



“I think that all artists, regardless of degree of talent, are a painful, paradoxical combination of certainty and uncertainty, of arrogance and humility, constantly in need of reassurance, and yet with a stubborn streak of faith in their own validity no matter what.”

— Madeleine L’Engle*

Dear Faithful Reader,

In the very first session of my writing program, Writing Mastery Mentorship, I offer our group of aspiring writers my “Seven Writers’ Mantras.” These are refrains I find myself returning to again and again, whenever I bump into my own self-doubts and internal resistance. (Every day, in other words.)

Here are just two of the seven:

Have faith that your core idea is sound.

The process of writing so consistently brings up self-doubts, the tendency to second-guess and smother the baby in the cradle is so pervasive and pernicious, that we need to carry this faith with us like a necklace of garlic to ward off the vampires of self-doubt.

Have the certainty of a five-year-old, the humility of an aged monk.

Writers need to learn to use these two diametrically opposite states of mind, and to become adept at turning them on and off like hot and cold water faucets.

To be a writer, one has to learn to trust that there is a core idea somewhere in there that is magnificent, even if its expression is a bit wonky at the moment. It may take a little patient digging to pull it out of the ground and dust it off — but it will be well worth the effort.

I think we need that uncertainty L’Engle talks about to keep ourselves open to sober introspection, so we can do the patient digging it takes to sort the silver from the dross and find a clearer expression of that magnificence. And we need the certainty to make sure we don’t let go of what’s precious in the process.

It’s the only way for a piece of writing to reach its true potential.

Which, come to think of it, is not so different from what it takes to live a *life* to its true potential.

Because writing a good book is a lot like living a good life.

My June wish for you: Spend time every day reminding yourself of your own validity, no matter what. Have faith in the core idea of who you are.



*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

When Madeleine L'Engle wrote about a “paradoxical combination of certainty and uncertainty,” she wasn’t pontificating. She was speaking from personal experience.

Most who recognize her name know that her most famous book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, is a classic among classics. It won the Newbery Award the year it was published and has ranked ever since as one of the most beloved children’s books of all time.

What many don’t know is that *before* it was published, it was rejected more than thirty times. And that a few years before that, after a decade of writing book after book and getting rejection after rejection, she came very close to quitting altogether.

“I went through spasms of guilt” (she later wrote in *A Circle of Quiet*) “because I wasn’t like a good New England housewife and mother. I couldn’t make a decent pie crust . . . [yet] with all the hours I spent writing, I was still not pulling my own weight financially.”

And so, on her fortieth birthday, she made a decision: she was quitting. No more writing. Done. Over. And yet . . . within a year she found the stories were still whispering their way through her brain.

Uncertainty, meet certainty.

When she finished *Wrinkle* it received its dozens of rejections, as she later wrote, “because it deals overtly with the problem of evil, and it was too difficult for children, and was it a children’s or an adult’s book, anyhow?”

Yet she refused to be categorized.

“I’m not a children’s writer. I’m not a Christian writer. I resist and reject that kind of classification. I’m a writer, period. People underestimate children. They think you have to write differently. You don’t. You just have to tell a story.”

Deep inside that mass of uncertainty, those “spasms of guilt,” there lay a core of certainty. Call it, the arrogance within the humility. A paradox.

And thank heavens it was there.

L'Engle went on to produce more than sixty books, including novels, poetry, essays, memoirs, and Bible commentaries. She received a slew of awards and honorary degrees, including the National Humanities Medal and induction into the New York Writers Hall of Fame. A crater on Mercury is named after her. (Seriously.)

And despite its being repeatedly banned by Christian organizations for being too heretical, and attacked by secular organizations for being too religious, *A Wrinkle in Time* has endured. A 2012 survey named it the second best children's novel ever written (placing after *Charlotte's Web*).

All because a New England housewife possessed “a stubborn streak of faith in her own validity, no matter what.”

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