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# Talking Back: Life and Writing in Jesuit Education: Three Rules

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# TALKING BACK

*Life and Writing in Jesuit Education*

## Three Rules

By Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.

### **Experience**

**W**hen I was student at St. Joseph's Prep in Philadelphia my summer camp counselor, a professor at Hamilton College, advised me: If you want to be a writer, do not go to a Catholic college. The experience, he warned, would be too narrow, not free and challenging enough to provide the inspiration every good writer needs. When I graduated I took the spirit of his warning and went to Alaska for a harrowing job repairing the railroad tracks between Anchorage and Fairbanks, living with fellow laborers in bunks stacked three high in box cars. After two weeks I was fired for being too young to work overtime (17), and I made my way home by bus across the South, where water fountains were marked for white and black and one bus rider shouted that he would not sit next to a Negro.

That summer set the tone of my travels for years as I taught journalism at a series of Jesuit universities, meanwhile determined to visit sometimes dangerous places, survive, and write about it. As a Fordham student, my year in Paris let me live with a family in Toulouse, see a bull fight in Spain, join a jackal hunt in Tunisia, spend a week in a monastery in Belgium, and stand awestruck in the churches of Rome. In following years, including two in the army in Germany, I stood where Hitler had stood in the stadium in Munich, and in a park in New Orleans at the high altar constructed for the visit of John Paul II.

I swam in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Adriatic Sea, the Red Sea, the Dead Sea, and the Sea of Galilee. I ran the streets of Cairo and Damascus and climbed Machu Pichu in Peru. With a Johannesburg stadium full of South Africans I welcomed Nelson Mandela home from prison as apartheid ended and visited a Peace Corps friend in the remote jungle of Gabon. In Vietnam and China I paid my respects to the

corpses under glass of Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-thung. Because I spent a month in Syria and Jordan, as well as an earlier visit to Israel, I cannot read the news today without welling anger and helpless frustration as the body counts mount and every proposal to rescue the suffering faces evidence that it would not work.

### **Reading to Write**

In 1902, Fr. Francis P. Donnelly, S.J., introduced a series of text books based on "model English," an exercise where the students would study the structure of a brief essay, often by Washington Irving, and then use the same structure on another topic. He had us read a

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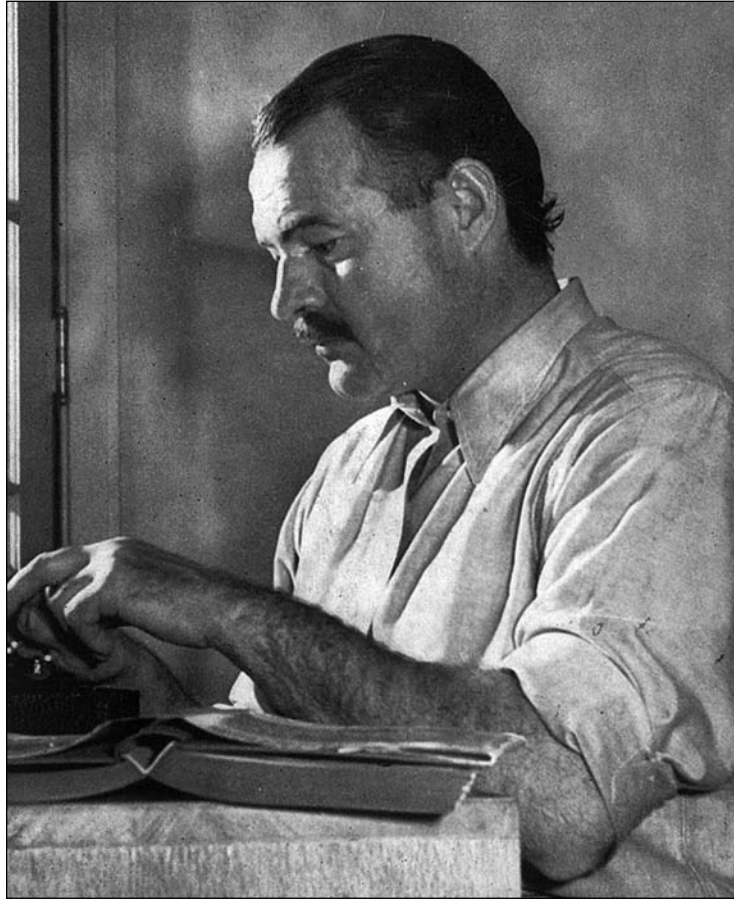
## Talking Back

**“Listen now.  
When people talk  
listen completely. ...  
Most people  
never listen.”**

*Ernest Hemingway*

description of morning and evening in the English countryside and write our own paragraph comparing yachting in a “gentle breeze and in a stiff wind.” Because imagery and compact brevity are the heart of poetry, my Jesuit mentor, Fordham’s Fr. Joseph R. Frese, advised me to read poetry before writing prose.

In 1935 a young writer visited Ernest Hemingway at Key West for advice. “Good writing is true writing,” Hemingway said. The writer’s story “will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is.” The writer’s life is like an iceberg: his experience is the huge part hidden below; the top is the memory he will put on paper. What books should the writer have read? “He should have read everything,” says Hemingway, “so he knows what he has to beat.” He lists over 20 authors, including my favorites, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamozov*. I would add Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, the essays of E.B. White, and the pioneers of the “new journalism” in the 1960s, which combined human observation with the novelist’s narrative skill and structure: Joan Didion, Gay Talese, and Norman Mailer. Hemingway concludes: “Listen now. When people



talk listen completely. ... Most people never listen.”

### **Commitment**

How well we write can depend on why we write. George Orwell, in his essay “Why I Write,” lists *sheer egoism*, *aesthetic enthusiasm*, *historical impulse*, and *political purpose* – his “desire to push the world in a certain direction.” His five years as a policeman in Burma made him hate authority, and his awareness of the working class gave him an understanding of imperialism. After the Spanish Civil War he worked to make political writing an art. I traveled to Baghdad the year after the Persian Gulf War and found my way to Amiriyah, the suburban site where on February 13,

1991 Americans had sent two laser-guided “smart bombs” smashing into what they said was a military target but was really a civilian shelter. At least 400 civilians were killed. Pictures of the dead children line the walls. I climbed up on the roof to the hole the rockets made and scooped up 3 stones as memorials. I have lost the stones, but not the memory.

James Baldwin, summarizes why Jesuit students and faculty should write. “You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but do so knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. ... The world changes to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then *you* can change it.” AMEN! ■