

Loaded Words

Writing as a combat discipline

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Published in the March/April 2012 issue of *Orion* magazine



Art: Raechel Running

RECENTLY, I'VE BEEN THINKING about something I wrote fourteen years ago, which has become one of my most quoted passages: "Every morning when I wake up I ask myself whether I should write, or blow up a dam." Despite having faith in my work as a writer, I knew that it wasn't a lack of words that was killing salmon in the Northwest. It was the presence of dams.

Since that time, things have gotten much worse for salmon, and for almost everything on the earth. By now we all know the numbers, or we should. Two hundred species per day driven extinct, 90 percent of the large fish in the oceans extirpated, more than 98 percent of native forests destroyed, 99 percent of prairies, and on and on. Virtually every biological indicator is pointing the wrong direction. Native communities—

human and nonhuman—are under assault. Where I live, frog populations have collapsed, as have newt populations, butterfly populations, crane fly populations, dragonfly populations, banana slug populations, songbird populations. Crow populations have collapsed. Bat populations. Woolly bear populations. Moth populations. Bumblebee and solitary bee populations. And these are just some of the absences I've noticed. Salmon of course have continued to collapse. At this point I give salmon fifteen years. If we can bring down industrialized civilization in the next fifteen years, I think salmon, in time, will be fine. Much longer and they will not survive.

So where does writing fit in? Far too many of us have forgotten, or never knew, that words can be used as weapons in service of our communities. Far too many of us have forgotten, or never knew, that words *should* be used as weapons in service of our communities. For far too long, too many critics and teachers have told us that literature should be apolitical (as though this were possible), and that even nonfiction and journalism should be "neutral" or "objective" (as though this, too, were possible). If you want to send a message, they told us, use Western Union. I once spoke with a nature writer who refused to lend his name to a campaign to protect a species about whom he had written, giving as his reason, "I'm a writer. I have to remain neutral."

When the world is being murdered, such a position is inexcusable. It is immoral. And it reveals a great ignorance for what it means to be a writer. Have these people never heard of Steinbeck, Dickens, Crane, Hugo? Charlotte Perkins Gilman? Rachel Carson? Frederick Douglass? Harriet Beecher Stowe? Alexandra Kollontai? George Eliot? Katharine Burdekin? Zora Neale Hurston? Andrea Dworkin? B. Traven? Upton Sinclair? A little Tolstoy, anyone?

I would not be who I am and I would not write what I write without having learned from some of my elders who refused to believe that writers should or can be apolitical or neutral or objective. The truth is most important, they said. It is more important than money. It is more important than fame. It is more important than your career. It's more important than your preconceptions. Follow the truth—follow the words and ideas—wherever they lead. Words matter, they said. Art matters. Literature matters. Words and art and literature can change lives, and can change history. Make sure that your words and your art and your literature move people individually and collectively in the direction of justice and sustainability. They said literature that supports capitalism is immoral. A literature that supports patriarchy is immoral. A literature that does not resist oppression is immoral. But you can help to create a literature of morality and resistance, as each new generation must create this literature, with the help of all those generations who came before, holding their hands for support, just as those who come after will need to hold yours.

I was also taught that art can be and is and, to be moral, must be a combat discipline.

Recognizing that art can be a combat discipline is part of a process necessary for social change, but it's not all of it. If too few of us remember that words can be weapons, even fewer of us remember that, as weapons, words cannot fight alone. Words themselves do not topple dictators, they do not stop capitalism, they do not stop oppression, they do not halt species extinction, they do not stop global warming, they do not remove dams. At some point someone actually has to *do* something. At some point someone needs to physically dismantle the infrastructures that allow capitalism to metastasize, oppression to continue, species extinction and global warming to accelerate, dictators and dams to stand.

That job is up to all of us.

A friend and mentor once asked me, "What are the largest, most pressing problems you can help to solve using the gifts that are unique to you in all the universe?" That question shows precisely where I have succeeded as a writer and human being, and precisely where I have failed.

There are many ways my writing life could so far be considered a success far beyond anything I daydreamed about when I was younger. I have twenty books out. People seem to enjoy reading them and coming to my talks, both of which honor me beyond belief. Despite the truth of the old cliché about writing, that it is a terrible way to make a living and a great way to make a life, for at least the last few years I've been able to financially support myself through writing. More important than all of these, however, is that I have been true to my muse, and have at least attempted to tell the truth as I have come to understand it. And I have sometimes succeeded in articulating some of those things I know in my heart to be true, and in so doing have, I hope, helped some others to articulate some of those things they may know in their hearts to be true.

This is all to the good. But the fact remains that if we judge my work, or anyone's work, by the most important standard of all, and in fact the only standard that really matters, which is the health of the planet, my work (and everyone else's) is a complete failure. Because my work hasn't stopped the murder of the planet. Nor has anyone else's. We haven't even slowed it down. It's embarrassing to have to explain why this is the only standard that really matters, but at this point embarrassment is the least of our problems. The health of the planet is the only standard that really matters because without a living planet nothing else is important, because nothing else exists. Compared to this, the number of books one has published doesn't matter. How beautifully or poorly they are

written doesn't matter. Financially supporting oneself doesn't matter. Life itself is more important than what we create.

These days when I wake up, I'm even less certain that my decision to write is the right one. I know that a culture of resistance needs every form of action, from writing to legal work to mass protests in the streets to physically dismantling destructive infrastructures. And that too few people are calling for actions that are commensurate with the threats to the planet. And so, for better or worse, most mornings, articulating the truth and defending it and rallying others to defend it in whatever ways they know how is the method of combat I choose.

The time for waiting is long gone. It is time to stop this culture from destroying life on earth. So take my hand. Take the hands of all those who came before us. But keep your other hand free, to make a fist or to pick up a pen. The health of the oceans, the forests, the rivers, the salmon, the sturgeon, the migratory songbirds, are all more important than you or I individually, and they are more important than your or my accomplishments. Their health will be the measure of our success.