

PAGE-TURNER

THE MIDDLE OF THINGS: ADVICE FOR YOUNG WRITERS

By Andrew Solomon

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Illustration by Roman Muradov

The following is adapted from a speech the author gave at the Whiting Writers' Awards on March 5th.

When I had just finished my schooling and was looking for a job, a friend put me in touch with an absurdly well-connected British biographer who, she assured me, would help me find the professional position of my dreams. I wrote and asked him whether we might meet, explaining that I would appreciate his advice on securing literary work and enclosing some of my early efforts. He duly invited me for tea. The advice I had in mind sounded like this: “You must call so-and-so at this number and say I suggested it and he will publish you and give you loads of money.” After giving me a cup of weak tea—no sandwiches, no pastry, not even sugar or milk—he said, “I have only one piece of advice for you. Have a vision and cleave to it.” We then discussed the weather for twenty minutes.

While I, unlike that biographer, am an artesian font of utilitarian suggestions, I can now see that being asked to comment on young brilliance is an explicit invitation to pomposity. I have done my best to R.S.V.P. in the negative. The proximate, tacit call to romanticism is harder for me to resist. While all old people have been young, no young people have been old, and this troubling fact engenders the frustration of all parents and elders, which is that while you can describe your experience you cannot confer it. It's tempting, nonetheless, to pose as an expert—and in another way it's tempting to say, ‘I know nothing that you don't already know.’ Neither of those postures is right. Every stage of life longs for others. When one is young and eager, one aspires to maturity, and everyone older would like nothing better than to be young. We have equal things to teach each other. Life is most transfixing when you are awake to diversity, not only of ethnicity, ability, gender, belief, and sexuality but also of age and experience. The worst mistake anyone can make is to perceive anyone else as lesser. The deeper you look into other souls—and writing is primarily an exercise in doing just that—the clearer people's inherent dignity becomes. So I would like to be young again—for the obvious dermatological advantages, and because I would like to recapture who I was before the clutter of experience made me a bit more sagacious and exhausted. What I'd really like, in fact, is to be young and middle-aged, and perhaps even very old, all at the same time—and to be dark- and fair-skinned, deaf and hearing, gay and straight, male and female. I can't do that in life, but I can do it in writing, and so can you. Never forget that the truest luxury is imagination, and that being a writer gives you the leeway to exploit all of the imagination's curious intricacies, to be what you were, what you are, what you will be, and what everyone else is or was or will be, too.

I want to take a moment to talk about the middle of things. The middle of things is less exciting than the beginning and less dramatic than the end. Middles can seem humdrum. Say that your current relationship to writing has been like falling in love: we exalt falling in love as the finest of all possible experiences. But the reason people marry and stay married is that the middle, when it can be made to work, far outclasses the beginning. Ask people who have been happily married for a decade or two whether they would like to start all over again, and you'll find that they mostly wouldn't, even if some are tempted by the occasional dalliance. It gets to be that way with your writing, too, as you get an ever-clearer sense of what interests you, what you can do, what you'd like to be able to do. Your mature work is the outcome of your early work: that there can be no meaningful middle without a meaningful beginning. But the middle is as joyous as enduring love.

In thinking about this address, I returned to Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet," the ultimate expression of intergenerational literary wisdom. If you've never read these letters, then do. They are worth reading while you are young so that you can imagine yourself as the recipient of this brilliance; they are worth reading when you are old as a measure of what your own acumen ought to approach. One of Rilke's injunctions is easy to follow: "Read as little as possible of literary criticism." I'm going to pass that one along unmediated. But others warrant a closer reading. The most famous passage is this:

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms, or books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

The insight is tremendous, but he has it backwards. Belief in answers can get you through your early days, while the belief in questions, which is so much less tangible, takes a long time to arrive at. To know more is simply a matter of industry; to accept what you will never know is trickier. The belief that questions are precious whether or not they have answers is the hallmark of a mature writer, not the naïve blessing of a beginner.

Of writing itself, Rilke wrote: "Depict your sorrows and desires, your passing thoughts and beliefs in some kind of beauty—depict all that with heartfelt, quiet, humble sincerity; and use to express yourself the things that surround you, the images of your dreams and the objects of your memory. If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor or unimportant place." All writers know this problem. A poor workman blames his tools, and we have only two: language and experience. Neither one is so poor as to hamper our ability to do what we dream of. The use of language gets taught at M.F.A. programs nationwide. The use of experience is far more elusive, a long-term game not easily won. Experience poses the questions we are asked to live, and our writing is the mere shadow of an answer.

Rilke adds, "Things aren't all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life." That's not far off base, but, of course, the writer's job is to say those things that appear unsayable, to cloak with language those volatile experiences that seem barely able to endure it.

Rilke has written, "Search for the cause, find the impetus that bids you write. Put it to this test: Does it stretch out its roots in the deepest place of your heart? Can you avow that you would die if you were forbidden to write? Above all, in the most silent hour of your night, ask yourself this: Must I write? Dig deep into yourself for a true answer. And if it should ring its assent, if you can confidently meet this serious question with a simple, 'I must,' then build your life upon it." That rhetoric of urgency is the credo of most writers: we may be on this path for profit, for fame, for catharsis—but, more fundamentally, we are there because it seems the only possibility.

Rilke goes on, "It is clear that we must trust what is difficult; everything alive trusts in it, everything in Nature grows and defends itself any way it can and is spontaneously itself, tries to be itself at all costs and against all opposition. We know little, but that we must trust in what is difficult is a certainty that will never abandon us; it is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it." The Romantic sublime entails the exchange of easier for more difficult pleasures. This is an attractive bargain only when more difficult pleasures are more propitious than less difficult ones. What Rilke is suggesting is not simply that we give up easier pleasures because the best things in life happen to be difficult, but rather that the difficulty itself is what makes those efforts so rewarding—that we need not merely endure difficulty to get to a goal, but must understand difficulty as part of the goal. That sounds masochistic, but it is masochistic only insofar as the act of writing is masochistic: insofar as the burdensome activity of marrying words to experience is a source of pain as well as pleasure.

To be an artist means: not to calculate and count; to grow and ripen like a tree which does not hurry the flow of its sap and stands at ease in the spring gales without fearing that no summer may follow. It will come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are simply there in their vast, quiet tranquility, as if eternity lay before them.

This is what I will say to you most urgently: there are many obvious differences between middle age and youth, between having lived more and done more and being newly energized and fresh to the race. But the greatest difference is patience. Youth is notoriously impatient, even though there is no need for impatience early on, when people have the time to be patient. In middle age, the wisdom of patience seems more straightforward, but there aren't so many days left. But Rilke is correct that we must all write as though eternity lay before us. Enjoy the flexibility that span of eternity offers. The discourse between the young and the nostalgic retains some of its inherent poetry in the form of a longing intimacy. The freshness of younger people awakens memories in older ones—because though you, young writers, are yourselves at the brink of your own future, you evoke the past for those who came before you.

Some of Rilke's advice seems obscure today, while some of it has been followed so often and so deeply that it sounds banal. But some of it is prescient. Today, we have no choice but to live the questions, because the prospective answers have burgeoned. We no longer expect much sense of the world. Deferring to that incoherence can feel dizzying, and there is an urge to simplify, but simplicity is often a mistake: not pure but reductive. Your work is not opposed to your life; you do not have to choose between them. It is only by living in the world that you acquire the ability to represent it. I am addicted to artists' residencies, to sequestering myself to concentrate, to the vision that comes in silence, to Rilke's vaunted solitude—but not to the exclusion of the engagement that gives you things to say. Try not to let your words outstrip your experience.

Never suppose that the humorous is the enemy of the serious. Middles can get ponderous, weighted down with their own importance. Lightness is a gift of the beginning—try to keep it with you for the whole stretch. Much press redounds to hate speech, which can instigate destruction. But even hate speech brings its point of view up from the darkness. To hate hatred is too abstract for men and women; that is the job of the angels. To hate the language of hatred is well within our powers. Learn that selective vitriol.

We are flooded with new technologies of representation and communication. There will be unforeseeable innovations in the course of your lifetimes, as surprising to you as online culture remains for many people my age. When I was a kid, I assumed that there would be colonies on the moon by now, but if you had told me that I could carry a small object in my pocket that would allow me to speak with and see anyone in the world, that could give me directions to anyplace I wanted to go, that would contain my favorite music, and that could allow me to access information on any topic, not to mention most of world literature, I'd have laughed at the absurd notion. As you ripen, you'll notice that time is the weirdest thing in the world, that these surprises are relentless, and that getting older is not a stroll but an ambush.

Despite every advancement, language remains the defining nexus of our humanity; it is where our knowledge and hope lie. It is the precondition of human tenderness, mightier than the sword but also infinitely more subtle and ultimately more urgent. Remember that writing things down makes them real; that it is nearly impossible to hate anyone whose story you know; and, most of all, that even in our post-postmodern era, writing has a moral purpose. With twenty-six shapes arranged in varying patterns, we can tell every story known to mankind, and make up all the new ones—indeed, we can do so in most of the world's known tongues. If you can give language to experiences previously starved for it, you can make the world a better place.

I used to say that my books were my children, but now that I have actual children I've found that books are by comparison rather pliable and accommodating, if somewhat less affectionate. I can speak to you lightly about time, about getting to be middle-aged, about having a vision and cleaving to it. But in some ways I failed to have such a vision. I grew up in a time when my current life was unimaginable, in a time before gay marriage, a time before people like me could have children, and my ignorance of what was to come engendered a paralytic sadness that has turned out to be irrelevant. I don't know what you may presume impossible, but I can say that some of it will turn out otherwise. Equally, I can say that forms of justice that seem unshakably strong will fall apart while you aren't looking. Since I was your age, women's reproductive rights have eroded steadily, anti-immigrant resentments have surged, and incidents of appalling racism have gripped the national conscience even since we reelected our first African-American President. I wish I could tell you which issues will move forward surprisingly fast and which will slip unaccountably backward. There will be surprises in store on both fronts. All I know for sure is that those twenty-six shapes are what we have to defend our liberty and sustain our hope.

Andrew Solomon is a professor of medical psychology at Columbia University. His books include "Far and Away," "Far from the Tree," and "The Noonday Demon."

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