Writing the Contemplative Essay

by Dinty W. Moore

“If you can speak what you will never hear, if you can write what you will never read, you have done rare things.” —Henry David Thoreau

I can remember as a young man dreaming that someday I would be a writer. My dreams included my byline in a magazine, my picture on the “featured contributors” page, and eventually my name on the cover of a book. On days that I let my dreams run wild and free, I fantasized about hefty royalty checks and a cozy house on the rocky coast of Maine.

Well, some of this has come true (after thirty years of stubborn progress), and some of it has not (in truth, I’ve yet to even visit Maine), but what I have learned along the way is that my dreams were missing the point entirely. The rewards of publication are fleeting, while the rewards of a regular writing practice are countless.

You may have run across the famous quote from essayist Joan Didion: “I write to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see, and what it means.” Or perhaps this one from Jean Malaquais: “The only time I know that something is true is the moment I discover it in the act of writing.”

Accomplished authors often comment on the idea that they have little or no sureness of what they want to say until they’ve actually put it down on the page.

Why is this notion so popular?

Because it is true. And this self-knowledge is the true prize for the writer.

As Didion and Malaquais have realized, the happy by-product of arranging the perfect sentences in the exact order necessary, of capturing in language those moments that most people simply dismiss as being “too hard to put into words,” is that one has a richer life. Knowing what we think, see, feel, and what it all may mean to us beyond the current moment leads inevitably to a deeper appreciation of all that surrounds us, both the joys and the challenges.

As Heraclitus reportedly once advised, “Know thyself!”

Which brings us to the contemplative essay.

Best-selling novelist Ann Patchett once said, “Writing is a job, a tal-
ent, but it’s also the place to go in your head. It is the imaginary friend you drink your tea with in the afternoon,” and the contemplative essay is what you might share with that friend.

In fact, some believe the essay form as devised by Montaigne came about because of the grief he felt when his close friend, the poet Étienne de la Boétie, died young. Montaigne’s essays were the conversations he would have shared with his dear friend, had de la Boétie lived.

Of course, writing is always a bit artificial, and I mean that in a good way. When I try to explain a complex thought process to my friends at the dinner table, I usually stammer, stumble, contradict myself, lose my way, and follow numerous inefficient paths back to my main point. When I write an essay, I have the luxury of editing, and rethinking, and rearranging, so that—on a good day—a reader thinks, “My, that Moore fellow sure thinks clearly.”

It is an illusion, of course. Just like the finest ballet dancer makes that leap into the air seem so effortless and natural only after hours upon hours of painful, strenuous studio work, the better writers seem naturally articulate on the page even though their first drafts may have been total, muddled wrecks.

So the contemplative essay combines the sense of free-form thinking with careful editing to create the artifice of good conversation on the page. Of course, you can’t have actual conversation, unless you are coauthoring with another person, so it falls upon you to hold up both ends.

Ask questions.
Suggest alternative ways of looking at things.
That’s what the contemplative essay is all about.

A Note on Meandering
One of the pleasures of the contemplative essay, for the reader, is the meandering sense of the form, the idea that you are taking a leisurely stroll with an interesting mind. It is lovely to observe the author as he glides off on an unexpected tangent, presents a few loop-the-loops, or does some graceful wing tilt, before he glides effortlessly home.

But this too is an illusion of sorts.

The personal essay can seem as if the author is just ambling along, considering various thought flowers along the winding path, but remember that the writer has to be in control (by the later drafts, not necessarily at the beginning).

And remember the reader, always.

“A responsibility of literature is to make people awake, present, alive,” Natalie Goldberg advises. “If the writer wanders, then the reader,
too, will wander. The fly on the table might be part of the whole description of a restaurant. It might be appropriate to tell precisely the sandwich that it just walked over, but there is a fine line between precision and self-indulgence.”

Even the most contemplative, wide-ranging essay is telling a story of sorts, and the reader is on a quest to see how all of the pieces will add up.

So always ask yourself as a writer, “Is this piece a piece of the larger story, or am I just wandering off the track?”

Three Quick Tips

• The best areas to explore in writing are those areas that you truly don’t understand. If you already firmly believe that something is wrong, then you will discover very little putting your convictions into an essay. (Write a letter to the editor instead.) If you know that you are entirely in favor of something, then why put forth the effort to dissect and explore? But certain situations—those gray areas of human existence—seem never to resolve themselves. For instance, why do two essentially good people who try hard to make a marriage work still sometimes fail? Are children better off with two parents who remain married but are always tense and at the edge of anger, or are they better off with two divorced parents, shuffling from household to household? Are there victimless crimes, and if so, why does the government spend time and resources enforcing laws against them? These questions never seem easily answered, especially when they involve people you know and love.

• Before writing, make a list of all of the common points—the clichés and usual turns of discussion—around the topic you are exploring. Then write an essay using none of those common points.

• Tackle something so vexing that in the end you wind up surprising yourself.

YOUR CONTEMPLATIVE ESSAY

The following prompts are in no way prescriptive but instead are designed to point you in a direction. If that direction leads somewhere fruitful, then by all means go ahead and follow where I have pointed. If you feel pulled in a contradictory direction, however, give in to that urge. The goal here is not to win a “most cooperative student” star on your report card; the goal is to be writing in a fresh and surprising way.
1. Consider this peculiar passage from our role model Montaigne: “’Tis not to be believed how strangely all sorts of odours cleeve to me, and how apt my skin is to imbibe them. He that complains of nature that she has not furnished mankind with a vehicle to convey smells to the nose had no reason; for they will do it themselves, especially to me; my very mustachios, which are full, perform that office; for if I stroke them but with my gloves or handkerchief, the smell will not out a whole day; they manifest where I have been …” Now, don’t let the fancy words fool you. What he is saying is that if he eats a corned beef and rye for lunch, with mustard, he can still smell it on his whiskers at bed time. Montaigne was all about his own peculiarities, and he was never shy about sharing. What are your foibles and peculiarities? You might begin with a list, but eventually choose one—the odder the better, but pick one you aren’t too ashamed to discuss freely—and try to bring the reader into your confidence.

2. Here’s Montaigne again: “Others shape the man; I portray him, and offer to the view one in particular, who is ill-shaped enough, and whom, could I refashion him, I should certainly make very different from what he is.” This was, in truth, a radical notion at the time. Writers were supposed to portray noble virtues and draw straight lines signifying the path to righteousness. Montaigne would have none of that. He believed in portraying the truth about himself, his “ill-shaped” nature, and if you’ve read much recent memoir, you know that Montaigne started a movement that continues even today. So who are you, really? What makes you human?

3. Another classic essayist, William Hazlitt, began an essay thusly: “One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone.” Do you prefer traveling alone or with company? Contemplate for a moment how the experience of walking through deep woods feels when you are simply by yourself and how it feels when you are in the company of a congenial friend. (Better yet, find a forest or lakeside and actually have the experience before writing.) How about a museum or historic cathedral? Do you crave solitude when in the presence of art and architecture, or good company?

4. Hazlitt’s contemporary, Charles Lamb, writes that “The human species, according to the best theory I can form of it, is composed of two distinct races, the men who borrow, and the men who lend.” Now that’s an interesting dichotomy, but certainly we could divide the human race up in any number of thousands of way. People who eat fast
food while driving home from the drive-through and those who would never be caught dead with mustard streaming down the front of their shirt. People who floss every night and those who do not. People who buy more books than they can ever read and people who haven’t held a book since high school. Those who are publicly religious and those who keep their spiritual beliefs deeply hidden. What dichotomy makes sense to you? Explore.

5. Woolf observed the finality of death by watching that ill-fated moth, but others of us realize this in other ways: the death of a parent, the withering of a summer garden, the site of a dead fawn in the forest. Where have you encountered death, and other than the obvious emotions of sadness and loss, what was evoked?

6. What has changed about modern manners and customs, such as the holding of doors for women, respect for the elderly, kindness to strangers, behavior at four-way stop signs. Avoid merely sounding cranky here, however. What is lost when certain customs fade away, and why does it matter?

7. You can, of course, take the alternate view, that certain customs that have faded away are gone for good reason, and we are all better off.

8. Why do so many of our politicians, especially the ones who are so quick to tell us what our moral values should be, end up involved in their own marital sex scandals? Don’t waste time decrying the fact: After all, there are few enough people out there who think sex scandals are a good thing. Instead, consider what it is about human nature that makes this so.

9. What are the traits that identify a quality next-door neighbor? Are those traits lost or just refashioned in the modern world?

10. We all, as Walt Whitman once pointed out, contain multitudes. Write an essay from the point-of-view of your hopeful self. In what ways can you suggest that the world is not going to hell in a hand basket, that climate change is not about to destroy us all, that human civilization is not spiraling into a narcissistic void?

11. Write an essay titled “In Praise of Not Walking in the Woods.”