

Ray Bradbury

Zen in the Art of Writing

(1973)

I selected the above title, quite obviously, for its shock value. The variety of reactions to it should guarantee me some sort of crowd, if only of curious onlookers, those who come to pity and stay to shout. The old sideshow Medicine Men who traveled about our country used calliope, drum, and Blackfoot Indian, to insure open-mouthed attention. I hope I will be forgiven for using ZEN in much the same way, at least here at the start.

For, in the end, you may discover I'm not joking after all.

But, let us grow serious in stages.

Now while I have you here before my platform, what words shall I whip forth painted in red letters ten feet tall?

WORK.

That's the first one.

RELAXATION.

That's the second. Followed by two final ones:

DON'T THINK!

Well, now, what have these words to do with Zen Buddhism. What do they have to do with writing? With me? But, most especially, with you?

First off, let's take a long look at that faintly repellent word WORK. It is, above all, the word about which your career will revolve for a lifetime. Beginning now you should become not its slave, which is too mean a term, but its partner. Once you are really a co-sharer of existence with your work, that word will lose its repellent aspects.

Let me stop here a moment to ask some questions. Why is it that in a society with a Puritan heritage we have such completely ambivalent feelings about Work? We feel guilty, do we not, if not busy? But we feel somewhat soiled, on the other hand, if we sweat overmuch?

I can only suggest that we often indulge in made work, in false business, to keep from being bored. Or worse still we conceive the idea of working for money. The money becomes the object, the target, the end-all and be-all. Thus work, being important only as a means to that end, degenerates into boredom. Can we wonder then that we hate it so?

Simultaneously, others have fostered the notion among the more self-conscious literary that quill, some parchment, an idle hour in midday, a *soupcou* of ink daintily tapped on paper will suffice, given inspiration's whiff. Said inspiration being, all too often, the latest issue of *The Kenyon Review* or some other literary quarterly. A few words an hour, a few etched paragraphs per day and—*voilà!* we are the Creator! Or better still, Joyce, Kafka, Sartre!

Nothing could be further from true creativity. Nothing could be more destructive than the two attitudes above.

Why?

Because both are a form of lying.

It is a lie to write in such a way as to be rewarded by money in the commercial market.

It is a lie to write in such a way as to be rewarded by fame offered you by some snobbish quasi-literary group in the intellectual gazettes.

Do I have to tell you how filled to the brim the literary quarterlies are with young lads and lasses kidding themselves they are creating when all they are doing is imitating the scrolls and flourishes of Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner or Jack Kerouac?

Do I have to tell you how filled to the brim are our women's magazines and other mass circulation publications with yet other lads and lasses kidding themselves they are creating when they are only imitating Clarence Buddington Kelland, Anya Seton, or Sax Rohmer?

The *avant-garde* liar kids himself he will be remembered for his pedantic lie.

The commercial liar, too, on his own level, kids himself that while he is slanting, it *is* only because the world is tilted; *everyone* walks like that!

Now, I would like to believe that everyone reading this article is not interested in those two forms of lying. Each of you, curious about creativity, wants to make contact with that thing in yourself that is truly original. You want fame and fortune, yes, but only as rewards for work well and truly done. Notoriety and a fat bank balance must come after everything else is finished and done. That means that they cannot even be considered while you are at the typewriter. The man who considers them lies one of the two ways, to please a tiny audience that can only beat an Idea insensible and then to death, or a large audience that wouldn't know an Idea if it came up and bit them.

We hear a lot about slanting for the commercial market, but not enough about slanting for the literary cliques. Both approaches, in the final analysis, are unhappy ways for a writer to live in this world. No one remembers, no one brings up, no one discusses the slanted story, be it diminuendoed Hemingway or third-time-around Elinor Glyn.

What is the greatest reward a writer can have? Isn't it that day when someone rushes up to you, his face bursting with honesty, his eyes afire with admiration and cries, "That new story of yours was fine, really wonderful!"

Then and only then is writing worthwhile.

Quite suddenly the pomposities of the intellectual fadists fade to dust. Suddenly, the agreeable monies collected from the fat-advertising magazines are unimportant.

The most callous of commercial writers loves that moment.

The most artificial of literary writers lives for that moment.

And God in his wisdom often provides that moment for the most money-grubbing of hacks or the most attention-grabbing of literateurs.

For there comes a time in the day's occupations when old Money Writer falls so in love with an idea that he begins to gallop, steam, pant, rave, and write from the heart, in spite of himself.

So, too, the man with the quill pen is suddenly taken with fevers, gives up purple ink for pure hot perspiration. Then he tatters quills by the dozen and, hours later, emerges ruinous from the bed of creation looking as if he had channeled an avalanche through his house.

Now, you ask, what transpired? What caused these two almost compulsive liars to start telling the truth?

Let me haul out my signs again.

WORK

It's quite obvious that both men were working.

And work itself, after awhile, takes on a rhythm. The mechanical begins to fall away. The body begins to take over. The guard goes down. What happens then?

RELAXATION

And then the men are happily following my last advice:

DON'T THINK

Which results in *more* relaxation and *more* unthinkingness and greater creativity.

Now that I have you thoroughly confused, let me pause to hear your own dismayed cry.

Impossible! you say. How can you work and relax? How can you create and not be a nervous wreck?

It can be done. It is done, every day of every week of every year.

Athletes do it. Painters do it. Mountain climbers do it. Zen Buddhists with their little bows and arrows do it.

Even I can do it.

And if even I can do it, as you are probably hissing now, through clenched teeth, *you* can do it, too!

All right, let's line up the signs again. We could put them in any order, really. RELAXATION or DON'T THINK could come first, or simultaneously, followed by WORK But, for convenience let's do it this way, with a fourth developmental sign added:

WORK RELAXATION DON'T THINK FURTHER RELAXATION

Shall we analyze word number one?

WORK

You *have* been working, haven't you?

Or do you plan some sort of schedule for yourself starting as soon as you put down this article?

What kind of schedule?

Something like this. One-thousand or two-thousand words every day for the next twenty years. At the start, you might shoot for one short story a week, fifty-two stories a year, for five years. You will have to write and put away or burn a lot of material before you are comfortable in this medium. You might as well start now and get the necessary work done.

For I believe that eventually quantity will make for quality.

How so?

Michelangelo's, da Vinci's, Tintoretto's billion sketches, the quantitative, prepared them for the qualitative, single sketches further down the line, single portraits, single landscapes of incredible control and beauty.

A great surgeon dissects and re-dissects a thousand, ten thousand bodies, tissues, organs, preparing thus by quantity the time when quality will count-with a living creature under his knife.

An athlete may run ten thousand miles in order to prepare for one hundred yards.

Quantity gives experience. From experience alone can quality come.

All arts, big and small, are the elimination of waste motion in favor of the concise declaration.

The artist learns what to leave out.

The surgeon knows how to go directly to the source of trouble, how to avoid wasted time and complications.

The athlete learns how to conserve power and apply it now here, now there, how to utilize this muscle, rather than that.

Is the writer different? I think not.

His greatest art will often be what he does not say, what he leaves out, his ability to state simply with clear emotion, the way he wants to go.

The artist must work so hard, so long, that a brain develops and lives, all of itself, in his fingers.

So with the surgeon whose hand at last, like the hand of da Vinci, must sketch lifesaving designs on the flesh of man.

So with the athlete whose body at last is educated and becomes, of itself, a mind.

By work, by quantitative experience, man releases himself from obligation to anything but the task at hand.

The artist must not think of the critical rewards or money he will get for painting pictures. He must think of beauty here in this brush ready to flow if he will release it.

The surgeon must not think of his fee, but the life beating under his hands.

The athlete must ignore the crowd and let his body run the race for him.

The writer must let his fingers run out the story of his characters, who, being only human and full of strange dreams and obsessions, are only too glad to run.

Work then, hard work, prepares the way for the first stages of relaxation, when one begins to approach what Orwell might call *Not Think!* As in learning to typewrite, a day comes when the single letters a-s-d-f and j-k-l-; give way to a flow of words.

So we should not look down on work nor look down on the forty-five out of fifty-two stories written in our first year as failures. To fail is to give up. But you are in the midst of a moving process. Nothing fails then. All goes on. Work is done. If good, you learn from it. If bad, you learn even more. Work done and behind you is a lesson to be studied. There is no failure unless one stops. Not to work is to cease, tighten up, become nervous and therefore destructive of the creative process.

So, you see, we are working not for work's sake, producing not for production's sake. If that were the case, you would be right in throwing up your hands in horror and turning away from me. What we are trying to do is find a way to release the truth that lies in all of us.

Isn't it obvious by now that the more we talk of work, the closer we come to Relaxation.

Tenseness results from not knowing or giving up trying to know. Work, giving us experience, results in new confidence and eventually in relaxation. The type of dynamic relaxation again, as in sculpting, where the sculptor does not consciously have to tell his fingers what to do. The surgeon does not tell his scalpel what to do. Nor does the athlete advise his body. Suddenly, a natural rhythm is achieved. The body thinks for itself.

So again the three signs. Put them together any way you wish.

WORK RELAXATION DON'T THINK, Once separated out. Now, all three together in a process. For if one works, one finally relaxes and stops thinking. True creation occurs then and only then.

But work, without right thinking, is almost useless. I repeat myself, but, the writer who wants to tap the larger truth in himself must reject the temptations of Joyce or Camus or Tennessee Williams, as exhibited in the literary reviews. He must forget the money waiting for him in mass-circulation. He must ask himself, "What do I *really* think of the world, what do I love, fear, hate?" and begin to pour this on paper.

Then, through the emotions, working steadily, over a long period of time, his writing will clarify; he will relax because he thinks right and he will think even righter because he relaxes.

The two will become interchangeable. At last he will begin to see himself. At night, the very phosphorescence of his insides will throw shadows long on the wall. At last the surge, the agreeable blending of work, not thinking and relaxation will be like the blood in one's body, flowing because it has to flow, moving because it must move, from the heart.

What are we trying to uncover in this flow? The one person irreplaceable to the world, of which there is no duplicate. You. As there was only one Shakespeare, Moliere, Dr. Johnson, so you are that precious commodity, the individual man, the man we all democratically proclaim, but who, so often, gets lost, or loses himself, in the shuffle.

How does one get lost?

Through incorrect aims, as I have said. Through wanting literary fame too quickly. From wanting money too soon. If only we could remember, fame and money are gifts given us only after we have gifted the world with our best, our lonely, our individual truths. Now we must build our better mousetrap, heedless if a path is being beaten to our door.

What do you think of the world? You, the prism, measure the light of the world; it burns through your mind to throw a different spectroscopic reading onto white paper than anyone else anywhere can throw.

Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper. Make your own individual spectroscopic reading.

Then, you, a new Element, are discovered, charted, named!

Then, wonder of wonders, you may even be popular with the literary magazines, and one day, a solvent citizen, be dazzled and made happy when someone sincerely cries, "Well done!"

A sense of inferiority, then, in a person, quite often means true inferiority in a craft through simple lack of experience. Work then, gain experience, so that you will be at ease in your writing, as a swimmer buoys himself in water.

There is only one type of story in the world. Your story. If you write your story it could possibly sell to any magazine.

I have had stories rejected by *Weird Tales* that I turned around and sold to *Harper's*.

I have had stories rejected by *Planet Stories* that I sold to *Mademoiselle*.

Why? Because I have always tried to write my own story. Give it a label if you wish, call it science fiction or fantasy or the mystery or the western. But, at heart, all good stories are the one kind of story, the story written by an individual man from his individual truth. That kind of story can be fitted into any magazine, be it the *Post* or *McCall's*, *Astounding Science-Fiction*, *Harper's Bazaar*, or *The Atlantic*.

I hasten to add here that imitation is natural and necessary to the beginning writer. In the preparatory years, a writer must select that field where he thinks his ideas will develop comfortably. If his nature in any way resembles the Hemingway philosophy, it is correct that he will imitate Hemingway. If Lawrence is his hero, a period of imitating Lawrence will follow. If the westerns of Eugene Manlove Rhodes are an influence, it will show in the writer's work. Work and imitation go together in the process of learning. It is only when imitation outruns its natural function that a man prevents his becoming truly creative. Some writers will take years, some a few months, before they come upon the truly original story in themselves. After millions of words of imitation, when I was twenty-two years old I suddenly made the breakthrough, relaxed, that is, into originality with a "science-fiction" story that was entirely my "own."

Remember then that picking a field to write in is totally different from slanting within that field. If your great love happens to be the world of the future, it is only right that you spend your energies on science fiction. Your passion will protect you from slanting or imitation beyond the allowable learning-point. No field, fully loved, can be bad for a writer. Only types of self-conscious writing in a field can do great harm.

Why aren't more "creative" stories written and sold in our time, in any time? Mainly, I believe, because many writers don't even know about this way of working which I have discussed here. We are so used to the dichotomy of "literary" as opposed to "commercial" writing that we haven't labeled or considered the Middle Way, the way to the creative process that is best for everyone and most conducive to producing stories that are agreeable to snobs and hacks alike. As usual we have solved our problem, or thought we solved it, by cramming everything in two boxes with two names. Anything that doesn't fit in one box or another doesn't fit anywhere. So long as we continue to do and think this way, our writers will continue to truss and bind themselves. The High Road, the Happy Way, lies between.

Now - are you surprised? - seriously I must suggest that you read ZEN IN THE ART OF ARCHERY, a book by Eugen Herrigel.

Here the words, or words like them, WORK, RELAXATION, and DON'T THINK appear in different aspects and different settings.

I knew nothing of ZEN until a few weeks ago. What little I know now, since you must be curious as to the reason for my title, is that here again, in the art of archery, long years must pass where one learns simply the act of drawing the bow and fitting the arrow. Then the process, sometimes tedious and nerve-wracking, of preparing to allow the string, the arrow, to release itself. The arrow must fly on its way to a target that must never be considered.

I don't think, after this long article, I have to show you, here, the relationship between archery and the writer's art. I have already warned against thinking on targets.

Instinctively, years ago, I knew the part that Work must play in my life. More than twelve years ago I wrote in ink on my typing board at my right hand the words: DON'T THINK! Can you blame me if, at this late date, I am delighted when I stumble upon verification of my instinct in Herrigel's book on Zen?

The time will come when your characters will write your stories for you, when your emotions, free of literary cant and commercial bias, will blast the page and tell the truth.

Remember: *Plot* is no more than footprints left in the snow *after* your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations. *Plot* is observed after the fact rather than before. It cannot precede action. It is the chart that remains when an action is through. That is all *Plot* ever should be. It is human desire let run, running, and reaching a goal. It cannot be mechanical. It can only be dynamic.

So, stand aside, forget targets, let the characters, your fingers, body, blood, and heart *do*.

Contemplate not your navel then, but your subconscious with what Wordsworth called "a wise passiveness." You need to go to Zen for the answer to your problems. Zen, like all philosophies, followed but in the tracks of men who learned from instinct what was good for them. Every wood-turner, every sculptor worth his marble, every ballerina, practices what Zen preaches without having heard the word in all their lives.

"It is a wise father that knows his own child," should be paraphrased to "It is a wise writer who knows his own subconscious." And not only knows it but lets it speak of the world as it and it alone has sensed it and shaped it to its own truth.

Schiller advised those who would compose to "Remove the watchers from the gates of intelligence."

Coleridge put it thus: "The streamy nature of association, which thinking curbs and rudders."

Lastly, for additional reading to supplement what I have said, Aldous Huxley's "The Education of an Amphibian" in his book, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*.

And, a really fine book, Dorothea Brande's *Becoming A Writer*, published many years ago, but detailing many of the ways a writer can find out who he is and how to get the stuff of himself out on paper, often through word-association.

Now, have I sounded like a cultist of some sort? A yogi feeding on kumquats, grapenuts and almonds here beneath the banyan tree? Let me assure you I speak of all these things only because they have worked for me for fifty years. And I think they might work for you. The true test is in the doing.

Be pragmatic, then. If you're not happy with the way your writing has gone, you might give my method a try.

If you do, I think you might easily find a new definition for *Work*.

And the word is LOVE.