

“Run for Your Life...” – Baltimore Writers Talk Roth’s Retirement

One of the things about being a fiction writer who teaches creative writing – perhaps both a good thing and a bad one – is that I grapple again and again with the advice I would give to my younger self. Each time a student expresses interest in a writing career, I wonder if I would have made the same choices if I’d known then what I know now – just how hard writing is and how much rejection is involved. What’s the responsible thing to do? Should I warn these fledgling writers – *Run for your life while you still can!* – or should I insulate them for as long as possible against the realities of “the business”?

One of my students last semester got in the habit of walking me to my office after class – we’d stroll down the “Van Meter Highway,” a brick path down the center of our wooded campus. One day, she said, out of the blue, “I don’t know what everyone is talking about when they say that writing fiction is fun. Satisfying, maybe. And absolutely necessary. But not fun. Writing is *terrible*.” I turned to her and made real eye contact, snapped from my post-teaching fog, and we studied each other in the afternoon sunlight. It was as if someone I’d previously thought spoke only French had let loose perfect, eloquent English. I’d misjudged where she was as a writer. A loss of innocence had already occurred, and I’d somehow missed it.

“Yes,” I told her. “It is terrible.”

“But it’s like you have to do it.”

“You got it, sister.”

But was this all there was to it? Back in November, *The Guardian* released the news that Philip Roth, considered by many the best American novelist of our time, has decided to quit writing. In actual fact, he quit three years ago, after the release of 2010’s *Nemesis*, his 31st book.

A person could quit writing? It had always seemed to me that one could no more quit writing than one could quit being a cowboy or an Eskimo or the Pope. Oh. Wait a minute.

Still, even though it was something I never thought possible exactly, it didn’t stop me from fantasizing about it. What would it be like if walking the dog and teaching and spending time with friends were *enough*? What if periods away from writing didn’t make my limbs heavy, didn’t numb my brain such that it was harder to care about things? What if I could be like my dog, who savors each moment she spends sniffing stop sign posts and rarely obsesses about her artistic legacy? It often strikes me that her way makes more sense – human beings are merely a blip in the planet’s lifespan. And one human being doesn’t register on the blip-o-meter. Wouldn’t it be liberating to be free of the notion that one’s life must be “significant” – a notion upon which the very act of writing seems predicated?

Philip Roth, I thought, *you lucky bastard*. Maybe quitting was something a person could do if he’d achieved, well, *everything*, in terms of that notion of significance. Somehow, even though it is the writing itself that makes me feel emotionally sound, the process is all bound up with external validation. After all, isn’t the painstaking work, all of the revision, designed to make the story connect better and better to those invisible readers – those readers who are every bit as imaginary and real to us as our characters? Aren’t we trying to achieve closeness with other people that’s elusive in life?

And maybe Roth, with his huge readership and his accolades that say *You did it, you achieved that closeness with other humans*, doesn't need to keep doing it. He has done it.

In a follow-up *Guardian* article on January 17 ("Philip Roth Picks His Best Novels") we find out that he has spent the past three years rereading his own books. "I wanted to see if I had wasted my time writing," Roth said. "And I thought it was rather successful."

It isn't something I could say about myself right now if I were to reread my one book, which presumably would take 1/31st of the time it took him to read all of his. Not only would I have hoped to have published more by now (I have both a novel and a short story collection that no one will publish), but I had hoped that the stuff that's out there would have made more impact on people than it has. It's hard for me to read my own work without thinking about that.

What I felt when I heard about Roth's decision – there was no doubt about it – was envy. It was ugly, and I didn't like what it said about who I am or where I am. I talked to other writers about it, people in the thick of it – publishing books and seeking to publish them.

Curiosity, I told myself. But wasn't it that I wanted to find out that they were envious, too? That my pettiness and disillusionment were "normal"?

What was reassuring was that many writer friends did express anxiety. It was along the lines of *Oh gosh, I hope I don't quit. I won't, will I? Is writing pointless? I hope not because I have to keep doing it.* However, many of them followed up with kind words for Roth (and none of them referred to him as *abastard*). Jim said, "Roth's retirement, as well as Stephen Soderbergh's recent decision to walk away from filmmaking to concentrate on painting, feel completely right. Their truest selves have been exercised (and in Roth's case, exorcised) over large bodies of amazing work."

Christine said, "Good for him. He must be super tired." I tried to make myself agree with her. *Yes, good for him.* But I didn't feel, deep in my gut, glad for him at all. Just sorry for me, for who and what I'd likely never be. Statistically speaking, how many of us can really be a Roth?

A couple of friends seemed very Zen about it. Elisabeth said, "Right now, writing offers a peculiar blend of frustration (when things aren't working) and exhilaration (when they are) that keeps me engaged, so I don't imagine ever stopping."

Marion said, "At this point, I can't imagine life without writing."

How I yearned not to imagine a life without writing. I wanted not to want to imagine it. There it was again. Envy.

And then something happened. Jessica, the author of three novels with a big publishing house, told me this story:

A few years ago, before her first novel was published, she'd had a lot of work rejected. She was feeling like she was just writing "on some far away planet and that it would never reach anyone — my writing would never connect to anyone (except my mother!)." Right around then she reread an Alice Munro story. When she closed the book, she thought, *Why do I even try? I'm never going to write anything that good.* She picked up a piece of paper and she wrote the only fan letter she'd ever written in her life. In it she said, among other things, "I'm quitting writing because I'll never be able to write as well you."

To her surprise, she got a handwritten postcard back from Alice Munro. The opening was an apology for the amount of time it took her to write. And then she said, “Keep writing, Jessica. Don’t stop.” Jessica tacked the card above her computer and stared at it for years while she kept writing. Eventually she took it down and tucked it away in a box of things she will keep forever.

“Of course, she’d never read anything I had written and wasn’t saying that I should write because I was any good at it. In my mind she was saying it because if I cared enough about it that I would actually write to HER to claim I’d quit, then clearly it was something I should do no matter what the results. I think of that card often and I do always try to write in spite of the anticipated rejection or acceptance. In spite of everything.”

Somehow, Jessica’s story provided some salve to my oozing angst. However, before I got the chance to savor the hope-and-change tenor of it, I heard from Betsy, who said, “I have a story about Roth for you.”

Roth, it seems, had come to her undergrad English lit class to visit one day. They’d been reading *Goodbye Columbus*, which she “completely loved.” She stood in line to have her book signed. At age nineteen, she was a college newspaper reporter determined to become a novelist someday. When it was finally her turn, she stepped up to the table. She said, “I want to write fiction.”

He barely looked up. “One in a thousand,” he grumbled. He handed over his little book in which he’d scribbled his name.

“I’m going to do it,” she said to him, even though he’d been discouraging. “And I wondered if I could,” she told me. “And still I hear myself tell him that I’m going to do it, from time to time.”

This story *seemed* like it should have plucked me from the jaws of hope and flung me back to despair. It always depresses me when life rewards jerks. But Betsy *is* doing it. She’s an accomplished short story writer, and her first novel already has an agent. And moreover, there was something about this whole conversation itself, the solidarity it implied.

It occurs to me that, so often, the one remedy for imagining the quitting that will never happen (unless maybe I publish 30 more books before I’m 79) is the compassion of others who share this slog through the writing life. “The Writer Gang,” as I call these friends, responded within minutes when I wrote to ask them about Roth and quitting – eager to help, eager to chip in a contribution to the hard work of understanding ourselves. And I think this communal struggle, like writing itself, at least gives the illusion that something of significance is happening. And whether or not it is an illusion, it is sometimes enough.

So maybe it’s not for me to advise my students whether to pursue a career – because they’ll do it come what may if that’s their calling. Instead, the most useful, the most kind thing I can say is, “Keep writing. Don’t stop.” In spite of everything.