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Writer as Activist, Activist as Writer

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MARYBETH HOLLEMAN

Writer as Activist, Activist as Writer

In college, I read Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and sat up late nights with friends, plotting ecotage on the nuclear power plant under construction a few miles from campus. Should we pour sand in graders' gas tanks? Bury spikes in construction roads? Spray-paint messages on new cement? In the end, all we did was make banners, pile into a van, and join the No Nukes rally in Washington, D.C.

It took a few more years—during which I finished my degree in environmental science and worked for the state's alternative energy division (the first time around that we tried to kick our oil addiction)—before I realized what Abbey's book had to teach me: words have power. Literature is a primary force for instigating change. Think *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Think *The Golden Notebook*. Think *Silent Spring*.

So, yes, I was an environmentalist, and an environmental scientist, before I was a writer. It was just a matter of time before I knit all my loves together: reading, nature, wildlife, justice.

Still, the primary tension throughout my writing life has always been whether to pick up the pen or the banner. I oscillate. I try to do both. In some ways, they help each other. In other ways, not so much. So I've learned a few things about working in the intersections of writing and activism. (Caveat: These are, as they said in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, more like "guidelines.")

1. *I can't escape writing about what matters.* I don't have the patience to write about subjects that don't engage me, and what engages me are those where I believe something vital is at stake, and I have some new thing to add to the conversation. It's the only way I can sustain the effort it takes to bring a project to completion. The driving force for *Crosscurrents North* was political: to amplify Alaskan voices who speak for Alaska's wild. This carried co-editor Anne Coray and me through many travails with the publishing industry. Susan Griffin, author of the seminal *Woman and Nature*, once told me, "Follow your obsessions. They'll lead you to your best work." I believe her.
2. *I get my message off my chest right away,* and then keep writing, researching, thinking, so the work (hopefully) moves beyond my initial assumptions into new territory. As Robert Frost wrote, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader" (777). Open-mindedness allows for wonder and imagination, as I try to illuminate my own blindness. How to do this when I also come to the subject with a burning passion to save polar bears or prevent the next oil spill? In my essay "What

Happens When Polar Bears Leave,” I expressed my astonishment immediately, and then dissected the ways in which their fate haunted me, with hope of some solution or at least some new comprehension.

3. *I avail myself of all forms.* On the oil spill and Prince William Sound, I’ve written radio commentary, op-eds, poems, essays, and my book, *The Heart of the Sound*. On polar bears and climate change, I’ve written essays, poems, a short story, a white paper for Defenders of Wildlife, a novel, and a talk on “Climate Change and the Literary Imagination.” Multiple forms allow me to approach the subject from different angles, like a prism, generating more illumination with each turn.
4. *I don’t force resolution.* As a writer and teacher, I’ve seen how forcing a resolution can damn an essay faster than you can say “rejection.” As a culture, we like the quick fix, the clear solution. But increasingly, in the complex world we have created for ourselves, there are no easy answers. At least, not to the questions I am obsessed with asking. (This is also my excuse for why I’m such a slow writer.)
5. *Sometimes I drop the pen, but not for long.* It’s easier when there’s an end date, like an election: when Sarah Palin got nominated for VP, I campaigned for Barack Obama. It’s trickier when the issue is never-ending. I often think about Nigerian novelist Ken Saro-Wiwa: he dropped his pen for political action, only to die for the cause. What new light might his novels have shed?

In the end, they’re the same—writing is action. It’s in the interplay between writing and activism that I’ve arrived at my favourite work. Immediately after the oil spill, I was driven to sop up oil, rescue birds, clean sea otters. Much later, in *The Heart of the Sound*, I wrote about those experiences and what they meant—for the otters, the Sound, and the Big Picture in which we all stand.

My moral obligation is the same as it is for anyone: to leave the world a better place than when I found it. As an artist, a writer, that way is through understanding something that hasn’t been understood, seeing what hasn’t been seen, illuminating something that hasn’t been lit.

When I become overwhelmed by all that remains in the dark, I recall what a Buddhist monk advised: you can’t enlighten the entire world, so just shed light on your little corner.

Works Cited

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MARYBETH HOLLEMAN is author of *The Heart of the Sound*, co-author of *Among Wolves*, and co-editor of *Crosscurrents North*. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her essays, poems, and articles have appeared in dozens of journals, magazines, and anthologies, among them *Orion*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Sierra*, *Literary Mama*, *ISLE*, *North American Review*, *AQR*, *The Future of Nature*, and on National Public Radio. She has taught creative writing and women's studies at the University of Alaska, and she runs the blog Art and Nature at www.artandnatureand.blogspot.com. A North Carolina transplant, she has lived in Alaska for over thirty years. See www.marybethholleman.com.