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Why we write

James Campbell

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It is often said that an idea clearly understood can be clearly written. Disorientation in our writing, lack of clarity is then, following this old adage, a sign of intellectual confusion or, at best, sloppiness.

We have all read prose and thought to ourselves: "He or she has no idea what (he or she) is talking about!" Usually the prose is unclear, cluttered and confusing.

I will admit that I have often been guilty of the crime. When I read my work I sometimes find myself saying, "You really are not clear there" or "What you have written makes no sense at all". Such is the cost of not thinking and writing clearly.

So why write? What's the point? Why such effort when the rewards apparently are so meagre? George Orwell, whose writings many consider as the exemplar of clear prose and strong commitment, provides one point of view. According to Orwell, in his essay *Why I Write* (1946), there are usually four reasons why we write.

The first is "sheer egoism". Orwell argues that the desire to "seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death" is a primary motive. Vanity, according to Orwell, drives us to write. The second reason is aesthetic enthusiasm. Orwell wrote: "Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement" are examples of an aesthetic appreciation that motivates many to write.

The third reason is "historical impulse", the desire to "to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity".

Finally, for Orwell, "political purpose", the "desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after" is critical.

Taking into consideration Orwell's observations and his honesty, I can attest to possessing at least three of the motivations strongly and one rather weakly.

Ego, I think, is easy to discern and concede to. Aesthetic sensibility is, for me, one of the most interesting aspects of writing.

The desire to say things elegantly and to enjoy the aesthetics of what we write is a constant joy. Historical impulse is my least motivating factor.

The fourth motivation is political. Orwell, I think, is right in his observation that for many writers the desire to move things in a particular direction is deeply inspiring.

This motivation spurs me in my writing and while aesthetic issues bring joy and pleasure, political considerations bring passion.

Writing forces us to think sharply and to put our position in the public sphere. We are quoted, agreed with and disagreed with. We argue, we cajole, we remonstrate. We express and articulate ourselves in ways that move us beyond our egos. We are held accountable for what we write. We hold ourselves to account as well.

Orwell wrote that in regard to his motivations: "I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally."

Remarkable writers such as Orwell possess another great virtue: Civic courage. His life was characterised by writing honestly and fearlessly.

For many of us, Orwell remains the mark by which we judge a writer's integrity and honesty. I must confess I feel meek against Orwell's standard.

Yet I know that his is the benchmark to take seriously.

So why write? Well there is to be sure a stimulation of the ego in the practice.

The joy of the aesthetic is also worth the effort. However, the chance we get to engage with issues of public importance, the chance opportunity we get to participate in the great civic conversation is perhaps the greatest reward.

For this author, writing is an exercise of freedom, it is a way to express myself, and ultimately a way for me to clarify my mind and participate take part in the greater democratic community.

Self-expression by itself is not sufficient. A sense of political purpose is also necessary.

What can we say about the nature of society and writing? A society that encourages and supports people to write is a society one that supports and which develops the exercise of civic growth, individual development and civic freedom expressed.

A society where people fear writing, where opinions are cloistered or repressed cannot be considered democratic in any reasonable sense of the term.

A knowledgeable society rests on an active and engaged citizenry. Writing helps to transform our private sensibilities into public ones.

If as educators and publicly-minded citizens we want to test the strength of our knowledge society, we ought to ask ourselves how dynamic and vital our culture of writing is.

Writing for the public helps create a public to write for, and a public interested and engaged enough to participate by writing and reading is the foundation for growth and social development.

These are good reasons to write and they redeem the practice in the face of the accusation that it is all ego and vanity. Orwell, as always, had a point.

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Why, why, why? Even the word itself is an undeniable call for a story. So today, let's tell ourselves the story of why we write. It will be just one story among many, one tiny part of an answerable answer. But it is a worthwhile narrative for any writer—indeed, any creator—to pursue. Why we are driven to tell stories is at the heart of everything we write. Realizing this can help open up a new understanding of how to write bigger, better, clearer, and keener. *4 Reasons Why We Write*. *Why We Write* is enchanting to read, a book filled with the voices of twenty critically acclaimed writers, including Jennifer Egan, Kathryn Harrison, Isabel Allende and Ann Patchett. It's reassuring to hear their frustrations, and yet their wonder with the writing process, the magic that can happen when characters take over a story and their passion for language and the craft. Many of them reveal the peace they feel when engaged in writing, how without it, they are not settled, not complete human beings. Why do we write? Nonfiction and fiction writing has been an instrumental way for people to connect to one another in the real world. Stories are about change, and by reading and watching them we, ourselves, can change for the better. But do people write for different reasons, and are some of those reasons more meaningful than others? Seriously though, why do we write? Why are all of us pursuing writing in the face of the increasingly limited attention spans of the broader public? It's not like we're making much money at it, if any. *Why We Write* book. Read 496 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Twenty of America's bestselling authors share tricks, tips, and secrets... Start by marking *Why We Write: 20 Acclaimed Authors on How and Why They Do What They Do* as Want to Read: Want to Read saving; Want to Read.