

PART I

PEP TALKS

— NO. 1 —

TRAINING FOR THE MARATHON

When I was twelve years old, for no rational reason, I ran around the block. My father reset his odometer and drove the car along my course to find that I'd covered six-tenths of a mile. The next day, I ran around a two-block area that ended up being exactly a mile. This went on. Right before I turned fourteen, my father followed me all over the area of my training as I tried to run the length of a marathon. As it ended up, I didn't make 26.2 miles, but I did go 20.6 without stopping. Granted, I'd slowed down to something like a forty-minute pace, but what the hell.

My father, I should point out, had this theory that if I went out at a dead sprint every day when I ran, over time I'd be able to run a mile on a dead sprint. That didn't work out, either.

Such a running regimen can be equated to the writing process. If a person writes (and reads good work) every day, then at the end of the year he has no other option but to have evolved into a better writer. There will be bad writing days—as in running there are shin splints, tendonitis, pulled muscles, head colds that make breathing difficult—but in the end, after a year of writing a page or more per day, the writer is stronger.

Listen, if I went out today and ran as far as I could (I'm old, I've had some bad habits over the years, et cetera), I might make it a mile. That would be stretching it, but let's say a mile. And if I wait for a year to run again, then I'll only run a mile again, at best. If I write and read today, and wait a year to write and read again, I will be no better.

— NO. 2 —

MULCH MATH

When spreading mulch on an herb garden, I have found it is best to do some mathematics beforehand and figure out how many bags of mulch to load up in the back of the pickup. But then it will never be enough, for some reason. If your herb garden needs twelve bags of pine bark nugget mulch, buy sixteen bags. More than likely, you'll spread out the sixteen bags and still need a couple more. So buy twenty-four and have leftover mulch.

In writing, it's much easier to cut your story or novel down than it is to add fifty pages. Overwrite, in regard to length. It takes too much time and effort to drive back and forth to the garden center, picking up one or two bags of mulch at a time.

— NO. 3 —

ON READING

Saying "I don't like to read other writers' works, because it'll affect my own style and voice" is a ludicrous, lazy comment. You will always be affected by someone else's style and voice, unless you plan to invent a brand new language of words unknown to any other human being. Read all of the contemporary writers being published. It'll seep into your consciousness in a mysterious way, and make you a better, more-likely-to-be-published writer. If you read *only* the classics, you will not be published, though you may do well on *Jeopardy!*, should the category be Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and Proust.

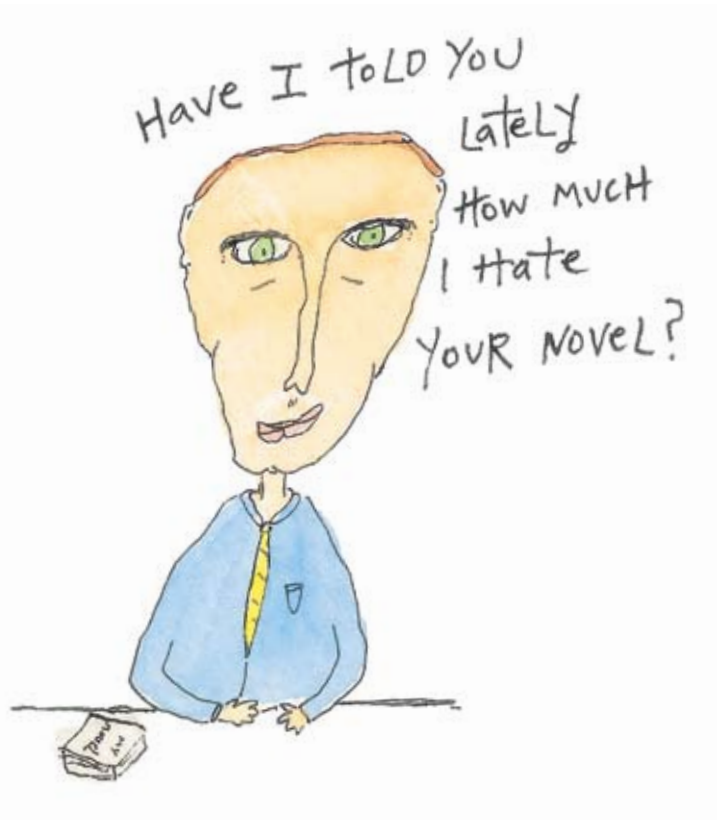
— NO. 4 —

WHEN TO TAKE ADVICE

If you have a group of friends, colleagues, or classmates reading your story drafts—and personally I'm against having too many people read drafts, seeing as friends' opinions don't count as much as editors' opinions—and all of them say that the beginning sucks but the ending's fine (or vice versa), then take heed.

If I bake a cake, and give eight people slices, and all eight people say, “You might should’ve used something called ‘sugar’ in the cake mix,” then I would be an idiot to yell out, “No! This is how I made it. This is what came out. This was how it was supposed to be, and don’t mess with my creative process!”

Instead, I should take their advice and bake a better cake next time.



— NO. 5 —

DIGGING A HOLE

When planting a magnolia tree, it’s easiest to dig a hole that you know is much deeper than the root ball, put the tree in the hole, eyeball it, take the tree back out, then fill in another foot of the loose dirt back into the hole. Do not dig, place in the tree, say to yourself “about six more inches,” take out the tree, dig, place the tree, say to yourself “about three more inches,” take out the tree, dig, place the tree, say “one more inch,” take out the tree, dig, then plant the tree. Make it easy as possible.

This is similar to writing more than you need to, in case you missed it previously. Write a bunch, then take out.

Or: Make a big pot of vegetable soup. Put in everything possible. Later, take out the vegetables that you don’t like. I’m not a big fan of okra, but I know that it flavors soup well.

Don’t eat the bay leaf, by the way.

When making chili, drain the fat.

— NO. 6 —

ON REVISITING THEMES

Do not think, *I have written a story about a narrator having troubles with his father, therefore I cannot do it again.*

Do not think, *I have written a story about two friends who've had a big fight, or a married couple undergoing problems, or a protagonist who's having problems with a quirky new neighbor, therefore I cannot write another story about such characters.*

If you travel to, say, New York City once a year, do you take a different route each time? Do you say, "I flew from here to Atlanta, then to New York last time, so this time I have to fly from here to Memphis, then Detroit, then New York City"? Do you say, "I flew last time, so I must take a bus this time, a train the next, and hitchhike on what may be my final trip to New York"?

Some writers have carved an entire good career out of boy-girl perplexities or out of dad-lad mistrust. After you've written a thousand such stories, *then* think about a new direction.

— NO. 7 —

SCHEDULES AND SNIPERS

If you usually write between five and seven o'clock in the morning, but for some reason have a glitch in your schedule and for a week or month have free time from five to seven in the afternoon, please change your schedule. Do not think, *I can't write at this time.* Do not think, *I'll just take a month off of writing until I get back on track with the schedule that works for me.*

Any two free hours to write should work for you. Maybe it's a sign. Maybe you had to quit writing between five and seven in the morning because a deranged sniper is traveling around your area, shooting at houses before dawn. Don't let the deranged sniper make you quit writing altogether.

— NO. 8 —

WHERE IDEAS COME FROM

People ask me where I get my ideas. I say Kmart, or Wal-Mart, or local yard sales. But this isn't necessarily the truth. It's usually two steps outside my front door, or two steps *inside* my front door.

