r economic success with a public
ote support for the arts in this

el had to be rewritten with notes
ee or four) every one thousand
rrifying? Exhausting? Of course,
or twenty-seventh production
urth . . . and every production,
ind of rewriting of your work
at a play is. The text of your play
you hope, you pray) create their
it—the actors with their bodies
with their choices—and they'll
tely surprising to you and at the
ur play than you had ever imag-
course, be taught. We are always
w to rewrite our plays because
ed with different people.

Bed

only magazine I subscribe to.
ien I have a couple sci-fi books,
mething easy and sweet, a Jack
best-of-the-year anthologies, I
n within reach. I always have a
the time to read. Philip Hoars's
tence of God by Rebecca Gold-
in life, to take the plunge.

---

have to produce, and so what if
ve to produce. At Iowa State, in
ng a draft every week, four drafts,
very week, so they got into the
novelist by being a perfectionist
get the book written. One of the
roup in Iowa was that they were
as production, not perfection. . . .
't really matter what teacher you
ers' work and make friends with

others who are as interested in writing as you are, with the same aspirations. That's what's valuable. That's the good thing about a workshop.

JOHN IRVING: Maybe "community" is a better word for the Iowa Writers' Workshop—more accurate than "culture," I mean. The community of writers in Iowa City is a real thing. You can feel it, and it doesn't seem to be altered by changes of location: those Quonset huts down on the Iowa River, or the hotel-sized English-Philosophy Building, or the new digs nearer to downtown. I was never so much of the feeling that I was part of a community of writers as I felt, at various times, in Iowa City. And that's a good thing because the work of being a writer is pretty lonely.

I was never so much of the feeling that I was part of a community of writers as I felt, at various times, in Iowa City. And that's a good thing because the work of being a writer is pretty lonely.

Creativity refers to the ability to bring something new or useful or, in the case of the arts, something beautiful into being. Or perhaps in the case of certain schools of contemporary visual art, something the critics and sophisticated collectors think is *not* beautiful, since the idea that any work can or should be beautiful is a bourgeois expression of power relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed, according to the critical theorists, and so if you're truly in the know, the uglier the art (or the more incomprehensible the prose), the better.

We're all creative, though. Even the guy who does your income taxes can be creative (the more creative the better, if he can save you some money while keeping you out of jail). We tend to think that being creative is a good thing, and generally it is. The puny human species without a decent coat of fur or big fangs and talons has nonetheless managed to survive and thrive thanks to its ability to imagine new and creative ways of working itself out of trouble.

To be human, in other words, is to be creative.

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus holds forth on the topic of poets, lovers, and lunatics:

. . . as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

One hesitates to suggest that the Bard didn't have it quite right, but if he was expressing through Theseus his own view here, then he didn't, quite.

Strictly speaking we don't construct something new from airy nothing when we're being creative. Rather, artists innovate by drawing on common experience or from ideas that already exist that they've acquired through research or study. They often only reshape familiar stories and images and tunes, combine them with some new twist or view them from a different angle—what if the damsel in distress doesn't want to get rescued?—and thereby reenergize what has faded into the habitual, the clichéd. We make it *new*, as Ezra Pound demanded. Sometimes radically so, outraging critics and the public alike.

Still, at the heart of the creative process there often *is* an airy something: something a little ineffable, inexplicable and a little spooky—where the hell did *that* come from?—that usually strikes when we're not looking for it, while we're sweating to hammer into place an element we're convinced is essential but that doesn't want to fit, and then *aha!* the jumble of preconceptions and days (or weeks or months) of work tumbles into irrelevance and the remaining pieces fall into place. When all is going well, a work of art takes on a life of its own, the characters begin to write themselves, the story insists it wants to turn out a certain way—and the author is just along for the ride. Or so we hope.

Still, at the heart of the creative process there often *is* an airy something: something a little ineffable, inexplicable and a little spooky—where the hell did *that* come from?

Writing about the creative process, C. G. Jung remarked, "The work in process becomes the poet's fate and determines his psychic development. It is not Goethe who creates Faust, but Faust which creates Goethe."[15] Or as T. S. Eliot put it, "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."[16]

The irony here is that artists of all sorts are known for their outsized egos, but what they often crave above all else is to escape that ego, lose control, and be created. This is the heart and soul of the creative process.

ROBIN GREEN: Writing fiction and writing scripts are for me different. Script writing is a craft, so you can't have writer's block. I had it once when I worked on *Northern Exposure* for Joshua Brand and John Falsey, and Josh said, "Well, if you don't come up with a scene, then I will." I knew this wouldn't be good for my career, so I wrote the fucking scene.

So sometimes I force myself to do it, but I do it. It was worse when I wrote alone, but now I write the TV stuff with Mitch Burgess, my husband, and it's a very disciplined, work-a-day effort. It's a business: problems to be

solved, to be worked out. It's a very focused, structured thing we're doing. After twenty years, we're familiar with its demands. Not that we're not back to square one every time. It's just that there's a definite format.

But I remember when I was writing fiction, sometimes I wrote as if taking dictation, in a blessed state, in a beam. When I *tried* to write, it wasn't any good.

ALLAN GURGANUS: Like taking dictation, exactly. As if the power of the universe is flowing through you, time passing very quickly. That's when you know you're doing it. I've had what seems about twenty-three minutes pass, and the clock later says those really lasted six hours. . . . It's so thrilling, exciting. You've been off in the other world.

Other times, you come home from a party, say, when you're a little snockered—a surfacey champagne drunk, not truly gut-and-gill gin drunk—and you're sitting in the dark at the keyboard at 1:00 AM, typing as fast as you can toward some new idea, with your eyes closed . . . I find the digital stimulation is extraordinary; as soon as my fingers begin to move, it's Pavlovian, the train of dreams ten little fingers can pull. And then you close the document without rereading it, and only in the morning do you go back and print it out—inevitably there are misspellings or mistypings. But you can see where it came from and where it staggered toward, half-tipsy. Then you enter the corrections and clean it up a bit and let it sit around like cheese getting moldy. You know you're onto something you would not have snagged during a usual workday after your usual breakfast and regular coffee. It's a wonderful feeling of possession, of faith in the abiding inward sources of fiction. It doesn't happen every day. If only it did. . . .

SANDRA CISNEROS: If you're thinking about the reader or the product, if your head's involved in it, you're blocking the potential for the story to take you someplace fantastic. If your *córazon* is involved, then, like Betty Davis said, you're in for a bumpy ride. That's where I want to go with my writing. Then the writing goes someplace I never imagined. That's the kind of writing I want to do. Don't think too much . . . then you'll be able to say something wiser than your years, bigger than yourself. That's what I try to tell writers, "Don't get in the way; step aside." When you sit with your writing long enough—I know from experience—you'll have to walk through a long valley of despair. But if you can get past that, and you're humble enough, and service-oriented, if you say to yourself, *I'm here to serve*, then your higher self, your spirit, god, light, or whatever you want to call it, will take you there. But you have to be ready for that to happen. And I think if you're steering

the writing with your head, you're impeding it from happening. It's like Buddhists say, "You have to empty yourself to fill up with the everything of the universe."

ROSALYN DREXLER: I'm a worker. I don't wait for inspiration. I don't know what inspiration is. A certain connection happens as you get deeper into the work. You are not really there. You are a state of mind: at one with the creation (book or painting, etc.). Thus I think inspiration comes afterward, not before. However, a contract and a substantial advance in payment is a great inducement.

JENNIE FIELDS: First of all, I read a lot; it feeds my writing. If I don't read, I don't write. Last night, for example, I read a passage from Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. Just the fact that someone could write so exquisitely is exciting. It's the quality of his writing that stuns and humbles me. Hearing the music of the words summons my muses. When someone writes something wonderful, I want to write like that. I sit down and I'm writing.

I learned early on that the creative process in advertising comes from a different part of my brain; it's more conscious. With fiction, your subconscious does most of the work. When I wrote *Lily Beach*, there was a violent moment, and I was shocked when it happened. But looking back through the novel, I could see that I'd set up that moment all throughout the book. Still, it came as a surprise to me when it happened; my subconscious knew it would happen. *I* didn't.

I start a book by getting to know my characters and giving them an insoluble problem that I then let them solve for me. I once read, and I think it's true, if you love your theme, you'll finish the book.

I start a book by getting to know my characters and giving them an insoluble problem that I then let them solve for me. I once read, and I think it's true, if you love your theme, you'll finish the book. I don't always know what my theme is when I start. Partway through, as my characters show me who they are, the theme begins to reveal itself. I guess my theme is usually about women who don't believe they have the right to be happy, but I can't always see that in the beginning.

Because the writing comes from that deep, secret part of my brain, I can fall into the work and forget where I am. I lose all sense of time and place. It's the most Zen thing in the world: to lose yourself to what you are doing.

CATHERINE GAMMON: In therapy later I realized that part of the attraction of writing for me, as a way of exploring and expressing my cre-

ativity and myself and my spirit and my life, was that my body didn't have to be invested in the presentation of it. Early on, if I gave you a story I'd written, I couldn't be in the room while you read it. I could read it to you if I knew you really well. Later I was able to read to an audience of familiar people, and even later to many strangers, but initially, I felt like this writing needs a wall, a protection, and other people don't get in until after what's being said gets out of my body, separate from me in time and space.

Getting into Zen practice shed more light on this and kind of freed it up. Zen practice is a process of the body, of being present in the body, and the art of it is in the body. It's not just in your ideas or your thoughts or what your mind does or your imagination, and the stillness of it is itself a very high-energy act. The process is about stillness and finding stillness in the midst of activity, which is very challenging. But somehow for me it has helped to break down that wall between me and the reader or you.

Has Zen practice helped my writing? I don't know yet. Recently, it's mostly meant years of not writing. But writing and practice aren't separate. Before I really entered training in Zen, at various times I was practicing sitting and also writing, and there was a more direct connection. After I was sober, when I went off to arts colonies, I had the time and space to sit before writing, and then I would do that. When I was working on *Sorrow*, an unpublished and very dark novel, I was sitting in the morning on my writing days before I started writing, and the sitting in that situation had the function of getting the distance out of the way, that resistance, a feeling in the gut that you don't want to go there, especially if I was working on something troubled or difficult in some way. So the sitting would already have taken care of that, and I could go more freely to the writing. But that's not really what sitting is for, the purpose of sitting, and I knew that, and I felt the difference between sitting as a pre-writing activity and a larger sitting that is just sitting still in the midst of this life, for the sake of life itself, not just to get out of my own way in order to make a book.

Right now my life is so immersed in Zen training, it's like being a Sunday painter to sometimes have Fridays to write. But having those Fridays also feels like preparation for the time when I don't live in a Zen community anymore, when I'm not doing a full-time job taking care of some aspect of the temple or this large complicated community, when I will be practicing as a Zen priest in whatever way that might manifest and will also have real time for writing.

SHERRY KRAMER: The impulse to acknowledge the sacred or magical or nonrational aspect of writing is pretty strong. If writing didn't connect me with some part of the world, a connection that gave me great peace and joy,

I don't think I'd do it. It sounds both obvious and embarrassing to say it, but I feel really alive when I'm writing.

Now I have students and friends who I call self-torturers—they're people who never have that euphoric state, writers who are anxious, anxious, anxious at every step, from the doubt and worry about the work before it's written, all through the writing, and after it's done. I feel bad about this, but with students, once I figure out that this is pretty much their relationship to their work—that the anxiety and worry isn't a side effect of writing but a necessary precondition of it—I stop seeing it as something dysfunctional, and I try to get them to see it that way too. Everybody finds their way into the world of their work differently. There's no wrong way.

MARVIN BELL: At the heart of "being creative" is always achieving a point in which the nonrational, the nonlogical part of the mind has a chance to go to work. This is true of all creative writing, but it is true with a vengeance if one is writing the sort of poetry that tries to express the otherwise inexpressible.

I prefer to write when the pot boils over. Of course, over the years I have learned how to turn up the heat. I generally write very late at night, beginning after midnight, when the mind loosens its grip on the rational connections one needs in one's utilitarian life. I like staying up late, always have. I write in spurts, always have. If the energy of the language flags, I walk away, which means I lose a lot, since one can't always get back into an unfinished poem. Not if the poem has been pushing the envelope.

But I can write anywhere, and at any time, if I have to. Nothing stops me. The more I have to do—jobs, family, friends—the more I write. Energy produces more energy. And writing, when one is cookin', is an escape from time. Regardless, I prefer the late hours, and I think they encourage pushing the envelope. And sometimes I write to stamp out my brain. The idea is always to write with abandon. I tend to say *yes* to whatever comes along.

SANDRA CISNEROS: *Yes!* Say *yes* to everything! What's the worst mistake a writer can make? Thinking too much. Don't think. It's not about thinking. You think when you edit. When you create, say yes, yes to everything. When the bell rings and it's the Jehovah's Witness folks, answer the door and say *yes*. The guy at the door might be in your story. Maybe he'll leave a piece of paper that takes you to

At the heart of "being creative" is always achieving a point in which the nonrational, the nonlogical part of the mnd has a chance to go to work.

the next chapter. Say yes to everything; nothing's an accident. Later is for the editing, but in the creation, be open, be gentle, like a mother; there's nothing you say no to. Trust that the nonsense you're writing will take you somewhere.

ALLAN GURGANUS: Exactly. Be generous with and to yourself. After that first draft, stash it away a while; work on other things (I believe in working on many units at once), let a little distance set in, and then reread it, ideally without a pen in your hand the first time, so you're reading it at exactly the speed with which you wrote it, not interrupting. Reconsider it from start to end, bemused with a kind of teacherly or parental patience.

Of course, I can say but not always do that. I'll maybe get two paragraphs in, trying to read it like that, impartially. Then I'll go ah, that so sucks, and I whip out the pen. . . . You have to take a macro view before you get into the dental-assistant details, the overcleaning; if you go too fast to the incisor-brightening, you might be working on the teeth of a dead man. Or you'll use up all your ingenuity on sentences that will prove redundant in the long run.

T. C. BOYLE: For *Talk Talk*, I had to know about ID theft, and so I got every book I could on the subject, how you do it, the horror stories, the cases, and so on. But it wasn't long until there was no depth to the story. It's about your identity; how do you know who you are? You have language. That's how you can name yourself, how you can think. I happened to go to my dentist when I was researching the book. He was divorced and had his eye out for the ladies, and he said, "The most gorgeous woman in the world was sitting in this chair before you, and you know what? She was *deaf*." Then he got out the jackhammer and the drill, and I realized that my heroine would be deaf. I began to see the possibilities. If my character were deaf, she'd have a special language, different brain patterns. The deaf from birth are from a different culture, with different brain patterns to make that special language.

DON WALLACE: Poems came out of my emotional weather. I'd walk and chant them in my head until a chain was formed that would last until I got back to the typewriter. From a poem I quite deliberately reverse-engineered my first real story at age twenty: of knocking around the streets of Long Beach with a Chinese high school friend, Bob Wong, and how our paths forked at the place where class, race, pride, ambition, anger all swirled together. It ended with the metaphor that tied the poem together: our friendship had been like a drop in the pan in Bob's father's Chinese restaurant, sizzling until it vanished. (I later heard Bob didn't particularly appreciate my appropri-

ating his life—I didn't even change his name—and I'm still waiting to run into him to apologize.)

Because of that unity, coming from an existing poem, with the ending secure in advance, the story caught the ear of the fiction editor of the free weekly in Santa Cruz called *Sundaz*. Two weeks later I was a published author.

Once I had a calling, I quickly became disciplined, a daily grinder. A morning person, I liked having something done and in the bank, psychologically speaking, before the rest of the day, before the "regular" work of being a student, and later, before the actual grinding jobs I would hold for the rest of my working life.

Though a grinder, I am careful to leave myself open to visions, inspirations, fugue states and Dionysian interpenetrations, and, yes, hangovers. (I stopped the obligatory writer-drinker thing in the late '70s, turning to jogging like so many other Americans in thrall to our Puritan—and in my case Scottish/Swedish—heritage. I now walk long distances again to spare my knees, and the ideas and thoughts rush in as before, exactly the same as when I was eighteen).

Books by the Bed

DON WALLACE: Not having had an end table on my side of the bed for a couple of years, my bedroom reading tends to drop to the floor and join a pile of loose newspapers, yellowing copies of the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. A writer's rats' nest snapshot of a month ago (before Mindy launched a surprise cleanup) would have come up with *Na'KuaAina: Living Hawaiian Culture*, which was helping me with a documentary film I'd been writing; R. W. Thompson's *Battle for the Rhine*, an out-of-print paperback that gave "Band of Brothers" a lot of its pith (and has a really strange, almost autistic third-person point of view that gives it much of its interest); *The Enthusiast*, a new novel by my old UC Santa Cruz writing pal Charlie Haas, about a hack magazine editor whose career bears some resemblance to mine; and Judith Freeman's *The Long Embrace*, in which she traces—or stalks—the strange marriage of Raymond Chandler, who fell for a woman without knowing she was twenty-two years his senior. Chandler lived in thirty-five places in a dozen years in Los Angeles, including a lot of places I once called home: Signal Hill, Long Beach, Idyllwild. These give an idea of the intellectual squalor in which I blissfully wallow.

DOUG UNGER: Let yourself go; give yourself the freedom to make mistakes. It's impossible to write a novel sentence by sentence perfectly. In

the first draft, write some messy sections, take wrong turns, and accumulate enough material to have something to work with. I saw John Irving doing that, when he revealed to us his process while working on *The World According to Garp*. He let us in on his first drafts and then his revisions in a way I never saw any other writing teacher do before or since. And I really learned a lot by witnessing this. He was an extremely generous teacher in how much he gave of himself as a writer by revealing his creative process. And he was generous to me personally.

Also, I learned a great deal from Lenny Michaels, in the opposite way, how he'd write a paragraph that was so tight, it was like a passage in baroque music; but in his case, it was like a musical score from a good piece of jazz or blues, how he felt the rhythm of every sentence, in every paragraph, every word, yet in revisions still left room for improvisations. The combination of both sensibilities, of such tight control and the impulse to freedom, makes for good writing, and students need to know this.

ALLAN GURGANUS: I do a lot of reading out loud. That's a huge, huge part of what I do, trusting my ear as an editor, imagining reading it to another person. Or actually reading it to a real live friend. I have people here who allow me to come over on short notice and corner them. Amazing how effective it is. Writing is so abstract, so algebraic—reading it aloud renders all that into real sound waves, makes it into physics. Tremendously important.

It helps to imitate how your characters speak, how people talk in a completely different language from the way they use for writing. The way you write about both is a third lingo. The more distinct a character's spoken and written language is, the more opportunities you have for comedy and tension. You hear shortcuts, you hear how many articles and prepositions people leave out. Hand gestures become surrogates for dropped lines. It's hard to write all that in silence.

DON WALLACE: Several of my long projects, novels, have had historical roots. I discovered that reading deep into a subject and a time and a place replaced the childhood way I had of creating worlds in my head. In addition to histories, I'd read nonacademic stuff, old novels and old newspapers, journals; I'd latch onto found objects with some physical connection to the period. For my latest work in progress, an old friend who combs estate sales for rare books and sells them on eBay sent me a great old dictionary from eighteenth-century England, as well as sailors' journals and other eccentric texts. When I read this stuff, I'm in heaven, my brain making up stories right and left out of the wonderful ricocheting details and vocabulary.

Certainly there's a danger of the research getting in the way and supplanting the actual creative writing: I don't want to be James Michener, after all, though I am grateful for the award I received in his name from the Copernicus Society. But for my first novel, *Hot Water*, which is about the then-unimaginable world of professionalized bass fishing, I kept a three-foot stack of press releases from lure and boat companies by my desk. Whenever my writing ran dry, I'd just pluck one up and—"Worm blood? What the hell is worm blood?"—I'd be off on another riff . . .

DENNIS MATHIS: Even terrible books are worth studying. While I'm reading a sentence, my mind is rewriting it better. That's more fun than passive reading. Sometimes I can't come up with a better sentence, and then I take time to savor a well-made sentence, a crafty foreshadowing or something. I'm a very slow reader. I need eye surgery, for one thing. I have a condition that makes printed words swim like minnows. So I don't read unnecessary books unless they capture my imagination . . . or I'm avoiding something else I should be doing.

Actually, one of the books on my table is a three-book compilation of John LeCarre's early novels, found on the "last chance!" shelf. One of the novels has the scene I mentioned before, where the spies knock on a door on a rainy night, and a little girl answers.

ANTHONY BUKOSKI: How does one stay inspired? I'm always inspired. My life has beautiful, troubling, perplexing things in it. I want to write the things out of me in order to understand them. Done with one story, an inspiration comes to me. Sometimes the inspirations get backed up. I am like the writer in Sherwood Anderson's "The Book of the Grotesque" preface to *Winesburg, Ohio*. "You can see for yourself how the old man, who had spent all of his life writing and was filled with words, would write hundreds of pages concerning this matter (of grotesques). The subject," Anderson writes, "would become so big in his mind that he himself would be in danger of becoming a grotesque. He didn't, I suppose, for the same reason that he never published the book. It was the young thing inside him that saved the old man."

I view writing as a craft I've been entitled, blessed really, to pursue. I'm honored to be blessed this way. I don't take myself as seriously as some—no fainting spells, no beret wearing, no absinthe drinking, no posing, no analyst telling me what is wrong that I can't write. If I find myself particularly confused or hard-pressed about writing, I remind myself that I am always

How does one stay inspired? I'm always inspired. My life has beautiful, troubling, perplexing things in it. I want to write the things out of me in order to understand them.

just trying to learn to write. Confused for a moment, indulging myself in "frustration," I remind myself this kind of thinking, this "suffering," is for "real artists," whereas I'm a simpleminded grandson of Polish peasants lucky enough to be interested in writing. I guess this is my pose: the Polish peasant pose. I don't take myself too seriously. I don't indulge myself. In fact I tell myself I'm not a good-enough writer to be bothered by writer's block. Then I get back to basics. I imagine such an attitude wouldn't set well with the "smart set" whether they be in Duluth—where there is indeed a "smart set" of visual artists, filmmakers, poets, et al.—in New York, Paris, wherever they may congregate in the service of "art." But, again, this attitude, the peasant attitude, serves me well.

Finally, I have no tricks to recommend to one needing inspiration. Or perhaps I do. Given my ethnic background, a sure way for me to be inspired is to listen to Chopin. I don't rely on this often, however, for I am always inspired to write.

JACK LEGGETT: Ordinarily I'm at the computer writing daily, and I've now got two what I deem to be publishable, saleable, even rather good novels if that's a reliable assessment (everybody that's finished a novel thinks it's publishable, better than anything anybody else has done). For the most part, I'm very grateful for my experiences in writing; it made a career in publishing, in education, and allows me a certain grace in retirement. So whether or not I'm published—I won't say I'm indifferent to that—but ideally I should be writing just to please myself. In other words, it should be enough . . . to get it as perfect as I can get it. That's the satisfaction and it's what I believe to be the ultimate gratification in the writing life.

MICHELLE HUNEVEN: I get inspired often by the dictionary or by odd bits of research. I love it when I look up a word and the etymology or the connotations leads me to another, close line of thought and thus puts a new bend or depth in the narrative.

Also, reading great fiction inspires me. I am never so alert and engaged as I am when reading a superb book. I think, if I can give some tiny portion of the literary pleasure to others that this book is giving to me, all those solitary hours of work will be justified.

ALLAN GURGANUS: I think everyone has his or her own inherent flaw or flaws they must come to terms with. One of the challenges, starting out, is realizing how your major tendencies to tell stories are successful and unsuccessful. Like shortsightedness or deafness in the left ear, these

require a daily compensation, a bitter realism about your standing imperfections.

For instance, one of my flaws is a love for beginnings; I adore starts that come like a drum roll leading to a trumpet call leading to *cancan* girls, leading to the coming up of the curtain leading to a single actor on a park bench alone onstage. I like the setting of the stage, the puppet mechanics of the opening. Once upon a time remains my favorite opening.

After that, it's just flying, grabbing everything that comes into your head as fast as you can type it. Starting a new story is a little like calisthenics for me; it feels hydrating-oxygenating to start something new. Usually you've heard something that sparks an idea, or you have some strong first sentence or maybe even just a title has appeared, wanting something under it. You go into a kind of trance as you're hurling words onto the page, and see how they'll look in print; you're dictating to the printing press.

You go into a kind of trance as you're hurling words onto the page, and see how they'll look in print; you're dictating to the printing press.

This can become a vice, though. You might be led from one beginning to another; it's like having promiscuous sex seven nights a week; you don't finally know whom you're waking up with. . . .

SHERRY KRAMER: I always keep what I think of as the mother lode, which is the first full draft where I made it all the way to the end. That's what I refer back to when I'm working. I might have a dozen drafts, or two dozen, but all those in-between drafts can sit forgotten in my computer. It's the first impulse that I need to be in touch with, not all the ways I've illustrated it or obscured it or (worst of all) taken all its mysteries and made them clear . . . the first draft is the treasure map. I don't ever doubt that it's the truest—maybe not the best, of course, because a lot of the time it's not fully formed and transformed, but it's the *truest* representation of what the work wants to be.

DOUG UNGER: Lately, I've been working on an essay about poetic inspiration. It's something I've been writing, actually, for some five years by now, in bits and pieces. I use three writers as examples: the great poetic primitive, Thomas Wolfe, who let himself get so lost in his trance state when he was writing that he might not notice when someone else was standing in a room with him; or he'd be talking to himself, muttering, pacing two hundred feet up and down a hallway in the Hotel Chelsea, and then he'd sit down and in

a rush let the words come out with his pencil and paper, pages flyi... desk every which way and landing on the floor.

Or I think of Jorge Luis Borges, who, in another kind of meditative state, would very consciously (later in his life, when he had gone completely blind) sit in a chair, with his blind eyes closed, rocking back and forth while he was stroking his cat. After about two or three hours of this, he'd have a complete paragraph or a stanza of a poem memorized in his head, and he'd call for María Kodama (his companion, whom he later married) and he'd dictate, whole, a passage he was writing. I've had two long conversations with María Kodama about this.

Or I think of my best friend and brother-in-law, Ray Carver, in those last great years when he was living out in Port Angeles, Washington, often all alone, writing poems. He'd call me up and, amazed, meaning to share his astonishment at what was happening with his writing, he'd say how the poems were coming to him, two a day, maybe more sometimes, big, whole, complete, and beautiful. He described the experience like pulling up fish, one after the other, like catching these incredibly wonderful steelhead or salmon from his secret fishing spots, and he was having this most incredible fisherman's luck—luck was just what he called it. He was in that state, too, that meditative and inspired condition of the imagination when it is very open to the world.

Different writers on the topic of creativity divide the process into different stages and give these stages a variety of names, but the heart of the process in most if not all of these accounts is the inspiration or the illumination or the *aha!* Sometimes it's a *moment*, a fleeting glimpse of a good idea—a brilliant idea, or so it may seem at first glance—to be worked out on the page (at which point it often seems not quite so brilliant). Sometimes it's a prolonged state of mind like the athlete's "zone," or the "flow" described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,[17] when it does seem as if we're taking dictation or the work is writing us, when we forget where we are, when the hours pass unnoticed, or rather become compressed into one glorious *now*.

But such moments rarely come without some coaxing, without courting the Muse, as it were. So we should not overlook the first stage of the creative process: preparation or practice, as it's variously called, that is, making oneself available to a good idea, should one come along.

One doesn't create something *new* without knowing what's *not* new, and so this preparation stage might involve study. This concentration on a particular problem or the study of the current knowledge or thinking in a specific field might involve formal training, consideration of the status quo