

article and finish the sentence with an ingredient listed in a cookbook. Play around. Dive into absurdity and write. Take chances. You will succeed if you are fearless of failure.

Don't Tell, but Show

THERE'S AN OLD adage in writing: "Don't tell, but show." What does this actually mean? It means don't tell us about anger (or any of those big words like honesty, truth, hate, love, sorrow, life, justice, etc.); show us what made you angry. We will read it and feel angry. Don't tell readers what to feel. Show them the situation, and that feeling will awaken in them.

Writing is not psychology. We do not talk "about" feelings. Instead the writer feels and through her words awakens those feelings in the reader. The writer takes the reader's hand and guides him through the valley of sorrow and joy without ever having to mention those words.

When you are present at the birth of a child you may find yourself weeping and singing. Describe what you see: the mother's face, the rush of energy when the baby finally enters the world after many attempts, the husband breathing with his wife, applying a wet washcloth to her forehead. The reader will understand without your ever having to discuss the nature of life.

When you write, stay in direct connection with the senses and what you are writing about. If you are writing from first thoughts—the way your mind first flashes on something before second and third thoughts take over and comment, criticize, and evaluate—you don't have to worry. First thoughts

are the mind reflecting experiences—as close as a human being can get in words to the sunset, the birth, the bobby pin, the crocus. We can't always stay with first thoughts, but it is good to know about them. They can easily teach us how to step out of the way and use words like a mirror to reflect the pictures.

As soon as I hear the word *about* in someone's writing, it is an automatic alarm. "This story is about life." Skip that line and go willy-nilly right into life in your writing. Naturally, when we do practice writing in our notebooks, we might write a general line: "I want to write about my grandmother" or "This is a story about success." That's fine. Don't castigate yourself for writing it; don't get critical and mix up the creator and editor. Simply write it, note it, and drop to a deeper level and enter the story and take us into it.

Some general statements are sometimes very appropriate. Just make sure to back each one with a concrete picture. Even if you are writing an essay, it makes the work so much more lively. Oh, if only Kant or Descartes had followed these instructions. "I think, therefore I am"—I think about bubble gum, horse racing, barbecue, and the stock market; therefore, I know I exist in America in the twentieth century. Go ahead, take Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic* and get it to show what he is telling. We would all be a lot happier.

Several years ago I wrote down a story that someone had told me. My friends said it was boring. I couldn't understand their reaction; I loved the story. What I realize now is that I wrote "about" the story, secondhand. I didn't enter it and make friends with it. I was outside it; therefore, I couldn't take anyone else into it. This does not mean you can't write about something you did not actually experience firsthand; only make sure that you breathe life into it. Otherwise it is two times removed and you are not present.

Be Specific

BE SPECIFIC. Don't say "fruit." Tell what kind of fruit—"It is a pomegranate." Give things the dignity of their names. Just as with human beings, it is rude to say, "Hey, girl, get in line." That "girl" has a name. (As a matter of fact, if she's at least twenty years old, she's a woman, not a "girl" at all.) Things, too, have names. It is much better to say "the geranium in the window" than "the flower in the window." "Geranium"—that one word gives us a much more specific picture. It penetrates more deeply into the beingness of that flower. It immediately gives us the scene by the window—red petals, green circular leaves, all straining toward sunlight.

About ten years ago I decided I had to learn the names of plants and flowers in my environment. I bought a book on them and walked down the tree-lined streets of Boulder, examining leaf, bark, and seed, trying to match them up with their descriptions and names in the book. Maple, elm, oak, locust. I usually tried to cheat by asking people working in their yards the names of the flowers and trees growing there. I was amazed how few people had any idea of the names of the live beings inhabiting their little plot of land.

When we know the name of something, it brings us closer to the ground. It takes the blur out of our mind; it connects us to the earth. If I walk down the street and see "dogwood,"

"forsythia," I feel more friendly toward the environment. I am noticing what is around me and can name it. It makes me more awake.

If you read the poems of William Carlos Williams, you will see how specific he is about plants, trees, flowers—chicory, daisy, locust, poplar, quince, primrose, black-eyed Susan, lilacs—each has its own integrity. Williams says, "Write what's in front of your nose." It's good for us to know what is in front of our nose. Not just "daisy," but how the flower is in the season we are looking at it—"The dayeye hugging the earth /in August . . . brownedged, /green and pointed scales /armor his yellow."⁷ Continue to hone your awareness: to the name, to the month, to the day, and finally to the moment.

Williams also says: "No idea, but in things." Study what is "in front of your nose." By saying "geranium" instead of "flower," you are penetrating more deeply into the present and being there. The closer we can get to what's in front of our nose, the more it can teach us everything. "To see the World in a Grain of Sand, and a heaven in a Wild Flower . . ."⁸

In writing groups and classes too, it is good to quickly learn the names of all the other group members. It helps to ground you in the group and make you more attentive to each other's work.

Learn the names of everything: birds, cheese, tractors, cars, buildings. A writer is all at once everything—an architect, French cook, farmer—and at the same time, a writer is none of these things.

Big Concentration

OKAY. TAKE SOMETHING specific to write about. Let's say the experience of carving your first spoon out of cedar. Tell us all the details. Penetrate that experience, but at the same time don't become myopic. As you become single-minded in your writing, at the same time something in you should remain aware of the color of the sky or the sound of a distant mower. Just throw in even one line about the street outside your window at the time you were carving that spoon. It is good practice.

We shouldn't forget that the universe moves with us, is at our back with everything we do. And if you throw a line in about it, it reminds the reader, too, that though we must concentrate on the task before us, we mustn't forget the whole breathing world. Tossing in the color of the sky at the right moment lets the piece breathe a little more.

If you are on a Zen meditation retreat, between forty-minute sittings you do *kinhin*, walking *zazen*. Very, very slowly, in a standing position, in coordination with your out-breath, you begin the motion of taking a step. You can feel both knees slightly bend, your heel lift off the floor. Very slow. On the in-breath, you actually lift the ball and toes of the foot and step forward about one inch. Then you repeat the process with the other foot. *Kinhein* lasts about ten minutes. In the act of slowing down that much, you realize you don't take isolated