

The

7 Truths

Every

Writer

Needs

to Hear

A personal reflection on the writing life—
its beauty, its pain, and its purpose.

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Introduction: Why This Matters

Writers feel alone in so many ways. When we write, when we publish, when we promote, even when we live. All of it, for every writer I've known, though mixed with public appearances, interviews, and book signings, feels very alone. There are not many people with whom creatives can share their thoughts, feelings, or hopes. Unless someone has that mindset, it is difficult for them to understand; however, we are fortunate that many of those close to us do try.

If you're like me, you sometimes stare at the page, stare at your newsletter or social media post, or even things that are published and produced, and these questions haunt you: Does what I'm doing matter? Is anyone out there listening? Am I wasting my time chasing words when the world is falling apart outside my window?

I've been there.

I still go there.

I understand.

More often than I care to admit.

You would think that every time we publish something or see our work produced, we would be euphoric. Some writers are. Most writers I know, though, feel a sense of anxiety. You see, there is a particular kind of silence that follows the “publish” of any sort and on any platform. We write a social media post, and no one “likes” it. Did they even see it? We write a blog and no one comments. We write a book, and no one buys it or writes a review (or maybe worse for our emotions, they give us a bad review). I think what we thought we wanted was applause. We certainly didn’t like criticism. Most of the time, though, what we get is just ... nothing.

In that nothing, it’s easy to feel like the work we do doesn’t matter.

Maybe, in that nothing, we begin to feel that we, and all we think and hope, do not matter.

After decades of working with, mentoring, and living with writers, let me tell you the truth that I’ve come to believe.

Writing isn’t about the noise.

Writing isn’t about algorithms or best sellers or box office successes or brand deals.

Writing, true writing, and the true purpose behind writing is connection.

It’s courage.

It’s about sitting down and writing words that someone else doesn’t yet know how to say or can’t imagine, so when they read it, they become engaged, entertained, educated, stimulated, and maybe, depending upon what you write, not so alone themselves. You don’t see that, though. Readers interact with you more than you realize. They may not “like,” comment, or appear to acknowledge you, but that does not mean they are not there. They are also shy. You will never fully know the difference you make in their life.

These seven truths I include here are my small offering to you, to help you, whenever you feel down or alone in your work, to keep the faith and stay the course. Your voice, your truth, is too important to remain silent. Others, no matter if they respond or not, need to hear you. And they do listen to you. They are waiting for you more than you know.

The seven truths I’m listing here aren’t theories. They’re not marketing tips. They are lessons that I have learned and carried with me after decades of being around writers. They are tested, weathered, and true. These are what I return to when the doubt creeps in,

when the silence stretches too long, even when the story I'm writing begins to feel too heavy.

If you're reading this, I think these seven truths are meant for you too.

So here is my hand on your shoulder. All around the world, writers like you and I are typing away. You are not alone. If you are typing, you are not failing. I genuinely believe you are doing holy work.

And these seven truths?

They may not change the world overnight, but they may help you keep writing the thing that will.

That's what's important to me.

You. Keep. Writing.



Truth 1: Your Voice Is Not a Mistake

It's ironic.

The thing you are trying to hide is the thing that we most need to hear.

(Reread the above sentence.)

We live in a world that does its best to convince us that we need to write like someone else, think like someone else, have opinions like someone else, and even sound like someone else to be worthy of being heard.

There is always a trend for people to be cattle-like, to follow, for publishers and producers to be cattle-like in wanting, for agents and editors to be cattle-like in recommending. Almost everyone feels they should be drawn, whether they are or not, to a format to mimic. There is always a polished literary voice that we feel compared to. There is always some topic that is touted as being more marketable. There are (if you do believe some reviewers) stories, poems, and essays that are written so perfectly they are not even within our possibilities to emulate.

I chased that for years. Every beginning writer does. I tried to shape my sentences, thoughts, stories, poems, essays, and screenplays into someone else's voice and rhythm. I changed the cadence of my natural voice to match a style book college professors told me I needed to memorize. When I edited my work, when the most natural part of me was in that first draft, I became self-conscious and failed myself, not by editing for clarity, but by editing my voice for conformity.

It doesn't work.

Because, after all the encouragement to write like someone else, we are told by those same teachers and critics that we sound like "whoever." We learn as we become real writers, creative writers, original writers, that what connects with readers, what truly stays with them, isn't how well we imitate the ideals of perfection, the lofty standards of style books, the tantrums of dramatic teachers, but rather what sticks with readers is what we dare to reveal. The voice you try to hide, suppress, and think is "too much" or "not enough" is actually the fingerprint of who you are. It swirls in its own unique way. There is no one else like you. That's what readers, editors, agents, publishers, film and TV producers really look for, whether they even know it or not.

I'll never forget the first time a TV viewer wrote to me (this was back before cell phones, email, and text), not to praise my perfect story structure or even my storytelling, but to say thank you for sharing my moment of truth.

Think about it.

I can tell you that this is a film I wouldn't even want you to watch today due to its lack of structure and storytelling. Looking at it now, it's messy, it's raw, it's shot all wrong. The dialogue is too on-the-nose. It was a project I almost considered hiring another writer to complete. I was also serving as producer, director, and writer, so it was certainly within my jurisdiction to fire myself if I so chose. I was embarrassed by it at the time. It was too real. It's honesty scared me. I felt vulnerable for even making it.

That moment, that letter from that viewer, changed how I write. It changed how I teach.

If you're reading this and you're thinking (or even beating yourself up) that your voice is too rural, urban, regional, emotional, unconventional, quiet, loud, or different, then think about it again because that voice, whatever it is, is you. It is your fingerprint.

Your voice, the way you see the world, shyly or daringly, is your gift to all the rest of us who don't know the world like you do. I promise you that someone, and maybe a bunch of someones, are out there waiting for you to have the courage to use that voice to say what they can't express or don't have the courage to speak.

Your voice was given to you by the blessing of your birth, your life, and your experiences. You don't need permission or approval to use it. You don't need to polish it to make it fancy; you need to polish it to sound more and more like you. You need to tell the truth, no matter how raw, messy, or even wrong it is. If people don't like it enough, rather than write a bad review, they might even ban your book, and you'll sell even more books because of it.

Have that type of power. Excite that degree of joy. Prod that extreme of anger.

Your voice, who you honestly are, is where your connection is with the rest of the world. Your voice is where your healing starts; it's where your readers begin to heal.

Your voice is where the art begins.



Truth 2: Writing is Sacred Work

I've never met someone at a party who does not love the idea of writing, the image of it. We writers know there is nothing romantic about it, but the rest of the world doesn't. To them, it is magical; to us, it is work. Oh, they see it: the steaming cup of coffee, the cozy desk, the flash of genius. Those things are true: I do have coffee, I do have a comfortable but not fancy place to work, and occasionally, I will write something that I think is clever. But that's not the actual work. That's not how the pages get written. That is not what carries me through the day. That is not what builds careers.

The real work happens because you show up, no matter how clueless you might be that morning.

Real work happens not in the romantic life imagined by nonwriters (and even new writers) but in the quiet of simply staring, of typing three words and stopping, wondering where you are going next. Morning, night, or in the middle of the day, it is in that quiet moment of staring at the wall that the magic happens.

The gold is spun because you dare to stop, listen, and go deeply, no matter where you are writing and no matter what is going on in your life. The pleasure is not because it is something easy or dreamy to do. The pleasure is because you dare and you refuse to quit or be intimidated.

There's a kind of dignity in that, a quiet, unglamorous grit. I've lived it. I look forward to living in that uncertainty and even discomfort every day. I've stared down deadlines while carrying grief. I've revised chapters after editors or producers have said "almost" for the fifteenth time. I've poured my soul into too many projects that have never seen the light of day. I've probably only published five percent of all the words I've written in my life, and I have written about three thousand words a day, every day, every year, for decades. I am well aware of those ninety-five percent sitting in old files, bankers' boxes, and computer files that will never see the light of day. I've literally burned a few of them to make a fire to cook hot dogs for my children. As awful as some of my writing is, I have poured my soul into every one of them. And I get up the next day, every day, to do it all again. I'm like a lab researcher; I write two thousand words to tell you how nineteen hundred of them don't work.

What I want you to know is those less-than-stellar words, those projects that took me three months and will never see the light of day, are not marked failures. They are the work. They are the marble chips on the floor beneath the sculpture. In a way, I wonder if those discards on the hardwoods are maybe, instead of failures that other people might see, that those rejects are actually the sacred parts, the sacrifices for something better.

Writing, real writing, is not fantasizing about the life. It's not waiting for inspiration. Real writing is about commitment to the most horrible work we can do, along with the promise to walk away and leave it in a drawer. It's about trusting enough that your voice matters no matter how much, and maybe because of it, you keep returning to the page day after day, not always to get it right, but to get it wrong ninety-five percent of the time. Even when the words, gold or coal sludge, don't come easily, you spill them out without judgment. Maybe that is why we writers write alone, so no one can see, even with the most experienced of us, how bad we are, what a mess we make of things when no one else is watching. This is the sacred part. You won't find it in a book launch. You're not going to see it in publication. You're going to experience it by showing up, day after day after day. You're going to find the magic in the faith that if you keep writing, five percent of it is going to be honestly worth showing someone else, if not brilliant.

Writing well or writing badly is not the point. The point is how much you grow while you're doing it.

If you are frustrated, tired, doubting yourself or your ability, wondering if the struggle and the fact that most times you can't get it right and things don't turn out how you see, feel, or hear it in your head, even thinking you are not cut out of this sort of misery, let me tell you

plainly, congratulations because you are not doing it wrong. If you've got these feelings, you are doing everything right. You're the exception, not the rule.

Typing it. Throwing it in the trash. You're doing the work.

What you are doing is holy.

The Christian Bible says, 'In the beginning was the Word.' You have the power to make worlds.



Truth 3: Success Looks Different Than You Think

I wrote a coming-of-age book for my son that I never thought would sell many copies but that I thought might be fun for him to read when he got older. It never made it—for several reasons—on any bestseller list (mainly because BookScan wouldn't recognize Walmart at the time). About twenty years later, after the world had changed, when Twitter first started, when it was a place to share ideas and connect, not to sell something or for people to spill their ill-thought-out comments or imaginary realities, I received a direct message. It was from a young man about the age of my son, a person of a different race and culture than me, a young man who grew up in a place foreign to me, who told me that his grandmother had gifted him that book when he was ten and he had kept it beside his bed, read it over and over, and it had saved him. That's what he said: it had saved him. Because of what he got out of my book, he had worked hard, he had studied hard, he was going to college (first generation), and he was going to make something of himself. He said my book had changed his life.

Up until that point, I thought success looked like bestseller lists and box office openings. I thought it was speaking to hundreds of people. I thought it was about appearing on TV shows. I thought it was about advances, royalties, and how much money was in my bank

account. Don't get me wrong; those things certainly are meaningful, and they do buy shoes for the kids, but they aren't the whole picture. I learned they aren't even the point.

I've had books sell well. I've sold several million of them in multiple languages. I've had films distributed worldwide in a dozen different languages. I've had doors opened to me by mentors who, looking back, I wonder why they did it, why they took the time, why they even cared. I've also had dry seasons when I write and write and write, and the only reward I have is knowing that I'm showing up every day to get ninety-five percent of my day wrong. There are still days that I finish up, and the only reward I have is pages I'll never use. In all those days, though, I know my reward. I showed up. I told the truth on the page. Success over all these decades is not measured by the number of books sold, films distributed, or one more massive speaking engagement. My win, after all these years, my success is one thing: I showed up.

Here's the thing I want you to hear: the size of your audience, even if it is the one young college-bound man I spoke about above from the Mott Haven neighborhood in South Bronx who was inspired for a decade by the story of a boy from a much-different demographic area in Missouri, does not have anything to do with the size of your impact. Some of my most meaningful letters and emails I've ever received did not come after a big media campaign push, a flowery press release, or a nationally released feature, but rather from one of my quiet, largely unread essays, a personal short story or poem, that spoke to someone's hurt in a way that nothing else had. Why did it resonate? The only thing I can guess is that I told the truth. In a spiritual place, a place far removed from reviews, blurbs, and praise, in a place where the thousands are irrelevant, I've found true success, for me, in a novel, poem, essay, short story, play, screenplay, or musical composition comes from meeting, even though we've never met, one other spirited soul. I have found that one soul who is changed, can change the world. I don't know how many lives this young man I speak of touched or will touch, but success for me, the thing that makes me happiest when I drift off to sleep at night, is that in a small way, through him, I have touched more people who will never know me. This is what success as a writer looks like.

We are taught by our culture to chase metrics, such as sales, followers, awards, and recognition. Success, though, true success, comes heaviest from those things we will never be able to measure or quantify. That true success multiplies from our lives we give through words. Writing success, the thing that will make you happy on that unfortunate deathbed, is the connections you made, and the lives changed with readers you will never know. Success is connection: mind to mind, heart to heart, soul to soul. And it comes from you, for you write the words that change people's worlds, and that, dear reader, changes the universe. It can get quite heady, but it's straightforward. Success comes from being yourself and sharing that with the world without worrying about quantifiable metrics.

If you're showing up and doing the work, if you're telling the truth in your voice, if you're putting something of the real you out in the world, if you're writing out of love, loving the good characters you write and the not-so-good, that is success.

There's a quiet kind of success in being the writer someone trusts, even if they don't know your name. There's success in giving language to another person's unspoken hurts and disappointments. There's success in the fact that you're still here, reading and writing, with full knowledge that no matter the media, the format, the genre, or the style, your words have the power to heal. Those words come from you.

Words heal.

Words guide.

Words inspire.

You don't need someone to crown you. You don't have to have a spotlight and mass veneration. You're a writer. You're successful. You're doing something by sharing yourself; you're doing something sacred.

Write on.



Truth 4: You Can Start Over Anytime

I've reinvented myself so many times, I've had more lives than a cat. I'd use the analogy of a butterfly, but it seems that in my life, I keep transforming from one caterpillar into another. The butterfly still eludes me. The problem with us humans is that there is no expiration, no designated life cycle, on purpose.

Somewhere along the way, the world convinced most of us that there is a deadline for becoming the person we were meant to be. The assumption also is that if you have not "made it" (whatever "it" is) by a certain age or phase in your life, you've missed your one shot.

That's a lie.

Through genres, markets, media, below-the-line, above-the-line, tortured poet, literary writer, genre writer, musician, executive, entrepreneur, ghostwriter, co-writer, writer of many pseudonyms, always a writer, I've changed forms and continue to find my way. Sometimes out of choice. Sometimes, out of heartbreak. Sometimes, out of necessity, because I was about to get thrown out of my efficiency apartment. Sometimes, to get out of

living in my car. But every time I thought I was finished, every time I thought it might be best to find the nearest bridge (no kidding), there was the voice in my crazy head that reminded me that that moment was not the end, but rather something deeper was beginning.

Your purpose is not a straight line. It doesn't have a deadline. It spirals around, it does figure-eights, goes backwards, takes you places you never thought you would go. But you keep the faith. You return to that blank page. You reinvent. You start, or you begin again.

One of the greatest gifts of being a writer is that our story is never finished. We hit the blank pages of our lives as often as we need to. We start a new book, poem, short story, essay, play, or screenplay. We evolve in our voice. Every day, it seems, we find a new character arc (ours), and we begin typing our life, writing a new version of ourselves. Success or failure is all around us. It doesn't matter. Life conflict is abundant. We sit down every day and type our lives. You don't age out of writing. If anything, you age into it.

We always begin where we are. Wisdom writes differently. Life experience writes differently. Success and loss are one and the same; they write differently. Hope writes differently—and probably the most exponentially—after it has been tested by us throwing ourselves into the oblivion, the fog, and seeing what is on the other side. It doesn't matter about the age or the place; it is what is beyond the mist.

You, today, are not the writer you were yesterday—God, I hope not. Your words today, no matter where you are on your journey, hold more power and resonance than they ever did or ever could when you were starting, because now you know what it means to fall, fail, and get back up. Every day, the more you write, the more you realize the power of your words. When you grow fat, your thoughts, themes, characters, and even your sentences, grow in maturing weight.

If you've given up on the dream or are waiting for the perfect time to return to the page, it's time to stop waiting. Start over. Now. This, this moment, is your time to shine.

There is no shame in beginning again. There is only shame in not beginning. I can't tell you the number of newspaper reporters who have called me a "renaissance man"; it's a badge I carry with pride. There is grace in sitting down and trying to write something better than you've ever written. There is character in changing who you are when you see something better ahead. There is power in the kind of writer who knows that starting over isn't a sign of failure.

It's a sign of courage.

At any age.

At any time.

You can start over at any time.

You can start today.

I hope you will.



Truth 5: You Need Other Writers

Jet-like solitude, whether it's in an office, outside on the back porch, or in a coffee shop, may be your studio, but community is where you get your fuel. Yes, writing demands solitude. You need quiet time to reflect and dig deep into your whole self. As writers, we must go inward. That's where the good stuff is buried. We must get away from the world's noise. We must float on our backs, looking up at the sun, hanging in that stillness where everything we write lives. This is where the work takes place. It is from our community, though, that we are sustained.

I learned this the hard way.

There have been times in my life, sometimes long stretches, where I've tried to go it alone. I've ditched parties. I've ditched relationships. In fact, to some degree, there have been times when I've ditched life. I'd sit with my thoughts, my doubts, my drafts, and attempt to convince myself that if I were a real writer, I wouldn't need help. All I needed to do was write. I felt reaching out made me seem weak, or looked like I wasn't a professional, or worse, was needy for some codependent support. I wanted to be taken seriously. I felt I should have the answers. Asking questions of others meant I didn't know, hadn't done my

homework, was an amateur; in short, I didn't belong in the world of professional writers. There was a sense of embarrassment, the chance that I would be laughed at or talked about behind my back. I thought my independence was noble.

It was not.

The isolation?

Not noble either.

In fact, it was dangerous.

The ironic thing is that it nearly silenced me more than once. It silenced me as I straightened banker's boxes instead of writing. It silenced me in that I would not confide in friends. It silenced me in pure isolation.

Luckily, what saved me was not lifting myself up by my bootstraps. It wasn't powering through the isolation to try to find genius. It wasn't persevering because I was the kind of guy who succeeded by pushing back harder than I was being pushed.

The thing that saved me, has always saved me, and what I rely on now with vehemence is people—writers and nonwriters alike. Writers: conversations pulling me out of myself. Friends and family: giving me reminders that the work I do matters, even when I'm in the darkest of dark places and can't see it.

Realizing the impact of community is one of the reasons that I founded the Killer Nashville International Writers' Conference. I wanted to create a place where writers didn't just learn, but where they, like me, belonged. I know how writers feel. I know the joys and the darkness. I know the loneliness, the panic, the confusion, the sense of being overwhelmed. I wanted to create a place where all writers from around the world, no matter where they were in their careers, could come out of the shadows and sit across from each other and say, "You, too? I thought this was only me." It's never only you. It's all of us. And we all need to be reminded of that in our community of peers.

Having the privilege of being part of the Killer Nashville International Writers' Conference, I've watched magic happen. I've seen strangers become critique partners (this is trust in action). I've seen debut authors find mentors (this is the epitome of giving back because we've all had mentors to get where we are; not one of us is self-made). I've seen, through Killer Nashville—especially above other conferences—careers launched, collaborations formed, tears shed, and breakthroughs made—not because of a panel or a pitch, certainly not because of me—but because of the attendees, and because someone took the risk to be seen.

Writing is exciting. It's exhilarating to feel you've hit it right. But at times, it is lonely. It's just you and a screen. You see no one else; you get no stimuli from fellow workers as in other jobs. It's you alone with your brain. Lonely, yes, but it shouldn't be isolating. Writing is too hard. It's too important.

Sometimes writers are afraid to share what they are working on. Sharing builds community. To protect their privacy, they cut the community off from each other. What I've found is that the right community won't compete with you. The right community, such as the Killer Nashville family, will remind you who you are when you forget. It's so easy to get lost in your head and your emotions. They'll challenge you, cheer for you, and, best of all, when they are genuine and chosen well, they will catch you when you fall. Bestselling authors have caught me so many times, famous screenwriters, but also unpublished authors who, though they don't have the same experience, are no less valid because they feel what I feel, and they offer comfort because of those genuine feelings.

If you're sitting in front of your computer or laptop right now, if you're out there trying to do this alone, don't do it. Stop now. You don't have to walk alone. You don't have to find your way single-handedly, with your pride, through the darkness of publishing. Find your people. As those who attend Killer Nashville almost always say in speeches they give during the event, "Find your tribe." Reach out. Ask questions you are afraid to ask. Stand up, reach out, and join the room. Even when writing itself happens to be in solitude, you were never meant to carry the weight of this calling alone. Other writers and non-writers are there and are eager to support you as you help them. Put down your fears and pride and open the door.

When writers walk together, when they live life together, something powerful happens.

We don't just write stories.

We become one.



Truth 6: Rejection Isn't the End

Sometimes “no” is God’s way of pushing you, pointing you to a better story.

There’s no way around it. Rejection of any kind stinks.

Whether it is a form letter (I’ve gotten plenty), a silent inbox (still happens all the time), or a carefully worded “we loved this, but ...,” a rejection of our work often feels like a rejection of us because the work is so personal to us.

When we send something out for consideration, send our little ones off into the world knowing that they can only stand on who they are, not us, we’re not attempting to sell a product (even the most experienced or learned of us), we know that even if we happen to be bestsellers, apparently confident and secure, that we are not just sending a manuscript, we are sending a piece of our heart.

When our heart is rejected, it is easy, too easy, to start questioning everything, not only about our work but about us: our talents, our instincts, our future, even our value.

I have been told “no” more times than I can count by publishers, producers, agents, networks, publicists, managers, you name it. What’s crazy is that some of those same people who rejected me now quote my work, teach from it, and some have even let down their defenses and pretenses to tell me they wish they’d said yes when they had the chance. I recall a couple of deals in particular: one with an agent, two with different production companies, two potential production partners, and one potential co-writer, all of which I believed would change everything. I’d worked for months, had the right connections, thought the stars were in perfect alignment, felt that this was going to be it (you know, it). We went along together down the path, and then, in those final moments, the deals, the promises, the hopes, all fell apart. I didn’t get the green light. I didn’t get the representation. I didn’t get the production deal. I didn’t get the terms that I had been led to believe that I would get. And, in all cases, even though there were (I thought) relationships built, in the eleventh hour, I got, “It’s a pass.” In all I’ve given as examples above and the many other disappointments that followed the same trajectory throughout my career, it was just, “It’s a pass.” No explanation. No explanation when asked. Just a no.

In every case, it hurts.

But in every case, my desire was so intense that the rejection pushed me forward to pivot, even to reinvent myself. I think of Garth Brooks’ song about unanswered prayers. Looking back, I’m thankful for the “no’s.” Those pivots always, always led to something even better, something I couldn’t have seen and didn’t see when I was standing where I was standing, devastated in my aloneness and rejection. You know what every “no” did, though?

It led me to more independence and a thicker skin.

It led me to ownership, allowing me to do better.

It led me to understand that maybe I was being done a favor.

It led me to something of my own, as I was left with only myself, which in turn led me to the next step on my own terms, since no one else was walking with me anymore.

Ultimately, it led me to a stronger voice and to readers, movie goers, and TV viewers who came to me and my work because I didn’t water it down to fit someone else’s mold.

Frankly, some things were just subpar. Some things others didn’t get. Many things had nothing wrong with them, except they just weren’t right for that company at that particular time.

Rejection has become, for me, a beginning. Not the end. Rejection is, for me, always a turning point, a new adventure down the road, a path unexpectedly taken because the path I thought I was going to take has been blocked. Sometimes the doors don’t open

because you are not meant to walk through them. Some doors are meant to be built by you because you are supposed to open your own.

In its blessing, rejection can teach you something that success never will.

It will teach you that your worth isn't dependent on someone else's approval.

It will teach you that you don't need every yes. You don't need to hit it out of the park with every swing. You just need to hit the right ones, and sometimes that requires waiting for the pitcher to throw you the perfect ball.

However, I believe the most valuable lesson rejection teaches is that often our most significant growth occurs not when things go right, but when they go wrong and we persevere anyway. If you keep on going, if you actively search to find the path around the obstacle, you never get a rejection; you get a push, a piece of advice, a powerful motivation to propel you forward despite all the moment seems.

When you're told "no," or if you've just been told "no," first know that you are not alone. I'm probably (and so is every other writer) also being told "no" right now for something that seems important to us at this time. If it is happening to you, when it happens to you (which it will), don't fold, don't shrink, don't stop, don't curl up in a fetal position, don't let your pity party last longer than ten minutes, and jump right back into the fray.

Keep knocking.

Keep writing.

And if the door still won't open?

Do as I have done many times: do it your own way.

My life is filled with such choices, moments, and actions.

They have made all the difference in the world for me.

That kind of action will make a difference for you as well.

That kind of proactive action will change your life.

Rejection is not the end. It is the beginning.



Truth 7: The World Needs Your Story

What you have to say needs to be said. Not because it is perfect. But I hope and pray, because it is true.

There comes a moment in every writer's life when the question shifts. It is no longer, "Will this sell?" no longer, "Will this be published?" but goes even deeper and becomes, "Does this matter?"

This is the legacy path of every writer who is in it for the long haul.

I've been there, I stay there, sitting at my computer typing, wondering if the hours, the effort, the sacrifices are worth it. I often wonder if anyone would notice if I stopped and instead did something less gut-wrenching than writing, maybe took some active vacation trips, played with my dogs, took my kids out of school (misleading the school administration, of course) and took them to do something fun (though it's always a "doctor's appointment," isn't it?). Oh, well, they learn more from me on our adventures, I sometimes think, than they learn in an hour learning about how to multiply by twos. Sometimes, I even, after writing probably over twenty-nine million words throughout my

career (and even putting them in the correct order), have nothing left that is worthy of saying.

It was in one of those ah-ha moments that I realized, quite quietly, something that has stuck with me ever since: writing isn't just what I do, it's not just how I make a living, it's who I am. It's how I make sense of the world. It's how I meet or reach people I've never met. It's how I leave something behind that I hope is a little more than the usual noise of the world. That's when I stopped thinking of writing as a career and realized it was a calling.

But this isn't about me. This whole booklet isn't about me. It's about you. Your story.

Your story is needed. It's not created because it is polished. It doesn't need to follow some fad, trend, or formula. All it needs is to be genuinely you because it carries your voice, your fingerprints, your blood, your birth, your experiences, your joys, your pains. No one else who has ever walked this planet, absolutely no one else, can pull off what you are doing in the way you are capable of doing it. You don't need to be trapped in a style book for what I'm telling you; you simply need to free yourself.

The world is a loud place right now, and it seems to be getting louder every day. Things are moving too fast for humans to be human beings. Everything is coming at us with such pace that being undistracted by the noise may one day be so uncommon that someone will classify focus as a mental illness. It is not, though. Being undistracted and focusing on yourself is a gift and a wonder. Beneath all this noise, people are starving for honesty, meaning, something that cuts through the surface, something that reminds them they are not alone. Stories, told bravely, feed us. They restore us. They give us hope. They light our path.

Even when it feels like no one is listening, write your words.

Even when the page stays blank as you stare at it, return to it daily.

Even when doubt or perfectionism creeps in, speak anyway, and speak boldly.

Let's not get overly flowery and say that your words may change the world. (I know mine won't.) But what you should never, ever forget is that your words could change someone's world. It's that someone who matters. It's that someone whose life is going to change because of you. And that, fellow writer, is enough. When the realization hit me, I knew that, in itself, was everything.



Closing: Let This Be Your Permission

You don't need to be younger.

You don't need to be smarter.

You don't need more education, more degrees, more contacts, more luck, more time.

All you need is courage, an open blank Word document, and your fingers on the keyboard.

I know how easy it is to believe you're not ready. I, myself, have been guilty of procrastination because I wasn't good enough, but how did I know when I hadn't even started?

I've watched incredibly gifted writers, students, colleagues, and employees hold back because they were waiting for someone else to tell them they were good, to believe in them, or to give them some justification. Maybe even more than anything, they were waiting for someone to give them permission.

You don't need permission to be a writer.

If you've been waiting for it, then take this as what you need.

You. Are. A. Writer.

Not because someone else says so.

Not because someone publishes you.

You are a writer because you write, just like a walker is someone who walks. You are a great writer because you care, because something in you won't rest until that story, poem, essay, play, or screenplay is told.

The dining room table is large, and you have a place at it. You belong at it. You have a permanent seat.

At that table, you are a part of the conversation. You have something to say that we need to listen to. In saying it, and in seeing our reactions, you'll realize that your voice matters more than you know right now.

This little book—these Seven Truths—aren't rules, but they are the truth. They are a guiding light. They are reminders. They are anchors. They are lightning bugs along your path. And if even one of these has helped or inspired you to find your voice, helped you get back to the page, then my job is done.

Don't stop here.

The road ahead is long, beautiful, complicated, taxing, exciting, and frustrating. Most of all, it is worth it. So, keep going after you leave these last few words. Keep learning, and keep writing what only you can write.

We've spent time together here. I've been sincere and transparent. I wish you well. When you need encouragement, when you need another hand on your shoulder, I'll be here. I've made a life of encouraging writers because I feel the written word and the voices from which they come are the most critical things on the planet. I believe that in the beginning, there was the word, and the word was all there was. From words, universes are created.

Here's your permission.

Write.

Create galaxies beyond your wildest imaginations.



Want to Keep Going?

If you found this helpful, visit <https://claystafford.com> and sign up for my weekly Success Points newsletter—packed with actionable insights on writing, productivity, and creative living. While there, check out the daily Success Points blog for inspiration you can use every morning to start your writing day. Bite-sized truths, encouragement, and craft insights to keep your writing life fueled, one day at a time.

Let's write something great together.

About Clay

Empowering Writers. Creating Stories That Matter.

Clay Stafford has had an eclectic career as an author, filmmaker, actor, composer, educator, public speaker, and founder of the Killer Nashville International Writers' Conference, voted the #1 writers' conference in the U.S. by readers of The Writer magazine. He has sold nearly four million copies of his works in over sixteen languages and is a monthly columnist for Writer's Digest and Killer Nashville Magazine. As CEO of American Blackguard Entertainment, he is also the founder of Killer Nashville Magazine and the streaming educational service The Balanced Writer. Subscribe to his weekly newsletter featuring Success Points for writers and storytellers. www.ClayStafford.com

