

The subject can never justify your prose or redeem its failures.

When it comes to writing, the intensity of the writer's feelings and  
The power of the subject mean almost nothing.

We only glimpse that power and intensity  
In the power and intensity of the prose.

Yet somehow we believe that subject is everything.  
We believe the writer *is* her story  
And that her authority somehow depends on what's happened in her life,  
That her authority is authenticity.  
People clamor to tell their stories in words.  
This doesn't make them writers,  
Nor does it make their stories matter.

If *you* are your story, where do you get another?

If you understand how to build silence and patience  
and clarity into your prose,  
How to construct sentences that are limber and rhythmic and precise  
And filled with perception,  
You can write about anything, even yourself.

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You may feel uncomfortable with the word "authority."

Perhaps it sounds dominant, overbearing, "authoritarian." You may need to work on the problem of self-deprecation,

Self-distrust,

Especially when it comes to noticing the world around you

And what you're able to say about it.

You may be used to denying your perceptions and dismissing your awareness.

You may be caught in a constant state of demurral  
Or have the habit of belittling yourself.

Watch for the chronic language of self-disparagement,  
The moments when you say, "My problem is . . ."  
Or "It doesn't matter what I think."

If you say these kinds of things, you probably say them out of habit, almost unconsciously.

This is a product of your education too, at home and at school.

Pay attention to it.

Recognize how harmful it is.

Its message—subliminal and overt—is that your perceptions are worthless.

Do everything you can to subvert this habit.

. . .



The most subversive thing you can do is to write  
clearly and directly,  
Asserting the facts as you understand them,  
Your perceptions as you've gathered them.

You'll ground your own authority in the language  
itself

As your sentences become better and better.  
You may need to write for yourself for a while,  
And listen only to the language.

That's okay.

The first person who needs to be persuaded of your  
authority

Is you.

Don't make it impossible to persuade yourself.

Part of the trouble may be this:

You're afraid your ideas aren't good enough,  
Your sentences not clever or original enough.

But what if your ideas are coherent and thoughtful?

What if your perceptions are accurate and true?

Your sentences clear and direct?

What if allowing us to see what's accurate and true is  
among the best work writing can do?

Saying the obvious thing briefly and clearly and  
Observing the critical detail are hard enough.

It's surprising how often ideas that seem obvious to you  
Are in no way apparent to the reader.

And vice versa.

What seems like common sense to you may come as a  
revelation to the reader.

The only sure test of your ideas is whether they inter-  
est you

And arouse your own expectations—

The capacity for surprise that you discover as you  
work.

One purpose of writing—its central purpose—is to  
offer your testimony

About the character of existence at this moment.

It will be part of your job to say how things are,

To attest to life as it is.

This will feel strange at first.

You'll wonder whether you're allowed to say things  
that sound

Not merely observant but true,

And not only true in carefully framed, limited  
circumstances,

But true for all of us and, perhaps, for all time.

Who asked you to say how things are?

Where do you get the authority to do any of this?

The answer is yours to find.

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Some people think that discipline is imposed from  
without,

Regular hours, strict containment, rigorous exclusion.