

Cultivating
Visionary Leadership
by Learning
for Global Success

Cultivating Visionary Leadership by Learning for Global Success:

*Beyond the Language
and Literature Classroom*

Edited by

Don Pardlow and Mary Alice Trent

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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FOREWORD

This collection of essays addresses a key challenge posed by every nation's transition to a global economy. The writer Daniel Pink prophesizes widely on what he describes as a cultural transition from our era—an “Age of Information,” to an alleged “Age of Conception,” a transition which has induced educators in British and in many Southeast Asian countries to attempt to inculcate creativity in their students in order to better prepare them for competition in the global marketplace. One symptom of this new age, the development of a global cyber network, or what Thomas Friedman calls the “digital platform,” has given to each and every entrepreneur the potential to expand his or her trade and sale of services and products to consumers worldwide, making many marketplaces more competitive on a global scale. In response to this challenge, a number of American colleges and universities have also taken this challenge to develop and to revise curriculum in order to graduate global citizens who are culturally astute, intellectually alert, and technologically creative and innovative.

Likewise, the historically black university Claflin University has set a goal known as the Claflin Imperative, which “[prepares] students for leadership and service in a multicultural, global, and technological society.” Some of the essays presented in this book were inspired by the 2011 Tenth Anniversary of the Claflin University Conference on Contemporary English and Language Arts Pedagogy in Secondary and Postsecondary Institutions, founded by Dr. Peggy Stevenson Ratliff, Professor of English and former Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Zia Hasan, Professor of English, and Dr. Mitali Wong, Professor of English. The conference has hosted a variety of nationally and internationally prominent scholars describing the latest innovations in language pedagogies and scholarship.

The anthology, which is divided into four sections, showcases some of the methods instructors are implementing to meet that challenge, to give each student, regardless of race, of ethnicity, of gender, and of social class, the chance to acquire an education—a *world-class* education.

In the first part of the anthology, Nahid Rachlin writes about a problem common to not only the writing student of the 21st and 20th century but also any other type of person, especially one on the route to developing

into a visionary: the challenge of developing a voice, an identity, and a sense of mission. The problem of finding voice, which parallels the problem described by W.E.B. Dubois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, is the problem of crossing the “color line,” or any other type of line drawn by gender, by social class, ethnicity, nationality, etc., a line which the dominant members of a culture use to silence others. Therefore, the writer is presented with a challenge, the struggle to find her or his own voice in a culture which denies her or him the right to free expression. In “How I Learned to Write in a Language Not My Own,” Nahid Rachlin reveals her literary coming-of-age in the Iran of the 1960’s, a nation whose patriarchal culture restricted her rights to gainful employment, education, and even her right to read the literary works of her choice. Ms. Rachlin negotiated those difficulties and found her voice as writer, after she immigrated to the United States, by learning to write not in her native Farsi, which she associates with oppression, but in English. The right and privilege of free expression gives the writer, or any other person, the opportunity to execute one of the first steps of becoming a visionary leader, the formation of a sense of purpose or personal purpose, to do what Deepak Chopra would call the creating of a personal vision (or a mission statement), which is a necessary step for a person to not only find a voice in her culture but also to get in touch with her own soul.

For the reasons listed above, creative writing, a means by which several young people find their voices and identities, is still a very sought-after and popular field of study. The genre has a wide variety of pedagogical applications. For example, Linda Hill shows how exercises in the genres of poetic-verse writing can be used to enhance students’ understanding of the novels which they read. Also, another staple of creative writing which peoples of various ethnicities use to realize themselves and to empower themselves, the personal ethnography, persists in the teaching of Marilyn Thomas, who has taught this genre at two HCBU’s. Thomas asserts that the demand for writing in this genre shall increase because “technology is a primary reason [for which] student creativity has sky-rocketed, as more information, both [for the] professional and amateur, is readily available to everyone.”

Thomas Kennedy, in his lecture “The Creative Element” and his story “Getting Lucky,” covers another threat common to the creative writer and the visionary leader, a threat more subtle yet just as dangerous: the attainment, the ephemerality, and the illusion of empty notions of success and subsequent hubris. Kennedy shows that the artist or visionary should value the fulfillment of her or his vision foremost and should take whatever benefits may come to her or him—fame, notoriety, wealth,

power, etc.—as consequences of fate and *not* as any validation or repudiation of that vision.

The second part of this anthology covers the teaching of literacies in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), literacies necessary to creating the visionary leader who is able to compete in the marketplace of this century. Peggy Blood explains extensively her general methods of preparing at-risk students for online instruction in the area of art appreciation. Erin Laverick presents her instructional plan for empowering English as a Second Language (ESL) students by using multimedia assignments as a way to build the academic and real-world literacies of these students. Lee Walls discusses another method of preparing students, specifically African-American students, for science education in his essay “Preparing Students for the 21st Century.” Francine Allen illustrates how the 21st century visionary teacher can integrate “clicker” technology in her or his English language classes. Maria Merrills, Jewell Cooper, and Nora Bird, like Peggy Blood, illustrate the challenges which a visionary teacher encounters in piloting an online world literature class at an HCBU.

Merrills, Cooper, and Bird explain many of the foreseen and unforeseen challenges which an instructor faces in her or his interactions with the students, the support staff, the administration, the technology, and the course itself: The perceptions of each of these parties, based on their experiences and expectations in face-to-face learning, create a recurring myriad of problems which would tax even a Hercules, as the coeditor Pardlow and his colleagues at Claflin are experiencing currently in the piloting of their online courses.

The third part of this anthology showcases a variety of ways in which the visionary teacher can draw from the histories and from the cultures of herself and of her students and can differentiate her instruction to serve the needs of her students in the best manner. One basis of such differentiated teaching is reflective teaching. The coeditor Don Pardlow has kept a journal of each session of his classes in order to provide notes on the lesson plans which he drafts, on the challenges presented to him when he implements each plan, and on the revisions drafted to meet those challenges. He feels that this cycle of drafting, of executing, and of revision, preparation for subsequent execution, cultivates and strengthens his knowledge and repertoire of skills which he uses to teach his students in a variety of ways.

A key element or root of reflective teaching is the teacher’s own memory of his or her own challenges confronted as a student, a source of self-knowledge which can catalyze, boost, or “turbo-charge” the cycle of

praxis. In a series of interviews of faculty at Morris College, Len Lawson illustrates how reflection can catalyze the visionary teacher's pedagogy.

Along with reflective teaching, coeditor Mary Alice Trent contends that educators also draw from critical theories across interdisciplinary subjects such as psychology, anthropology, humanities, history and other disciplines to frame classroom conversations on an analysis of literature. In her essay, Mary Alice Trent uses three works of fiction by twentieth century, African-American writers--Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neal Hurston--in order to challenge readers to reflect on race and gender and to examine how Bowen's Theory of Differentiation of Self can be employed to analyze each protagonist's ability to establish a true identity in spite of the familial and societal constructs of race and gender. Each protagonist has to overcome internal conflicts and conflicts within the family and society in order to discover his or her authentic identity. Through their discourse analysis, students discover many leadership qualities revealed by the protagonist in each work. Students are encouraged to grapple with ways race and gender intersect with equality.

Milford A. Jeremiah argues again that the visionary teacher and leader not only must provide access to disenfranchised minorities but also must watch and monitor the efforts of those groups who actively and aggressively work to continue that disenfranchisement.

In her essay, Lena Ampadu looks at feminist literary figures, in this case Alice Walker, J. Nozingo Mariaine, and Miriam Ba. Ampadu shows how the authors have used their fiction as vehicles for advancing the values of human rights for women "long silenced and dominated" and ultimately all peoples.

Like Ampadu, Joann Allen illustrates how the visionary teacher must serve a higher purpose (transformative) and keep his or her mind on his or her vision, not the ephemeral goals which the spin doctors, political special-interest groups, multi-national corporations, and false prophets project to the general public in order to snare whom Noam Chomsky calls "Joe Six-pack," the prototypical everyman who wishes in life only to hold a job, to marry, to support his family, and to otherwise have a good time as much as possible; he rarely, if ever, thinks about the larger issues which affect his life. Allen reminds us that the visionary leader must "get behind the mule" at the beginning of each workday and always keep her or his "eye on the prize," waiting patiently for the appropriate moment or crisis to arise (*kairos*) and to be answered.

Because the information explosion, or the expansion of knowledge which we commonly name the "Age of Information," has created a limitless sea of data, a sea whose level is ever-rising, the editors of this

anthology wish to cover methods of aiding the 21st-century student in learning to navigate that sea. Therefore, the editors foresee that literacy instructors, particularly those who teach in the public middle and secondary schools, will need to teach skills related to critical thinking, to logical thinking, and to creative thinking more strenuously to teenage students. It is common knowledge that a large proportion of these students are in need of intensive remediation, and that these students should be taught on their level of literacy, yet the global marketplace still continues to expand and continues to relocate low-skilled, highly-routinized jobs overseas from western economies to the much cheaper labor markets of the second-world and third world. High-paying, unionized, assembly-line jobs are becoming much scarcer in the American economy; therefore, the American educator faces a challenge: to find a way to motivate his or her students who read and who write at a remedial level to take responsibility and ownership of their learning well enough to undertake the task of becoming more literate and becoming more intellectually competitive in the global marketplace.

In response to this challenge, the final section of this anthology introduces Don Pardlow's "Logic and Reason," in which he proposes one type of solution, a return to the positive, non-elitist elements of the classical trivium, a curriculum built largely upon ancient rhetorical instruction in the discipline of logic and upon the application of logic to all other disciplines, a curriculum which has been a staple in private academies for the past six millennia. Pardlow proposes that the curriculum be taught by a differentiated pedagogy in order to accommodate students in a class with a variety of learning styles and abilities.

In addition to necessary training in logical-reasoning and critical-thinking skills, the visionary leader needs also highly-developed, imaginative, creative-thinking skills to handle the sea of information well enough to create solutions or products to meet the needs of the world's population and marketplaces. Kimarie Engerman, Konstantinos Alexandridis, Donald Drost, and Stavros Michailidis describe the University of the Virgin Island's introductory courses designed to train students in creative-thinking skills, specifically the methodologies of Creative Problem Solving, as a means of enhancing the scientific-technological-engineering-mathematical (STEM) literacies of those students. The training of the student in creative, higher-order thinking skills in the logically-rigorous STEM areas, intended to create a "balance" in cognitive skills with those skills used in the humanistic disciplines, is essential to developing the mindset of the visionary leader of this era.

Brianna Grantham shows how the visionary leader as visionary teacher can continue to provide a first step to intellectual empowerment for the politically, economically, and culturally oppressed by teaching in both the standard dialect and the students' own local dialect: Grantham illustrates the "bridge" that the visionary leader must be to give disempowered students access to the mainstream culture and potential empowerment within that culture.

Scott Theirault demonstrates how an instructor's knowledge of not only a student's dialect but also knowledge of a student's body language can help that instructor understand how to serve the educational needs of her or his students, particularly in the tutoring of that student in a writing center.

In her second essay, Linda Hill demonstrates how the use of the reflective journal can aid students in critical thinking and creative thinking as they study the content of literary works.

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PART I:

**CREATIVE WRITING
AND THE EXPLORATION OF THE SOUL**

THE CREATIVE MOMENT

THOMAS E. KENNEDY

FARLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY

Years ago, in the mid-1980s, when I had only published two or three stories and when someone asked me what I *did*, I had difficulty answering. Because I had decided long before that all I wanted to do with my life was to be a writer. I had decided that literature, to me, was the most important work that I could do, my spiritual discipline. I made that decision all the way back when I was 17 years old, in 1961. I had been reading intensely since I was 15 when my father gave me a book by Feodor Dostoyevsky titled *Crime & Punishment* that hooked me on reading fiction, on the fact that you could see into the secret lives of fictional characters in books, in novels, and in so doing to get insight into your own life. I was reading three or four books a week from that time on.

Then I read a very short story by Katherine Mansfield titled “Miss Brill.” The story was about a lonely old woman who overhears a fashionable young couple saying extremely cruel words about her, and the experience just about destroys her image of herself and her life in the world.

That story made me furious. I did not yet quite understand the nature of a fictional character, construed Miss Brill to be a real person and thought that the author, Katherine Mansfield, had subjected Miss Brill to that cruel situation. I decided to write Katherine Mansfield a letter, scolding her soundly for treating that poor old woman so badly. (Admittedly, I was a pretty weird kid.)

So I examined the book of stories to try to find the address of the author and discovered an astonishing fact. The author had been dead for nearly 40 years. Then I began to think differently about it. It was as though Katherine Mansfield had reached out of her grave and touched deep into my heart.

And I decided that I wanted to try to do that. I decided that I wanted to be a writer.

Katherine Mansfield had made me *see* the pain of Miss Brill, the pain we unthinkingly cause to others. She had made me *understand* what I would later read in Joseph Conrad’s powerful writing. Conrad described

the process of writing in this way: “. . . by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel, above all, to make you *see*. That and no more, and it is everything—and perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.”

That was in 1961 when I had just turned 17.

That was also the year that Ernest Hemingway took his own life. He was 61 years old, and I thought to myself, in my 17-year-old mind, *Well, he lived a good long life*. By that measure, I would have had my own “good long life” 7 years ago, and I am by far not ready to go toes up yet. 61 is *not* a good long life.

When you begin as a writer, when most people begin, I think, or at least when I began, I had a sublimely ignorant belief in my ability to write, to use language, to tell stories, and was astonished not only that I could make words run down the page to form a stagnant puddle that I thought was a story, but also was astonished that no one wanted to publish them—and I tried. At 17, I sent stuff out to the *Saturday Evening Post* and *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*

I could not have imagined how long it would take me to learn to write a viable story, a story which was a river of words that led to the sea of human experience and did not form a stagnant puddle on the page, a story that someone might want to publish.

In fact, it took me 20 years to write a viable story that anyone wanted to publish. It took me until I was 37 years old. So I would like to tell you all the mistakes I made so that those of you who are starting out as writers can avoid those mistakes and *not* take 20 years to get started.

I worked on my own for most of those years. And I was impatient. When I was 24, a course I took in college, at the City College of New York, in 1968 with Edward Hoagland and another with Irwin Stark helped me tremendously. I *almost* got published that year, even had an agent and a grant for a novel-in-progress. And New American Library—a New York publisher—asked me to expand one of the stories that I could not get published into a novel. So I took my grant for a novel-in-progress--\$2,350, which I could live frugally on for quite a while in the '60s—I took my grant and went to live on a commune in the desert in California so that I would not have the disturbances of everyday life or of school, so that all I had to do was look out the window at the dry, wide, flat desert, and I wrote a novel that was dry and low and flat and that nobody wanted to publish.

Even when I realized what 20 minutes looking over the shoulder of Edward Hoagland as he edited a manuscript of mine with quick dark pencil strokes, when I realized how much that taught me, I was still impatient and didn't recognize all that I had to learn and, because of that, I

did not learn, or learned only with painful slowness.

I believed that either I was a writer or not. I believed that writers are born. And maybe writers *are* born—maybe we are born with a facility, with a gene, for language, but that is usually all it is—a facility or a gene. When I set out to be a writer, I did not realize that, as any athlete knows—(let me be quick to say that I am not now, nor have ever been an athlete)—you have got to train and to practice. I worked out with weights for a while when I was 13 or 14 and got to where I could press my own weight when I weighed 125 pounds, and I thought, ”kay, got that,” not realizing that if I didn’t continue to work out with the weights, not only would I not get stronger, I would *lose* my strength. Like an athlete, a writer has to train and practice and compete against himself, keep writing and keep reading, keep working out.

I’m not saying that a writer has to compete against other writers. I happen to believe that writing is *not* a competitive sport—as Ernest Hemingway seemed to believe it is. Hemingway said something like he had got into the ring with the 19th century French short-story writer Maupassant and knocked him out. Then he got into the ring with the French novelist Emile Zola, and they had two fights which were both draws, but he, Hemingway, had the edge in the second. But he said that he was not getting into any ring with Tolstoy until he got a lot better.

And it was a humorous comment, but I think it’s sad in a sense, too—to believe that you have to knock someone out of the way to create art. Art is truth, and you don’t create greater art by knocking out the truth of another person, or by silencing him, or by punching him in the mouth so that he can’t say such artistic things. That’s what dictators try to do. I believe that the greatness of civilization depends upon the accumulation of art—we have thousands of years of writing to look back upon, and it all enriches us—what could be greater than the 5,000 year old Gilgamesh or the 2500 year old *Oedipus Rex*? Do we really have to challenge Sophocles to put the gloves on? Or Shakespeare? Or Joseph Conrad? ‘Cause we’ll get whipped.

But a practicing writer has to practice. He or she has to study the writing of others and be taught by, and about, and exposed to, the writing of others—perhaps, as Norman Mailer said, as an athlete studies the performance of another athlete to come to understand where his own performance is strong and where it is weak and compares his or her own performance with the performance of other skillful athletes—or, in this case, writers.

Most of all, a writer, especially a young writer, has to read widely and, especially, *deeply*, and to study and absorb the lessons of the masters, to

try to *see* what they are doing. That's one thing I did right. I did read a lot. And I think I did *see* what they were doing.

Again, in the words of Conrad, “. . . to *see* . . . that and no more, and it is everything—and perhaps also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.”

I use the word “see,” as Conrad did, rather than “understand” because one of the most crucial lessons I had to learn at one point of my 20 years of failing was to try *not* to understand what I was doing until I was done doing it. It was about 1980 when I realized that, when I read a book about writing by Wright Morris in which he wrote, “How do I know what I want to say until I've said it?” As I said, I read that in about 1980, and I realized suddenly that I had been laboring under the unconscious assumption that I had to understand my story before I wrote it, that I had to *know* what my story was about before it existed.

But suddenly, thanks to that deceptively simple question by Wright Morris—“How do I know what I want to say until I've said it?”—I came to understand that writing a story is a process of discovery, that you have to enter the darkness with the flashlight of language and follow its beam until you discover what is there. As Updike said, “It's like driving at night—you can't see beyond your headlights, but if you follow them, you will get there.”

An old proverb is “Think before you speak.” And probably that is good advice in many or most situations but not when you're writing. I asked Robert Coover once how he thought his best stories came to be, and he answered something like “Probably my best stories, insofar as I can judge, are the stories I only allowed to be written.”

You've got to let the words rise through your being. Don't think so much. Just act. Just write. As Vincent Van Gogh said, “The blank canvas can begin to look like an idiot staring at you and can turn you into an idiot unless you splash some colors onto it.” Splash some words onto the blank page. Trust your instinct. So much depends on intuition, on believing in the linguistic force inside you. What is it that happens when you speak, when you write? A thought arises in you, in the depth of your soul or your heart or wherever it arises from, and as it begins to ascend inside your body, inside your mind, inside your blood, it accumulates words, and the words are carried on your breath and shaped by the sculpting forces of your tongue and your teeth and your mouth, and then you've made a statement, you've written a sentence, a paragraph, a page, pages, and only after you write that, do you begin to try to understand what you are saying, what you want to say, what you are discovering—or not discovering.

And if you fail, know that everybody fails. All writers fail. As Samuel

Beckett said, “Try. Fail. Try again. Fail better.”

I could not have imagined how long it would take me to learn to write a viable story, a story which was publishable. In fact, as I said, it took me 20 years, until I was 37 years old.

And I *knew* when I had written the first couple of pages that this would be my first published story. And I was right. It was accepted on about the fourth time out by *Confrontation* magazine at Long Island University in January, 1982.

I was relieved, and reviewing the 20 years that led up to that acceptance, I realized something. I realized that I had learned most about writing during the year I had studied formally with Edward Hoagland and Irwin Stark. The remainder of those years, I was blindly “struggling in the dark with the enormity of my soul” (as Jack Kerouac put it), all by myself.

So, on the strength of that acceptance of my first story, I decided to apply to a low residency MFA program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts—which is where I met Dr. Dennis Bormann, and he and I undertook together the *very sober* study of the fine arts of writing with Professor Gordon Weaver.

And that brings me back to the beginning of this talk—where I said that in those days, having only published 2 or 3 stories, when someone asked me what I did, I had difficulty answering.

At that time, I earned my money, supported my family—my wife, children, house, car—as an administrator. And good money it was. And fun work it was, too, with lots of travel. But my vocation was still to be a writer. I was a successful administrator, but I felt like a failure as a writer, having invested 20 years to learn to write a viable story for which *Confrontation* magazine had paid me all of twenty dollars. How could I feel joy (and I *did* feel joy) over being paid twenty dollars for twenty years work—dollar a year is what it’s worth, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, in his “Talkin’ New York Blues”—“Dollar a day is what it’s worth.”

So I asked our professor—my and Dr. Bormann’s professor—Gordon Weaver—I asked him when it was that he began to feel comfortable answering the question of what he *did* by saying, “I’m a writer.” I can tell you that I did *not* feel comfortable saying I’m a writer, but neither did I feel comfortable, or honest, saying, “I’m an administrator.”

Gordon gave me an answer that sustained me for years to come: He said, “A writer is someone who writes. A serious writer is someone for whom writing is the most serious professional activity he or she engages in. The amount of fame, money or publication one gets—these are extraneous to what it means to be a writer.”

I think that is extremely important to remember. The great Austrian

poet Rainer Maria Rilke said that a tree in winter looks as though it's dead, but in fact, it is working quietly to develop the force it requires to bloom in spring. Those 20 years were a long season of winter for me, the winter of my discontent—and maybe I was stupid or maybe I was obsessed, but because I could not quit, eventually I did bloom.

And I tried to quit—in 1980, just before my first published story, I decided to quit, and as a symbol of my disassociation from the world of fiction, I sold most of my library of fiction books to a second-hand bookshop in Copenhagen. I sold about 500 books for about 300 dollars. Then I started missing all of those books which had been my companions for so many years, and I started buying them back at like ten times the price I had got for them.

Then I realized I could *not* quit writing—and somehow that realization led me to write a story, my first story that *was* published, and finally I was on my way.

But the angels that protect me—or the ghosts of dead poets or whoever it is that leads us once in a while to make a solid choice—guided me to turn to *pe-de-go-jee*—*always* had trouble with that word.

We might look at the word's roots—pedagogue comes from the Greek—*paida* for child, and *agogos*, for leader—and a pedagogue was a slave who led children to school. But since I have always had trouble with that word, I would prefer to say that I was led by the better angels of my nature, as Abraham Lincoln said, back to college, back to writing school at just the moment where I could benefit most from it. So in retrospect, I am grateful for the way in which my professional life worked out. I might have gone to an M.F.A. program years before I did, but I was not really ready for it, I don't think, was not ready to be led by my mentors—I was a *terribly* stubborn youth. To quote Bob Dylan again, “I was so much older then – I'm younger than that now.”

But who knows whether I could have accelerated those 20 years of learning to write one viable story? Who knows? In those 20 years, I wrote five never-to-be-published novels: a literary novel that was a terrible mess (written in the desert), a detective novel, a spy novel, a rock and roll novel, and finally another literary novel that was less of a mess than the first one, but still eminently unpublishable. And this was in the time before computers—it was a terrible pain in the neck to type up all those pages and use wite-out and literally cut and paste non-electronically—taking a scissors to the page and applying paste and scotch tape to end with a very lumpy manuscript that looked like hell. But I did learn a little something from each of those attempts to write a novel or a story.

After I returned to being led by writing mentors, it went faster, and in

the *next* 20 years I wrote and published more than 20 books and more than a hundred stories and maybe another hundred essays and dozens of translations. And in the ten years after that, I wrote and published another dozen or so books and many other stories, essays, and translations, and then, in 2008, I got a 4-novel world-wide contract from Bloomsbury Publishers for a good deal of money.

This was the first sizeable amount of money I ever got for my writing, but really it was only about equal to what I made in a couple of years as a salary for being an administrator. If you pro-rate it over the roughly 50 years I have been writing now, it comes to about \$3,500 a year, minus 15% for the agent's fee.

But I have no words of complaint. I would have done it anyway—even if there never was any payday. Of course, you want your writing to be published and to be recognized and to be read and paid for, but the amount of money or recognition or publication you get is far less relevant than the reward of the creative moment.

I have become increasingly convinced over the years that the prime reward must be found in the act of creation, in the creative moment, in the fact that you are working in concert with the deeper forces in your soul, in your heart, in your unconscious toward the truth, toward beauty, toward *seeing*, toward the greatest song of language of which you are capable.

And in truth, truth and beauty and your soul and your heart and your unconscious do not care about money.

They only work to realize the joy of creation.

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HOW I BECAME A WRITER IN A LANGUAGE NOT MY OWN

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First I'd like to tell you a little about my background, the dynamics that went into my becoming a writer, and why I prefer to write in English, a language not my own. Then I will read you a few fragments from *Persian Girls*, my memoir that has relevance to these issues.

I began to write when I was in high school, in Ahvaz, an oil town in Southwest Iran. My desire to write was embedded in all the tension which I experienced because of oppressiveness all around, political and personal, but mainly due to my unusual circumstances. When I was an infant, I was adopted by my aunt, and then, when I was nine years old, my father forcefully took me back from her to live with my birth-family. This change was traumatic. I had been totally attached to my aunt and viewed her as my mother. I viewed my parents as distant relatives whom I saw only occasionally. My aunt could not get pregnant, and after her husband died, there was no hope left. I was the focus of her attention. At my birth-family's home, I had to share my parents with six other siblings who were older than me and the ones that were born after they took me back. My aunt, though an orthodox Muslim, was completely lenient with me. My parents, were modernized Muslims but in inconsistent ways. My father ruled with an iron hand.

I was drawn to books, hoping to find answers to what I could not make sense of. The desire to read led to a desire to write. I found that writing, giving shape to what seemed chaotic and incomprehensible, made me feel peaceful, even happy. As soon as I came home from high school, I went to my room, changed from my gray uniform to a skirt and blouse, and began to write. I wrote in the hope of understanding what went on around me. I found that making incidents and experiences into stories gave even the harshest reality a certain beauty and meaning and eased my pain and bewilderment. It became an ingrained habit, lasting to this day.

It was a hard battle for me to convince my parents to send me here,

because in Iran young girls were expected to get married, preferably soon after high school, and to settle for a life of domesticity. Boys were the ones who were encouraged to go for higher education. But I always questioned the role prescribed for me and aimed for a higher education. Since my brothers had come here before me, I tried to talk my parents to send me here too. They agreed under the condition that I go to an all-women's college near one of my brothers. One of them was going to medical school at Washington University in St. Louis, and there was an all-women's college in St. Charles, not far from St. Louis, and so I applied to that college and got in, with a full scholarship, room, board, and tuition.

But being in America wasn't as easy for me as I had expected. When I just came here at the age of seventeen, I thought I knew America well already. Living in Ahvaz, an oil town in Southwest Iran, I had seen many American movies and read books in translation. Some Americans lived in the town, employed by the oil refineries in the area. But once I came here, I found that what I knew in broad terms didn't capture all the subtleties that go into the makeup of a culture.

I majored in psychology, as I thought being a writer wasn't very practical. But then when I was home with a baby, I began to put my dream of becoming a writer into practice. I wrote a few hours a day and I took writing courses. Eventually I went to two MFA programs, at Columbia and at Stanford.

I wrote my first novel *Foreigner* to channel feelings and questions about my identity into a novel. The protagonist of the novel finds herself caught between the two cultures, not knowing where she really belonged.

In spite of my conflict about where I really belonged, I knew English was the language I wanted to write. That was mainly due to the fact that there was so much censorship of the spoken and written word in Iran that I associated my own language with fear and punishment. English didn't have that association for me.

Readings

Now I will read you some fragments from *Persian Girls*, my memoir that delves into some of the issues I just discussed. So that these fragments make sense I'll give you the synopsis first:

Persian Girls extends from the time of the late Shah to the present in Iran and goes back forth between Iran and America. I develop my relationship with my aunt Maryam, who adopted me from my mother when I was six months old, and with my birth-mother, after my father forcefully took me back from my aunt when I was nine years old.

A big part of *Persian Girls* is also focused on the stories of my sister Pari's and my own lives in Iran and then as we took different paths—she remaining in Iran, and I coming to America. When I started living with my birth family, I became very close to my older sister Pari. We both resisted the roles prescribed for us by our parents, our school, and the wider society. She wanted to become an actress, and I a writer, goals both considered undesirable for one reason or another. Then I managed to come to America while Pari got trapped in a bad arranged-marriage and had to give up her aspiration to become an actress and all the independence she was striving for. After I had been in the U.S. for many years and witnessed the Islamic Revolution from here, I got a phone call that Pari had fallen down the staircase of her house and died. I was married then had a child, and was involved in writing and teaching, but I dropped everything and went to Iran to find out more about what happened to Pari. I knew it wasn't murder because she was with her friends when she fell, but I feared it could have been self-inflicted, since she had been depressed about her life for a long time.

Excerpts

From Chapter One, pages 6-10 of the 2007 first trade paperback edition of *Persian Girls* (I'm still living with my aunt in an old-fashioned section of Tehran):

The day began like any other day. I woke to the voice of the muezzin calling people to prayers, *Allah o Akbar*. After Maryam finished praying we had our usual breakfast—*sangag* bread still warm from the stone oven it was baked in, jam that Maryam made herself with pears and plums, mint-scented tea. On the way to Tehrani Elementary School I stopped at my friend Batul's house, at the mouth of the alley, to pick her up. We passed the public baths and the mosques, sights visible on practically every street in the *Khanat Abad* neighborhood.

It was a crisp, cool autumn day. The red fruit on persimmon trees on the sidewalks were glistening like jewels in sunlight. Water gurgled in *jobs* running alongside the streets. The tall Alborz Mountains surrounding Tehran were clearly delineated in the distance. We paused at a stall to buy sliced hot beets and ate them as we walked on.

* * * * *

At a class recess, as I stood with Batul and a few other girls under a large maple tree in the courtyard, I noticed a man approaching us. He was thin and short with a pock-marked face and a brush mustache. He was wearing a suit and a tie. Even from a distance, he seemed powerful.

“Don't you recognize your father?” he asked as he came closer.

In a flash I recognized him, the man I had met only once when he came to Maryam's house with my birth mother on one of her visits.

* * * * *

I was afraid of my father, a fear I had learned from Maryam. Having adopted me informally, Maryam didn't have legal right to me; even if she did, my father would be able to claim me. In Iran, fathers were given full control of their children, no matter the circumstance. There was no way to fight if he wanted me back. To make matters worse, my father was also a judge.

So often Maryam had said to me, "Be careful, don't go away with a stranger." Was Father the stranger she had been warning me against? Our worst fears were coming true.

"Let's go," he said. "I'm taking you to Ahvaz." He took my hand and led me forcefully towards the outside door.

"Nahid, Nahid," Batul and my other classmates were calling after me. I turned around and saw they were frozen in place, too stunned to do anything but call my name.

"Does my mother know about this?" I asked once we were on the street. My heart beat violently.

"You mean your aunt," he said. "I just sent a message to her. By the time she knows, we'll be on the airplane."

"I want my mother," I pleaded.

"We're going to your mother. I spoke to your principal, you aren't going to this school any more. You'll be going to a better one, a private school in Ahvaz."

I tried to free myself, but he held my arm firmly and pulled me towards Khanat Abad Avenue. Still holding me with one hand, he hailed a taxi with the other. One stopped and my father lifted me into the back seat and got in next to me, pinning my legs down with his arm.

"Let me go," "Let me go!" I screamed. Through the window I saw a white *chador* with polka dot design in the distance. It was Maryam. "Mother, Mother!" As the car approached, I realized the woman it wasn't Maryam.

"Don't put up a fight," my father said as the cab zigzagged through the hectic Tehran traffic. "It won't do you any good."

Before I knew it, we were in the airport and then on the plane. The stewardess brought trays of food and put them in front of us. I picked up a fork and played with the pieces of rice and stew on my plate, taking reluctant bites. Nausea rose from my stomach in waves.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"Go ahead," my father replied.

"The toilet is in the back," the stewardess said.

I must hold it until I get to the toilet, I said to myself, but my stomach tightened sharply and I began to throw up in the aisle. The stewardess gave me a bag, and I turned toward the bathroom with it pressed against my lips.

When I returned, the stewardess had cleaned up the aisle.

“How do you feel?” Father asked me. “Better?”

I didn’t answer.

“You’ll be fine when we get home, your real home,” Father said, caressing my arm. “Your mother, sisters and brothers are all waiting for you. And I’ll look after you.”

Finally I fell asleep; when I awoke we were in the Ahvaz airport. I was groggy and disoriented as we rode in a taxi. Flames erupted from a tall tower, burning excess gas from the Ahvaz petroleum fields. A faint smell of petroleum filled the air.

We passed narrow streets lined by mud and straw houses and tall date and coconut palms.

* * * * *

“Stop right here,” Father said to the driver as we entered a square.

The taxi came to a halt in front of a large modern, two-story house, with a wrap-around balcony and two entrances.

“We’re home,” Father announced . . . I felt an urge to bolt, but Father, as if aware of that urge, took hold of my hand, and grasping it firmly, he led me into the house.

A woman was sitting in a shady corner of the courtyard, holding a glass of lemonade with ice jingling in it. She wore bright red lipstick and her hair in a permanent wave. She looked so different from Maryam, who wore no make-up and let her naturally wavy hair grow long.

“Here is Nahid, Mohtaram *joon*, we have our daughter back with us,” my father said to her.

Mohtaram, my birth mother.

She nodded vaguely and walked over to where we were standing. She took me in her arms, but her embrace was tentative, hesitant. I missed Maryam’s firm, loving arms around me.

“Ali, show her to her room,” Mohtaram said to the live-in servant, who came out of a room in the corner.

“Go ahead,” Father said to me. “You can rest for a while.”

* * * * *

Gradually everything around me blurred and I plunged into a deep, dark sleep.

When I awoke, it was the middle of the night. I felt dehydrated and reached for the earthen pitcher of water Maryam always kept beside my bed. Instead, my hand hit a vacuum. *I have been taken away from Maryam*, I thought in a panic. When Maryam got the message Father sent that he

was taking me away, she must have started crying. Then she must have calmed herself by thinking she would come to Ahvaz as soon as possible and plead with Father to let me go back to her. *How soon will she be here? Will she be able to take me back?* A tangle of disturbing thoughts clogged my head.

From Chapter Four, pages 26-27:

The next morning, Ali called me down to breakfast with my parents and siblings. My mother spoke of the day ahead: the ceaseless chores, something to be bought for this child, something else for another. I had just arrived, and yet it seemed that I was the one she was complaining about, as if I had somehow tipped the scales and now she had far too many children. I looked to my siblings for solace. But none let their eyes rest on me except for my sister Pari, who stared at me with curiosity, a look that would blossom into love.

“Now all my children are here with us,” Father said, trying to pull me in, his stern face brightening.

From Chapter Five, pages 40-41:

My new home was chaotic, filled with a clashing and confusing mixture of traditional Iranian/Muslim customs and values, and Western ones. None of us prayed, followed the *hejab*, or fast. But my parents believed boys and girls shouldn't mingle with the opposite sex until they were married by the religious law, that marriages should be arranged by parents, that unmarried girls shouldn't draw boys' attention to themselves by wearing make-up or suggestive bright colored clothes, that education was for sons. Daughters should marry as soon as a suitable man came along. Tension from unexpressed desire permeated the house—desire of any kind—for more clothes, a different type of clothing, to say certain things, to be with a particular person.

The mixture of values at home mirrored the ones among the people of Ahvaz. Ahvaz's population, consisting of a few thousand Americans and English, about seventy thousand Iranians and a few hundred Arabs, mainly immigrants from Iraq, was an amalgam of the modern and the old fashioned. There was a great deal of antagonism in the city among people with opposing views. There were the conservative Iranians and the half-westernized ones, like my parents. Then there were the Americans and English employed by the oil companies, not to mention the Arab immigrants who were Sunnis (in the midst of Shiite Iranians). They mingled in uncomfortably. As people lined up in front of the cinema that showed American movies, a mosque across the street broadcast a sermon warning people against worldly pleasures such as seeing movies. Men and women were forbidden to each other and yet romantic songs were always blaring out of radios.

The Shah himself, caught between America's pressure and the mullahs opposed to his westernization, allowed certain things but not others.

Chapter Ten, pages 70-73 (Another fragment to illustrate censorship: This is while I was living with my parents in Ahvaz):

One afternoon, as I was taking a different direction home, I noticed a bookstore on a narrow street off Pahlavi Avenue. The street was lined by a few run-down and some closed-down houses and was very quiet. I walked in and looked for books. A few boys were there, browsing through books. Among the boys was the one I had seen with the red kerchief. That day he wasn't wearing it.

The store wasn't large, but it was brimming with books. On a table I found books by revered Iranian poets, Saadi, Hafiz, and Omar Khayam. These ancient poets spoke to all strata of the population in Iran; each interpreted the poems their own way. Hafiz's poetry was often used to tell fortunes. The person would open the book to a page and whatever was written there was interpreted to mean something about the person's future. Because they were from ancient times, they weren't censored. Operating under the Ministry of Information, the censorship authority controlled the publication of all manuscripts, original or translated. Books that either contained a political message or could be interpreted as political, were banned. Sometimes a book passed the censorship but, after some new meaning was found in it, was taken off the market and all copies destroyed. SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, was always on the lookout for anything even remotely threatening to the regime. They believed Restlessness aroused in people by reading certain books could eventually lead to an uprising, they believed.

I picked out *The Sun Also Rises*, among books in translation piled on another table that somehow had passed censorship. When I went to pay, the owner looked at me quizzically as if wondering what was a young girl doing buying a book by a foreign writer. He was a thin, tall, sensitive looking young man with grave dark eyes. As I was leaving the store, he said, "Come back, I get new books all the time."

At home I devoured the book. I began visiting the bookstore weekly to buy more. The owner, Jalal, told me a little about the translated books he had in stock, ordering them as soon as they were available. I liked the translations; they gave me glimpses into other worlds, other lives, as the American movies did.

Once when I came home, I found the door to my room wide open. Father was rummaging through my books. I stood by the door fearfully. Was he going to object to the books I was reading? I entered the room and just stood there silently.

"Nahid," he said in a tense, agitated tone. "Be careful about the books you buy; some of them can get us into trouble. You never know who might

be a SAVAK agent. It could be someone disguised as a handyman or an electrician.”

Then he just zoomed out. I breathed with relief.

* * * * *

On another day browsing the books in the bookstore Jalal, the owner said, “I just got a new book I can show you.” It was as if we had an unspoken connection, trusted each other. There was no one else in the store that day other than him and me, but he was still whispering. His face, his voice were even more grave than usual

“What is it?” I asked, dropping my voice.

“*Les Miserables*. It was taken off the market. I managed to get a few before they shredded them. I tell you because I know you love books as much as I do and you hate many things about our society as I do.”

“What’s it about?”

“A man who, out of starvation, steals a loaf of bread and how he’s hounded by the police for the rest of his life. SAVAK thinks the book might mirror some things in our society.”

“I’d like to read that.”

Jalal pushed aside a thick curtain in the back of the store, revealing a stairway. He climbed down and returned within minutes, holding a book. He handed it to me. It had a plain white jacket on it, revealing no title or name.

After I bought it he wrapped the book in gift paper and gave it to me.

“Be very careful,” he said.

I put it in my school bag and headed home. His remark, “Be very careful,” rang in my ears and I was tempted to turn around and say the same thing to him. Terrifying images of him getting arrested, his shop shut down, his being thrown in jail and kept there for years or even executed came before my eyes. Rumors said that people were punished that way for just that “crime,” he was committing. How strange that, in our culture, books were considered dangerous, that the written word was given so much power, that a person was thought of as criminal for owning or reading certain books. I had actually taken a few steps back to the store, I realized. I stopped myself. He was older than I, had owned the store for three years, he had said. He was cautious enough to have gotten away with selling such books. He knew instinctively who to trust.

I stayed in my room with the door shut and immediately started reading the book like a child starved for food.

Chapter Seventeen, pages 124-125:

A few days later I was sitting in a shady corner of the courtyard and reading the novel *Mother*, by Maxim Gorky, another white-jacket book, I had bought from the Tabatabai Bookstore. I was usually careful to do my