A Writing Life
Weintraub, Stanley

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Preface I
Making the Most of Possibilities

Our father liked to talk about his family history. His maternal grandfather was a farmer, and he was proud, in particular, of the wood carvers and coppersmiths, the artists, who populated the generations before him. Certainly, he admired great artists. But we find it interesting, and predictive, that those who preceded him included “writers.”

In the last decades of the 1800s, his paternal grandfather Mendel earned his living as a scribe, writing letters and legal documents in Romanian and Russian for his less-literate neighbors. Dad’s maternal grandmother Ziva was also a writer. She lived in Narveh, a bend-in-the-river village near Bialystok in the borderlands between Russia, Romania and Poland. There and then, Jewish women and girls were mostly illiterate. She taught her own daughters, and other girls, reading and writing while the boys went off to school.

The next generation was born in the old country and came to America, like many in our country’s history, in search of a better life. Dad’s mother Rintel (we knew her as Grandmom Ray) was born in 1904 in Bialystok, the youngest of eight children. When she was two, she escaped the violence directed towards Jews in the borderlands of central Europe during the first years of the twentieth century. After hiding out for her last ten days there, in the family’s brick-lined root cellar, she was smuggled out of Czarist Russia in our great-grandmother’s arms, the last of her family to escape from a Europe in which they had no viable future.

Dad was well aware of his origins as the first member of his immigrant family to have been born in America, to have become a United States citizen by birth. Though his family lived in relative poverty at the beginning of the Great Depression, opportunities existed for a poor
Jewish boy in Philadelphia that would not have existed for him in the
Pale of Settlement.

He was in a hurry to take advantage of the opportunities he had been
given and that had been denied to his forefathers and foremothers. He
was not the first in his immediate family to graduate from high school;
his mother was. But he was the first to graduate from college, doing so
in only three years while working forty hours a week and commuting
twenty-five miles each way, every day. He was also the first to serve in
the U.S. Army, to earn a Ph.D., to become a university professor and to
publish a book—and then approximately sixty more books.

In looking back at his life, he suggests near the end of this memoir
that what defines one’s life is “what you have done with the possibili-
ties available to you.” The arc of his life took him from his birthplace in
Philadelphia, to West Chester, to Korea and wartime service, to Penn
State University, and finally all over the world as a scholar, researcher,
speaker, educator, editor, author and consultant. From beginning to
end, he did a great deal with the possibilities available to him.

One of the most important possibilities he maximized, fortunately
for us, was his brother’s introduction to him of Rodelle. She became his
partner in writing as in life, developing into an accomplished scholar
herself. She helped furrow out raw material for his books and provided
expert—sometimes ruthless—editing expertise.

Throughout this memoir, you likely will notice his obsession with
Sherlock Holmes. They were both detectives, one solving crimes, the
other unlocking secrets of the past. He absolutely adored these stories,
re-reading the entire Holmes oeuvre every April as a birthday present
to himself. He managed to see much of life, and the lives of those he
wrote about, through a Sherlockian lens, and he spent much of his life
investigating the lives of others on the same streets of London where
his good friend Holmes had done the same.

In this memoir, he also reveals the origin of his lifelong love of mar-
tinis: the Korean War. And while he loved them for himself, he advised
us, circuitously, to avoid them. How so? He advised us to avoid olives.
If we learned to enjoy olives, we would start drinking martinis and
that, apparently, was something to be avoided for reasons he never ex-
plained. The bottom line for him, then, was simple: olives lead to mar-
tinis, so for his children no olives. We ignored this advice.
Amazingly, his only advice to us as new parents also involved martinis, but in this case, the advice was to drink rather than avoid them. We’re all allowed to be a little schizophrenic, right? His advice: if the baby is crying and can’t easily be calmed, put them in their crib. Have a martini. Take a long, hot shower. Have another martini. They’ll be fine. We all seemed to have turned out OK enough, so perhaps he was right.

Our memories are of Dad always writing, reading or enlisting us to sort and mark on 3 x 5 cards and help create the index to one of his many books. As kids, we loved to delight him on birthdays and holidays with writing-related gifts we always knew he’d appreciate: a jar of rubber cement, new typewriter ribbons, and typewriter erasers before computers made these gifts obsolete.

In our young teenage years, we found another use for these items. Mom wanted a Christmas tree, and, since Dad year after year refused to embrace this radical idea, she appealed to his ego: she clipped a small, strong pine branch and stuck it in a jar. For decorations, we hung a jar of rubber cement, typewriter ribbons and erasers, pencils and boxes of paperclips; and as the pièce de résistance we kids crafted miniature reproductions of the dust jackets of his books, which we affixed to matchboxes and hung on the tree. He had no choice but to admit defeat. Mom got a tree, of sorts, and a holiday tradition was born: the Stanley Tree.

Though nearly always reading or writing something, he often found time to take us out to the yard to play catch. He’d gently toss a ball, underhanded, to one of us at age four or five, and the ball would land at our feet, while we stood still, baseball glove carefully outstretched, waiting for the ball to land in the glove.

“You need to go to the ball,” he’d say. “The ball won’t come to you.” He’d fetch the ball and toss it again. He, of course, NEVER tossed the ball into the maw of one of our wide-open, eagerly-awaiting, ball-hungry baseball gloves. Doink. The ball would land a few inches to the
left or a foot to the right. “You need to go to the ball; the ball won’t come to you” he’d repeat. Eventually, we learned. But what we learned wasn’t about catching a baseball. His advice was about life, about how he achieved all that he did. Rarely do the best and the most important things simply come to you. You pursue them, you go to the ball.

In *A Writing Life*, he tells his own story of how he pursued knowledge and history around the globe for the better part of a century and how he sought each and every day to write one perfect sentence. Along his Forrest Gump-like journey, he introduces us to many of those he met during his travels through the twentieth century: Eddie Fisher, John Barth, C. P. Snow, Malcolm Cowley, Sir Basil Liddell Hart, Danny Kaye, Pierre Salinger, Ray Bradbury, Leonard Woolf, Studs Terkel, Jorge Amado, Alfred Knopf, Odetta, Isaac Bashevis Singer, J. M. Coetzee, W. H. Auden, Rex Harrison, Kitty Kelly, Joe Paterno, Barbara Walters, Larry King and Jacob Rothschild, among others. And in *A Writing Life*, you will discover that on many, many days, he achieved his goal of crafting a perfect sentence, and so as memorable as is his story, discovering and savoring these perfect sentences makes reading *A Writing Life* a marvelous adventure.

—Mark B. Weintraub
—David A. Weintraub
—Erica Weintraub Austin

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