

Upfront

"You should write a book."

I think I've heard these words, though it might be my aspirational imagination's voice. There's a part of me that believes I'm capable, and a part that subconsciously dreads the potential failure as much as the laborious slog.

Few vocations have a lower barrier-to-entry than writing. If you have a language and a pen or a laptop, or – perhaps – a chatbot, you've got everything you need. But do you have a thought or a story that anyone wants or needs to hear?

A combination of unabashed ego, untainted naivete, and a love for creating something from nothing shape the nascent writer's mind. But the fear mountain demands an incredibly steep climb.

I craft this column in about an hour and a half, maybe two. From ideation (the hardest part, by far) to edited copy. But I can't sit still much longer than that. (And sometimes the two hours include a couple of away-from-the-keyboard breaks.) This page runs between 800 and 1,000 words (today it's 950), give or take a few. Per Google, "the average length of an American novel usually falls between 70,000 and 100,000 words. The character development, complex story arcs, vivid description, and soul-mining self-examination that are novel-writing musts are a lot more demanding than the work that goes into a stand-alone essay. So, the pace will be slower if I do it. Thus, for a 100,000-word book, with a 400 words-per-hour best case, it's 250 hours for the first pass. Fifty full days, if you do 5 good hours a day...which might not sound like a lot, but it is.

After that, what do you have? Maybe it will be terrific; but, perhaps, it will mercilessly suck. And your grossly inflated self-worth will crumble beneath the weight of your disappointment and shame. The thing you have always quietly believed you were destined to do is a thing you should never have considered at all.

On the other side of the what-if coin...you're 60. Who knows how many good years you have left? Your mind seems as sharp as ever, but what about next year, or five years from now, or 10? When you "have more time." Which you will and you won't. After all, your schedule is ultimately your choice. It is now, and it will be then. And there are plenty of things you can pretend are life-dependent essential to perpetually forestall this daunting pass/fail lifetime-achievement final exam.

A book. An essay. Just words, nothing more. How does one maintain the arrogance to believe they matter, even a little bit? For me, it's

down to a couple of things, and how not having or experiencing those things would lead to a less-than life.

I'm not great at opening to people in real time. If I didn't write, I'd be socially and spiritually isolated. Writing is my gateway to humanity, one that other people – most people – have without having to look for it. I often find that link to the rest of the world in the text on a page I've produced.

Writers like metaphors. Here's one. I own a rental house. I'm selling it. During due diligence, the buyer's inspection noted that the house is missing a roof vent. The house is 70 years old. It has never had a vent. So, the air in the attic hasn't circulated as well as it would have otherwise done. It's been stagnant up there for decades. Dark, damp. It's fine, but it could have been better. No leaks. No obvious problems. The roof was not going to fail. Nevertheless, the vent is important, and we installed one. Writing is a vent for me. There's a lot inside my head and it would probably be okay if it remained there, but I'm structurally better off if there's an outlet through which I can flush my festering thoughts.

For a fundamentally shy person, it's very rewarding to discover that I've connected with somebody. I was in my coffee shop with Jenna. We were meeting with somebody and doing a little work. While Jenna and the other person were exchanging words, I heard a whisper from a couple tables away. "I read his stuff all the time. I love it. He's really good." Is it bad that such a moment provides me joy...makes me feel better (about myself, perhaps, if I'm being honest) than I otherwise would?

Twenty-two years ago, it was excruciating to hit "send" and commit this column to print. For the next several days, I would agonize over how you or others would interpret my words. Nowadays, the process is relatively sweat-free. When my mom tells me she likes my column (which she does almost every two weeks), I often respond by asking her what it was about...and I'm not being cute. Like the air in the newly vented roof, it has benignly floated away.

I still have worries, though. The people I love – do I write about them too frequently? Or not enough to reflect how much they truly mean to me? Do I share things they have not sanctioned? (Yes.) Do they realize it's my most natural way of professing my love, even if it's a little awkward? (I hope so.) They are the characters in my story, without them my autobiography would be a massive blank page.

It comes down to this conclusion...an action item, of sorts. If one or more of you tell me I should write a book, I'm going to do it. And I'm starting right away. I might begin compiling and reworking a collection of essays, selected from a couple decades' output. But the novel will be right behind it. Got any good ideas?



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