

Advice to young writers: On story-telling, truth-telling and Hell on Earth

The following are prepared remarks delivered April 28 at the University of Colorado's Center of the American West banquet in honor of the Thompson Awards for Western American Writing. The contest features undergraduate and graduate creative writers and nonfiction writers.

As a young reporter starting out, an editor gave me a hauntingly difficult assignment. The year before, a mass of tornadoes ripped through my home state and killed nearly 30 people. I was to attempt to tell a story that hadn't been told beyond the simplest of details: a young guardsman searching for survivors helped lift a fallen office wall to find his mother dead beneath it.

What had become of this young man?

The problem was, he didn't want to talk.

The first time I set up the interview, he didn't show. The next time I drove out to meet him, he almost bailed again.

Why is it that we want to write? What's the point of it? What gives us the right to even try? What message are we sending to the world by working as writers that we want it to recognize?

In trying to answer those questions, I hope each of you — every time you approach the task of writing — first demands of yourself the grit it takes to answer a different one, more relevant today than it should be, but always a tough nut: What is the truth?

From the hallowed halls of our academies, through the conflicted pages and postings of our media and social media, to the bare-knuckle reality of our politics, trying to make sense of what it is we believe the truth to be bedevils us.

It is likely to do so your entire writing career.

That said: writers of fiction and journalism and history ought to wish to tell the truth — even when we don't like it.

No matter how difficult the stories are we try to tell, we ought to be in the truth-telling business.

Lately I've been reading the book "Sapiens," by Yuval Noah Harari. The central concept of the 30,000-foot view of history is that the mutation that set homo sapiens apart and led to our supplanting all other human species, and taking over the planet in the process, is our ability to create stories that unify or organize us around concepts that don't necessarily have a basis in the physical world; like a hero-savior myth, or a game of basketball.

Tribes of our genus that lacked abstract thought remained small; their language unable to unite beyond simple hunting and gathering concepts. Our poor friends the Neanderthals figured out how to make a knife and stuck with that for two million years, but our ability to tell organizing stories allowed tribes of sapiens to band together almost overnight and try all kinds of new things, a lot of them completely worthwhile and mind-blowingly fun. Other stories have of course had bloody and nightmarish outcomes. Once written language became possible, and increasingly available to most sapiens, our organizing stories attained truly miraculous powers. Just look around us.

The invention of trade and the concept of money — other kinds of organizing stories — allow innovations and cooperation that bridge cultural divides. Shared concepts of governance bolster the advantage, as long as the stories that support the argument continue to convince enough sapiens — even hundreds of millions of them — to stick with the program.

All of these organizing stories change over time. Reshaping and retelling those stories to account for our mutable ideas is critically important. Our species advances or declines or muddles through based on how well the organizing belief systems we create and maintain give meaning to our lives.

In this view of our history, a daunting fact emerges: Storytelling is the most important thing that we do.

And when we get it wrong, when our organizing stories justify slavery or genocide or unjustifiable wars and atrocities, when they bestow the aura of holiness to the unrighteous denial of respect and freedoms and equal rights, we create a Hell on Earth.

Wherever you are ideologically in the United States of America today, you see that the basic concept of what it is our society should be about is in epic flux, and once-accepted norms are under assault. It is always so. The concept of trustworthy journalism is right up there in the churning crosscurrents. Ideas about what constitutes the arts, and even what it means to gain a university education, face enormous challenge. It's a constant struggle.

Meanwhile, the rapidly evolving technological landscape presents writers with almost too many new and different ways to tell stories, and to be read, or not be read. After all, we're a bunch of incorrigible sapiens. We can't help but keep inventing ways to tell stories: We're mutants.

As members of the next generation inheriting these fertile and dangerous times, how will you manage to hold yourself together?

You focus on the fundamentals. You make good decisions. You do your research.

You try to tell the truth.

So, if sapiens flourish because of stories we make up, how do we answer the question: What is the truth?

Obviously, a lot of blood has been spilt on this subject, for we've always at least had knives.

For our purposes tonight, the truth is that telling the truth means writing honestly, in good faith, using the most thought-through and precise prose you are able to employ: telling stories the best way you can, given the facts and the logic and the wisdom gained through your unique perspective.

Since July, my job has been to run the editorial pages for The Denver Post. My most important responsibility is the publication of our unsigned editorials: the opinions of the entity that is The Denver Post.

As editorial writers, we strive to meet the standard that the writing we do represents journalism's highest expression. And just like any other storyteller, we're subjected to mistakes and emotional reaction. But such are our goals. We strive to represent the conscience of the newsroom.

To do that, we have to be critical thinkers, and fiercely independent about it (even if it isn't in our nature to be fierce).

Yes, the make-up of the editorial board governs opinions that more often align with one ideology over another. Boards tend to develop their own personality, governed by past opinions and civic goals. Fair enough and no matter, for there will also be significant differences or complaints with those we more-readily align. When that happens, we express our criticisms as needed. And, worth noting: We invite those who disagree with us to offer their point of view, and we publish their opinions.

What guides us? Our goal should be to express as honestly as we can arguments for a way of life we see as more beneficial to as many sapiens as possible.

We value cooperation and compromise. We long for fair-minded debate and statesmanship.

Similarly, you must find your guiding star. My hope and advice is that you choose to be independent-minded, objective critical thinkers who refuse to take the easy path of partisanship.

That said, watch out: Once the world realizes you can write, you'll be presented with temptations that lead you away from writing the truth. To begin with, most of the time it pays a lot better to answer the question about truth-telling narrowly. The dependable money is in telling stories that support a specific agenda. But as writers of fiction or history, of journalism or opinion journalism, we shouldn't be satisfied with propaganda. We should seek to explode propaganda.

To do so, we must do reporting. We must gather facts and write stories and essays based on those facts and the narrative or logic they support. We must take into account many opposite points of view and contrasting arguments and explanations. We must take into account past practices — history — economic impacts, scientific studies and projections. We must try to create as complete and factual a story or analysis or argument as we can.

Our goals as creative writers should be the same, but our reporting is different. We should want and seek to tell the stories of human experience. We should tell the truth about our most difficult and contradictory emotions and desires, our most-ingrained prejudices and hatreds, our greatest loves and affections. We should be curious and brave enough to understand and properly present innocence — and evil.

William Faulkner put it something like this: We should write about the problem of the human heart in conflict with itself.

Here too, as fiction writers, it often pays better in the grand scheme of things to pull your punches. The world of commercial publication finds it far easier to promote books that don't dig deeply into the human experience, but rely on boilerplate, page-turner plots, stereotype, cliché, simple characters and false promises. So too does the academic world too often withhold its rewards and perks to those who fall outside the prevailing ideologies and hypotheses of the day.

Another way of saying what I'm getting at is that you should strive to avoid the pack. Don't just write what everyone else is writing. Yes, the risks are greater if you do, and even the rewards are complicated by the vicious reactions from the pack, the special interests, the envious and the ignorant.

Another warning: You'll never face greater fury in your life than when you expose hypocrisy. Such exposure is like scalding a nerve. You'll never feel worse than when you get it wrong.

Sometimes your observations, your truth-telling, will hurt those you love. The closer you circle to home in such writing, the greater the damage to your psyche and well-being.

Yet getting such stories right is what we most need. Such stories are the ones you must write. Such stories are the ones the fakers and the rat bastards desperately don't want us to tell.

Why else would we write? Why would we exhaust ourselves trying to be novelists or poets when the money is elsewhere, and keep at it even when we don't win prizes or get published, which is most of the time? Why do we keep at it as journalists and academics when the world seems uninterested and there are more efficient ways of paying the bills?

We write because the act itself is the best way we have of being honest. Writing is a higher form of thinking, a more powerful and profound approach to thought than any other. We don't really know what we know until we can explain ourselves through writing. Writing is a discipline we strive to develop in order to think clearly, and by doing so, we help others find meaning in their lives.

Remembering this about writing is key, especially when toiling in obscurity. When the voices in your head tell you to screw it all and give up, how do you keep going?

My hope is that achieving recognition for one's writing should be of secondary concern. The very act of writing is a great gift to us sapiens, and we are never better than when we are trying to use it as best as we are able.

Even a lifetime of writing in obscurity or in the trenches is worth the reward of knowing your own mind.

And you never know, some day you might get to write editorials for a living. Or finally sell that novel.

So what gives us the right to even try?

As I mentioned at the top of these remarks, when I first started in newsrooms, I faced stories about loss and death that haunted me.

What gives you the right to intrude on these people, I would ask myself.

I would wonder: How can I even show up on their doorstep?

How can I keep at a young man who tells me he's still not ready to talk about the experience of trying to rescue tornado victims and instead finding his mother dead before him?

My first answer was that an editor for a newsroom paying my bills told me to do it. That answer helped get me started, at least, but then came the realization that most survivors want their stories

to be told. They want the world to have an accurate and compassionate account of what was lost, what was taken, and what that experience meant and means. And how it might be overcome.

The young guardsman I struggled to interview was reticent because he also was struggling. He struggled to hold his life together. He nevertheless remained committed to his duty, as the only way he knew to honor his mother's expectations, example and memory.

Stories like his inspire us in miraculous ways.

We need those stories.

As human beings we give the right to tell our stories to those we trust.

What gives us the right to tell stories is our commitment to fulfilling our duty to tell the truth with all we have. We do it to honor men and women like that guardsman.

We began with a series of questions. The last one was: What message are you sending the world by working to be a writer that you want it to recognize?

Your answer will become the reason you do what you do in the way that you decide to do it.

Your answer will matter every time you write.