How You Can Become a Writer

This piece was written by Kenan Heise, a writer who over 34 years was a reporter, columnist, and reader advocate for three major Chicago newspapers, including the Chicago Tribune. He is the author of The Book of the Poor, a book which compiles many first-person narratives by low-income people he interviewed over the years. Kenan, like us, wants you to tell your story and to connect it to the fight for economic justice. Although this is specially intended for people who have been poor themselves, we think it is a great encouragement for anyone to write and speak out. He has generously donated 10 copies of his book to CHN – we will send a copy to the authors of the first 10 stories we receive (written or in video format) in thanks for your most valued action.

Deep down,
Everybody wants to become somebody and something big.
On one side, you see most things as impossible
And you lose interest.
You don’t even try.

I will tell you something that is big,
That is possible
And that is easier
By lots and lots.
Than you think,
You can become writer.

Yes, you. YOU can.
You do not have to wait until tomorrow.
What you have to do is to write,
Write anything about anything right now.
If you do, you can call yourself a writer
And a writer, you will be.

To be a writer,
You do not have to be published.
To become a writer,
All you have to do is write.
That is it.
Try it.

It does matter where you are
Or what people think about you.
You might be in prison or flunking the fifth grade,
Homeless,
Being put down by everybody
Or considered crazy.
You may need help in reading this.
You can still be what you believe impossible.
You can become a writer.
All you have to do is try.
I can help you
As best I can
To do as best you can.

I was a very poor writer.
Nobody was willing to publish anything I wrote.
I was put in a remedial writing class.
But I became a writer
And have earned a living at it for 50 years,
Not because I was smart
But because I wrote anyway,
I wrote a lot
And I was willing to let people help me.
Charles Dickens,
One of the most successful writers who ever lived,
Said what helped him very much
Was that he became interested
As a child
By everything he saw around him
When he visited his father in prison every Sunday.
I got better mostly because so many were willing to help me
And now I want to pass the favor along to you.

Write now, even if you cannot spell very well,
Do not know how to write
Or even cannot figure what to write about.
Even if, at first, you can hardly write your name.
Doing so is a good way to start.

Next, listen carefully to what someone else is saying,
Anything.
Write it down exactly as they said it.
No, not in your own words, but theirs.
Try it several times until you get the idea.
   Read the words you have written.
   Correct them, as you might need to do
   To be exact.
   Keep doing it
   Till you know it is as exact as
   possible
   Demand of yourself that you do that.

Charles Dickens went around the country
copying down people’s speeches.
He learned to write better and better by doing it.
I interviewed very poor and destitute people.
I did not do it to become a better writer,
   but it helped me a lot.
Now, you have done it,
Even just a little
   You have entered a new world.
   You have become not just a writer,
   But also something else, a reporter.
   Even if no one will ever publish what you write,
   You will become a reporter.
   Expand on that.
Find an interesting place to sit down or stand.
Write down what you -
Or, in another word,
Use your imagination to describe what you see.

Rewrite a bunch of times what you have written
until it becomes more and more interesting.
You will have become not just a writer and a reporter,
but an interesting one.
Then, try it and try it again.

As a writer,
you will have come a long ways since you started.
That is good!

Part II

Tell Your Story

Tell your story.
It’s the best way to write.
It is the most interesting way.

Tell stories.
You already do.
Writing them is a little different,
but it can be fun
and it can be a WOW!

I will start your story.
You finish it.
You have at times been so hungry
That you thought you were going to pass out and die.
Did you ever feel that way?
I mean really.
One time....(Tell about it.)
Or another time....(Tell about that one.)
Don’t tell how you survived just yet.
Go back to the two times. You may thought of an even more interesting
time.
Recall details, ones that can make your more interesting.
   What led up to it?
   Where exactly were you?
   How did it feel? Were you weak?
   Were you scared? How scared?
   What did you think? Did something unusual cause it?
Now, ask the reader to think:
Has anything like that happened to him or her?
Were you really scared about passing out and dying?
Tell the reader what happened when you were really hungry.
Stretch it out when you tell it.
Describe who might have helped you and why think they did?
Tell about both times.
Save the best story for last.
Share your thoughts about how you got through it.
Also, what it means for other people.
You have told a story,
you have reported something that happened
and it has been interesting..
Your story is big and a part of an even bigger one.
Tell why it is.
Tell yourself “wow” about what you have done.

Now try to do the same about being poor, being a small child, being in school, being homeless, trying to get a job, working at a lousy job or for a mean boss, getting real sick or about other people you have known who have it even worse.

All of this is what has happened,
but has never before been reported.

Do it all as best you can.
You have started being a writer.

Keep it going

The world will be better for your doing it.

Send it to us.
We will attempt to publish it on a blog for you.