

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Are You a World-Changer?



“I arise in the morning,” E.B. White wrote, “torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

I used to be torn, too – tormented, in fact. For years, I didn’t allow myself to be a writer (except of leaflets, manifestos, platforms, and speeches). The

worthy causes that claimed all my time – peace, women’s rights, environmental protection – were rewarding, but...

I missed writing.

Eventually, deciding I could wait no longer, I did begin to write. Oddly, the explicitly political novel I started with (a somewhat autobiographical tale of a speechwriter in the Clinton Administration) didn’t turn out to be either soul-satisfying or any good.

Then I discovered a diary kept by my late great-aunt, an elderly woman living alone in Brooklyn, and found myself mesmerized by it. I started working on a one-woman, one-act play based on the diary’s spare, eloquent words. Some lines by Walt Whitman seemed to belong in the mix, too.

The work seemed to have no political content at all, and that worried me. But by the time I’d finished, something surprising had happened.

To my amazement, what I’d written turned out to feel – to me – deeply political. In revealing my aunt’s inner life, I turned out to be communicating that every person, no matter how ordinary, has a place in the great sweep of humanity celebrated by Whitman.

“Beautiful Hills of Brooklyn” became a short film starring Joanna Merlin, and now it’s being used to train people who work with the elderly. When I introduce it at professional and community gatherings, I feel like an activist.

And like a writer.

This would not be news to Barbara Kingsolver, the prolific author and creator of the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. Great literature, she believes, *a/ways* changes minds.

“Fiction cultivates empathy for a theoretical stranger,” Kingsolver writes, “by putting you inside his head, allowing you to experience life from his point of view. It can broaden your view of gender, ethnicity, place and time, power and vulnerability, things that influence social interaction. What could be more political than that?”

As writers, we help people inhabit other people's lives, slip into their skin, walk in their shoes. Which is what that photo of the guys in high heels is doing at the top of this post. The teetering parade in question is the brainchild of an organization called “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes,” which agitates against rape, sexual assault, and gender violence.

Savor the world, save the world – it turns out sometimes they’re not so far apart after all.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.