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Hard Laughter

Rosie

Joe Jones

All New People

Operating Instructions

Bird *by* Bird

*Some Instructions
on Writing and Life*

A n n e L a m o t t



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L o o k i n g A r o u n d

Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on. Now, if you ask me, what's going on is that we're all up to *here* in it, and probably the most important thing is that we not yell at one another. Otherwise we'd all just be barking away like Pekingese: "Ah! Stuck in the shit! And it's *your* fault, *you* did this . . ." Writing involves seeing people suffer and, as Robert Stone once put it, finding some meaning therein. But you can't do that if you're not respectful. If you look at people and just see sloppy clothes or rich clothes, you're going to get them wrong.

The writer is a person who is standing apart, like the cheese in "The Farmer in the Dell" standing there alone but deciding to take a few notes. You're outside, but you can see things up close through your binoculars. Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you

are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others. It's simple in concept, but not that easy to do. My Uncle Ben wrote me a letter twenty years ago in which he said, "Sometimes you run into someone, regardless of age or sex, whom you know absolutely to be an independently operating part of the Whole that goes on all the time inside yourself, and the eye-motes go *click* and you hear the tribal tones of voice resonate, and there it is—you recognize them." That is what I'm talking about: you want your readers' eye-motes to go click! with recognition as they begin to understand one of your characters, but you probably won't be able to present a character that recognizable if you do not first have self-compassion.

It is relatively easy to look tenderly and with recognition at a child, especially your own child and especially when he is being cute or funny, even if he is hurting your feelings. And it's relatively easy to look tenderly at, say, a chipmunk and even to see it with some clarity, to see that real life is right there at your feet, or at least right there in that low branch, to recognize this living breathing animal with its own agenda, to hear its sharp, high-pitched chirps, and yet not get all caught up in its cuteness. I don't want to sound too Cosmica Rama here, but in those moments, you see that you and the chipmunk are alike, are a part of a whole. I think we would see this more often if we didn't have our conscious minds. The conscious mind seems to block that feeling of oneness so we can function efficiently, maneuver in the world a little bit better, get our taxes done on time. But it's even possible to have this

feeling when you see—really see—a police officer, when you look right at him and you see that he's a living breathing person who like everyone else is suffering like a son of a bitch, and you don't see him with a transparency over him of all the images of violence and chaos and danger that cops represent. You accept him as an equal.

Obviously, it's harder by far to look at yourself with this same sense of compassionate detachment. Practice helps. As with exercise, you may be sore the first few days, but then you will get a little bit better at it every day. I am learning slowly to bring my crazy pinball-machine mind back to this place of friendly detachment toward myself, so I can look out at the world and see all those other things with respect. Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don't drop-kick a puppy into the neighbor's yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper. So I keep trying gently to bring my mind back to what is really there to be seen, maybe to be seen and noted with a kind of reverence. Because if I don't learn to do this, I think I'll keep getting things wrong.

I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?

Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at

least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious. Try walking around with a child who's going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!" And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!" I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world—present and in awe. Taped to the wall above my desk is a wonderful poem by the Persian mystic, Rumi:

*God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flowerbed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
now a cliff covered with vines,
now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
till one day it cracks them open.*

There is ecstasy in paying attention. You can get into a kind of Wordsworthian openness to the world, where you see in everything the essence of holiness, a sign that God is implicit in all of creation. Or maybe you are not predisposed to see the world sacramentally, to see everything as an outward and

visible sign of inward, invisible grace. This does not mean that you are worthless Philistine scum. Anyone who wants to can be surprised by the beauty or pain of the natural world, of the human mind and heart, and can try to capture just that—the details, the nuance, what is. If you start to look around, you will start to see. When what we see catches us off guard, and when we write it as realistically and openly as possible, it offers hope. You look around and say, Wow, there's that same mockingbird; there's that woman in the red hat again. The woman in the red hat is about hope because she's in it up to her neck, too, yet every day she puts on that crazy red hat and walks to town. One of these images might show up dimly in the lower right quadrant of the imaginary Polaroid you took; you didn't even know at first that it was part of the landscape, and here it turns out to evoke something so deep in you that you can't put your finger on it. Here is one sentence by Gary Snyder:

*Ripples on the surface of the water—
were silver salmon passing under—different
from the ripples caused by breezes*

Those words, less than twenty of them, make ripples clear and bright, distinct again. I have a tape of a Tibetan nun singing a mantra of compassion over and over for an hour, eight words over and over, and every line feels different, feels cared about, and experienced as she is singing. You never once have the sense that she is glancing down at her watch, thinking, "Jesus

Christ, it's only been fifteen minutes." Forty-five minutes later she is still singing each line distinctly, word by word, until the last word is sung.

Mostly things are not that way, that simple and pure, with so much focus given to each syllable of life as life sings itself. But that kind of attention is the prize. To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that it presents a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one.

T h e M o r a l P o i n t o f V i e w

If you find that you start a number of stories or pieces that you don't ever bother finishing, that you lose interest or faith in them along the way, it may be that there is nothing at their center about which you care passionately. You need to put yourself at their center, you and what you believe to be true or right. The core, ethical concepts in which you most passionately believe are the language in which you are writing.

These concepts probably feel like givens, like things no one ever had to make up, that have been true through all cultures and for all time. Telling these truths is your job. You have nothing else to tell us. But needless to say, you can't tell them in a sentence or a paragraph; the truth doesn't come out in bumper stickers. There may be a flickering moment of insight in a one-liner, in a sound bite, but everyday meat-and-potato truth is beyond our ability to capture in a few words. Your whole piece is the truth, not just one shining epigrammatic