my late colleague Bill Walsh of *The Washington Post*. In his blog, in his books, in his workshops at conferences of the American Copy Editors Society, now ACES the Society for

Editing, he was always happy to share whatever he knew, whatever he had learned, whatever he had thought through. He would talk as easily and freely with some shy tyro as with a grizzled veteran. He was sensible, he was informed, he was smart, he was funny, he was what we hope to be at our best.

I think too of ACES, with which I have been associated since its founding in 1997. Bill Walsh was not the only presenter who freely shared the wealth of his knowledge; he was one of scores, of hundreds over the past two decades. At ACES conferences, as at this one, the participants come eager to learn and to share their learning. It has been a joy to see ACES and Editors Canada happily affiliated with each other, the better to affirm, strengthen, and promote our obscure craft.

The need to strengthen has become more acute. Cheese-paring publishers have concluded that editors, particularly copy editors like me, are a costly frill. In my own career as a newspaper copy editor since 1980, I have witnessed the decimation of copy desks, to the extent that we can say there is a novel sense of the word *decimate*: to reduce *to* one-tenth. These publishers, of newspapers, magazines, books, and online publications, have assumed that since the public tolerates widespread online slackness, there is no point in attempting anything more ambitious. And many writers, now in possession of spell-check functions and more or less effective grammar checkers—often less effective—imagine that they are good to go.

Our anonymity has worked against us. It has permitted the survival of the stereotype that we are fussbudgets preoccupied with commas and inconsequential details. But the world is in need of editing. There is flabby prose out there. There is opaque prose out there. There is pretentious prose out there. There is *dishonest* prose out there. But because we have been neither seen nor heard, it is imagined that what we know how to do can be dispensed with.

We do not give up. Some of us are fighting a determined rear-guard action at our publications to uphold standards of accuracy and clarity. Some of us work at publications, print or online, that give some thought to being reputable. Some of us work at government agencies or nonprofit organizations laboring to English bureaucratic prose, and may the Blessed Henry Watson Fowler watch over you. Some of us are possessed of the grit and determination to make a go of working as freelance editors. (I don't have it, but I admire it.)

What must do is *show* how valuable we are, and in coming here you have made an important step toward that goal. You came here to learn—and in some cases to unlearn—and to be more professional, better skilled. A number of you have taken the trouble to become professionally certified as editors, and still want to develop further. On the last day of my editing class each semester, I quote Chaucer, “The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,” “the life so short, the craft so long to learn.” There is always more to learn, about the language, about the technology, about the skills we need to develop or refine. That is what you have been doing here, to share and compound learning in the sessions, at meals, in the conversations in the bar in the evenings. This is what you will be able to take away as you return home, better prepared to show what it means to be a qualified professional editor.

You cannot expect it to be easy. Not only will you encounter those who scorn the very act of editing, but also those who will expect you to edit for free, or for some contemptibly small sum. Resist. Explain to your manager or your client what you do and why it has value, indeed *adds* value. Be prepared to show and explain what you have done, that the writer can see the value that you brought to the text.

Let me suggest something fundamental about the value of our work. In the first number of *The Federalist*, Alexander Hamilton wrote that the great project of the United States was to determine “the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.” I want to suggest a broader scope of this than politics and governance.

We are collectively presenting the whole world and all of human experience to our readers: in scientific and medical technical articles, in governmental studies and reports, in concert and restaurant reviews, in sports reporting, in the perceptions of writers of fiction, and yes, in politics and government. It is our particular responsibility to see to it that the texts that pass from our hands are as accurate and clear as we can make them, so that our readers can use them to make informed choices, to act from reflection and choice rather than to be pushed about by accident and force.

In this, we can rely on one another. For technical advice, for career advice, for counsel, for consolation in misery. Editors who come to conferences like this one for the first time experience an “I am not alone” moment. You are not alone. You need not struggle alone. Together we are stronger.

I have been an editor for something approaching forty years, and while I have no particular intention to hang up my spurs, though that may not be entirely my own decision, I am not the future. *You* are the future in editing, and I have been privileged to come here to meet you, talk with you, listen to you.

I leave you with this.

The world needs editing.

The world needs editors.

Go show the world what you can do.