It is said that we have ten seconds

Richard Bach

When we wake of a morning, to remember what it was we dreamed the night before. Notes in the dark, eyes closed, catch bits and shards and find what the dreamer is living, and what the dreaming self would say to the self awake.

I tried that for a while with a tape recorder, talking my dreams into a little battery-powered thing by the pillow, the moment I woke. It didn’t work. I remembered for a few seconds what had happened in the night, but I could never understand later what the sounds on the tape were saying. There was only this odd croaking tomb voice, hollow and old as some crypt door, as though sleep were death itself.

A pen with paper worked better, and when I learned not to write one line on top of another, I began to know about the travels of that part of me that never sleeps at all. Lots of mountains, in dream country, lots of flying going on, lots of schools, lots of oceans plowing into high cliffs, lots of strange trivia and now and then a rare moment that might have been from a life gone by, or from one yet to be.

It wasn’t much later that I noticed that my days were dreams themselves, and just as deeply forgotten. When I couldn’t remember what happened last Wednesday, or even last Saturday, I began keeping a journal of days as well as of nights, and for a long time I was afraid that I had forgotten most of my life.

When I gathered up a few cardboard boxes of writing, though, and put together my favorite best stories of the last fifteen years into this book, I found that I hadn’t forgotten quite so much, after all. Whatever sad times bright times strange fantasies struck me as I flew, I had written—stories and articles instead of pages in a journal, several hundred of them in all. I had promised when I bought my first typewriter that I would never write about anything that didn’t matter to me, that didn’t make some difference in my life, and I’ve come pleasantly close to keeping that promise.

There are times in these pages, however, that are not very well written—I have to throw my pen across the room to keep from rewriting There’s Something the Matter with Seagulls and I’ve Never Heard the Wind, the first stories of mine to sell to any magazine. The early stories are here because something that mattered to the beginner can be seen even through the awkward writing, and in the ideas he reached for are some learning and perhaps a smile for the poor guy.

Early in the year that my Ford was repossessed, I wrote a note to me across some calendar squares where a distant-future Richard Bach might find it:

How did you survive to this day? From here it looks like a miracle was needed. Did the Jonathan Seagull book get published? Any films?

What totally unconceived new projects? Is it all better and happier? What do you think of my fears?

—RB 22 March 1968

Maybe it’s not too late to appear in a smoke puff and answer his questions.

You survived because you decided against quitting when the battle wasn’t much fun … that was the only miracle required. Yes, Jonathan finally was published. The film ideas, and a few others you hadn’t thought of, are just beginning. Please don’t waste your time worrying or being afraid.

Angels are always saying that sort of thing: don’t fret, fear not, everything’s going to be OK. Me-then would probably have frowned at me-now and said, “Easy words for you, but I’m running out of food and I’ve been broke since Tuesday!”

Maybe not, though. He was a hopeful and trusting person. Up to a point. If I tell him to change words and paragraphs, cut this and add that, he’ll ask that I get lost, please, just run along back into the future, that he knows very well how to say what he wants to say.

An old maxim says that a professional writer is an amateur who didn’t quit. Somehow, maybe because he couldn’t keep any other job for long, the awkward beginner became an unquitting amateur, and still is. I never could think of myself as a Writer, as a complicated soul who lives only for words in ink. In fact, the only time I can write is when some idea is so scarlet-fierce that it grabs me by the neck and drags me thrashing and screaming to the typewriter. I leave heel marks on the floors and fingernail scratches in the walls every inch of the way.

It took far too long to finish some of these stories. Three years to write Letter from a God-fearing Man, for instance. I’d hit that thing over and over, knowing it had to be written somehow, knowing there was a lot that mattered, that needed saying there. Forced to the typewriter, all I’d do was surround myself with heaps of crumpled paper, the way writers do in movies. I’d get up gnashing and snarling and go wrap myself around a pillow on the bed to try it longhand in a fresh notebook, a trick that sometimes works on hard stories. But the religion-of-flight idea kept coming out of my pencil the color of lead and ten times heavier and I’d mutter harsh words and crunch it up as though solemn bad writing can be crunched and thrown at a wall as easily as notebook paper.

But then one day there it was. It was the guys at the soap factory that made it work—without the crew at Vat Three who showed up out of nowhere, the story would be a wrinkled ball at some baseboard yet.

It took time to learn that the hard thing about writing is to let the story write itself, while one sits at the typewriter and does as little thinking as possible. It happened over and again, and the beginner learned—when you start puzzling over an idea, and slowing down on the keys, the writing gets worse and worse.

Adrift at Kennedy Airport comes to mind. The closest I steered to insanity was in that one story, originally planned as a book. As with Letter, the words kept swinging back to invisible dank boredom; all sorts of numbers and statistics kept appearing in the lines. It went on that way for nearly a year, days and weeks at the monster circus-airport, watching all the acts, satchels filling with popcorn research, pads of cotton-candy notes, and it all turned into gray chaff on paper.

When I decided at last that I didn’t care what the book publisher wanted and that I didn’t care what I wanted and that I was just going to go ahead and be naive and foolish and forget everything and write, that is when the story opened its eyes and started running around.

The book was rejected when the editor saw it charging across the playground without a single statistic on its back, but Air Progress printed it at once, as it was—not a book, not an article, not an essay. I don’t know whether I won or lost that round.

Anyone who would print his loves and fears and learnings on the pages of magazines says farewell to the secrets of his mind and gives them to the world. When I wrote The Pleasure of Their Company, one side of this farewell was simple and clear: “The way to know any writer is not to meet him in person, but to read what he writes.” The story put itself on paper out of a sudden realization … some of my closest friends are people I’ll never meet.

The other side of this farewell to secrets took some years to see. What can you say to a reader who walks up at an airport knowing you better than he knows his own brother? It was hard to believe that I hadn’t been confiding my inner life to a solitary typewriter, or even to a sheet of paper, but to living people who will occasionally appear and say hello. This is not all fun for one who likes lonely things like sky and aluminum and places that are quiet in the night. “HI THERE!” in what has always been a silent unseen place is a scary thing, no matter how well meant it’s said.

I’m glad now that it was too late for me to call Nevil Shute on the telephone, or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, or Bert Stiles, when I found that I loved who they are. I could only have frightened them with my praise, forced them to build glad-you-liked-the-book walls against my intrusions. I know them better, now, for never having spoken with them or never having met them at bookstore autograph parties. I didn’t know this when The Pleasure of Their Company was written, but that’s not a bad thing … new truths fit old ones without seams or squeaks.

Most of the stories here were printed in special-interest magazines. A few thousand people might have read them and thrown them away, or dropped them off in stacks at a Boy Scout paper drive. It’s a quick world, magazine writing. Life there has the span of a May-fly’s, and death is having no stories in print at all.

The best of my paper children are here, rescued from beneath tons of trash, saved from flame and smoke, alive again, leaping from castle walls because they believe that flying is a happy thing to do. I read them today and hear myself in an empty room: “There is a lovely story, Richard!” “Now that is what I call beautiful writing!” These make me laugh, and sometimes in some places they make me cry, and I like them for doing that.

Perhaps one or two of my children might be yours, too, and take your hand and maybe help you touch the part of your home that is the sky.

—RICHARD BACH

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