



“A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.”
— Thomas Mann*

Dear Faithful Reader,

Wait a minute — *what?* Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Doesn't a professional writer have, as Liam Neeson might say, a particular set of skills? Shouldn't writing come *easier* to a writer than it does to everyone else?

In a way, yes, that's all true. And there is evidence that the Nobel prize-winning novelist cited above first wrote the now-famous line in jest, poking fun at a hapless, self-important character in one of his novels. Some years later, however, he restated it as applied to writers in general — including himself. In fact, Mann (Thomas, not John David) was known to labor painstakingly over his work, often producing no more than a few hundred words a day.

In his wonderful book *On Writing*, Stephen King tells a story about the legendary Irish novelist and poet James Joyce:

A friend came to visit him one day and found the great man sprawled across his writing desk in a posture of utter despair.

“James, what's wrong?” the friend asked. “Is it the work?”

Joyce indicated assent without even raising his head to look at the friend. Of course it was the work; isn't it always?

“How many words did you get today?” the friend pursued.

Joyce (still in despair, still sprawled facedown on his desk): “Seven.”

“Seven? But James . . . that's good, at least for you!”

“Yes,” Joyce said, finally looking up. “I suppose it is . . . but I don't know what order they go in!”

And you know, I relate. Even though I've published over thirty books in the past fifteen years and thus could be justifiably called “prolific,” I have been there, done that, and own at least a few thousand of those particular tee-shirts.

So what does it mean, “a writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people”?

I think it’s like saying a priest is someone for whom having faith is more difficult than it is for other people. And if you asked twenty priests, if they replied honestly, I’ll bet 17 or 18 would agree.

Or, perhaps, this: *A genuinely happy person is someone who has wrestled with grief, tragedy, loneliness, and despair.*

To this, again, I relate.

Throughout my childhood, I was a generally happy kid, probably happier than most. But as I look back at that time and reinhabit those little shoes, it occurs to me that I didn’t *know* I was happy. My general good cheer derived, I suppose, from a congenitally sanguine disposition, combined with the fact that I was fortunate to be born into a relatively untroubled, worry-free life.

Yes, I was happy — but I wasn’t that I’d earned that happiness; it was just there. As water to the fish and air to the bird, to borrow the old Indian saying, I existed within a general state of happiness but was unaware of it, oblivious to its substance, depth, and value.

At the age of 14 my family moved to a new city. I hit puberty with a thud and plunged into a solid year of depression. And then emerged from that year into what became the most dynamic, productive years of my childhood — a time during which I led a group of peers to start our own high school, did a ton of public speaking, and flourished in every way. It was an exhilarating time, a ferociously abundant spring following an especially gloomy winter.

Ten years later, I once again slid abruptly into a dark season: my first-born son fell ill and died at just under a year old; within a few years my marriage crumbled and crashed.

And out of the ashes of those years of misery I started writing and publishing and built a thriving business and abundant social circle.

There’ve been other crises since, further dark times (that business crashed and burned, bankruptcy ensued, another marriage crumbled, and so on) — and each time I’ve emerged a far happier person.

The difference, I think, is that the happiness feels *earned*. I’ve observed its formation, like witnessing continents born from upheavals of magma. Underpinning the everyday experience of happiness is a substrate of gratitude that wasn’t there at the ages of 7, or 10, or 18.

Perhaps that’s what lies at the heart of Thomas Mann’s wry observation.

Perhaps it isn't so much that words come more easily to a writer, or that they come with more difficulty. It's that when they come, even the ordinary ones, they feel fully arrived, each phrase freighted with substance, each word a precious gemstone.

My November wish for you: that you take a few moments every day to notice those pieces of ordinary life that arrive freighted with substance, precious as gems.



* ABOUT THE WRITER

Thomas Mann's hereditary roots go back to the Mann family of medieval Lübeck, a city that maintained its staunchly independent statehood more or less continuously for centuries until its amalgamation into various versions (confederation, empire, or republic) of what eventually became modern Germany.

One of Lübeck's historical claims to fame is that it refused to allow Adolf Hitler to campaign there in the presidential election campaigns of 1932 (Hitler lost), a position that won the city the thin-skinned politician's enduring hatred. Mann himself was ardently opposed to Hitler and his militaristic regime, and by the time of Der Führer's ascension the novelist had left his homeland, never to dwell there again. In 1939 he moved to the United States, living and teaching for a time in Princeton, New Jersey.

My father, Alfred Mann, the musicologist and conductor, followed a strikingly parallel course, arriving in the US a year earlier than the novelist and eventually settling in New Jersey about an hour's drive north of Princeton, where he taught at Rutgers and conducted performances in New York.

Thomas Mann, while no relation to my family by blood, was also my father's favorite writer. He was awarded the Nobel prize in literature in 1929 for his early novel *Buddenbrooks* (one of my father's most-treasured books), which traces four generations of a wealthy North German family, loosely based on Mann's own family, in the latter nineteenth century.

Mann the novelist remained an outspoken public critic of Nazism, recording monthly broadcasts (in German) condemning Hitler and his associates; the recordings were flown to the UK and broadcast by the BBC on radio frequencies that reached well into German territory. Mann eventually came under the scorched-earth scrutiny of the McCarthy crowd and was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Among his comments before the committee were these:

“As an American citizen of German birth, I finally testify that I am painfully familiar with certain political trends. Spiritual intolerance, political inquisitions, and declining legal security, and all this in the name of an alleged ‘state of emergency’ . . . That is how it started in Germany.”

Mann joined physicist Albert Einstein, violinist Yehudi Menuhin, fellow novelist John Steinbeck, Christian pacifist Toyohiko Kagawa, and a slew of other prominent thought leaders in sponsoring the Peoples' World Convention in Geneva, which supported the formation of a World Constitution and democratic world government as a response to totalitarianism and a means to foster global cooperation and world peace.

In 1952 he was forced out of his position as an expert in German literature at the Library of Congress, and left the country altogether, moving to Switzerland, where he lived out the rest of his days.

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