

Eleven Ways to Begin

The Anecdote

My eight-year-old daughter and I were walking our dog the other day when the dog saw a cat and bolted across a busy street. The dog didn't get hit by and was waiting when we arrived to grab her leash. We were delighted the dog hadn't been killed. My daughter, television's child as much as mine, remarked: "Plop. Plop. Fizz. Fizz. Oh, what a relief it is."

My daughter, thinking in jingles? I was appalled, of course, but was also secretly satisfied. Part of me hates and fears television, and what could be better evidence of its malevolent effects on the youth of America? Contrary to widespread claims and parents' worries, violence and sex are not what's wrong with television. Johnny Mack Brown and Lash Larue, the old-time Saturday afternoon Western heroes, wasted their enemies with even less compunction than Baretta or Kojack show on the tube. There always have been more cheap sexual thrills available to even the semi-literature in *True Confessions* – never mind *Penthouse* or *Hustler* – than will ever get past the FCC. Television's real crime is not that it incites passion, but that it purveys pabulum, intellectual paste and emotional puree.

(M. M. K., "Just for You, Barbara," *The New Republic* 10 Dec. 1977)

There are some people who never learn to stand up for themselves. I know a woman who underwent unnecessary surgery because she did not wish to inconvenience her revered physician. No matter how great her misgivings, how racked with indecision she was, how indefinite the evidence that surgery was necessary, she could not bring herself to postpone or cancel the operation. To have done so would have been against hospital policy, and she was very intimidated by policies. So on a dreary, cold March morning she allowed herself to be wheeled into an operating room where she allowed her doctor to carve away what later proved to be a perfectly healthy breast. In her indecisiveness, in her suffering, in her stoic endurance of the life that others have determined for her, my friend reminds me of Reverend Jones in Joy Williams' story "Taking Care."

---- Chris Lindley

The Setting or Background

There are some fifty square blocks of pre-World War II apartment buildings in what used to be one of the most genteel neighborhoods of New York City, near Columbia University, where things have gone slightly, delicately, to seed. The area is called Morningside Heights, and many old ladies live there. Inside front hallways, the polished tables are scratched and the Tiffany lampshades have a panel or two of their stained glass missing. On the outside, the creamwhite stones have graffiti on them and the wrought-iron railings of the buildings are surrounded by weeds.

The old ladies' apartments are all different, but all alike – multi-roomed, dark, large, meticulously kept; the way professional people lived forty years ago; not an appliance less than thirty years old; walls hung with prints of Bavaria in the 1890's, or of India, or Japan, and the dark corners crowded with knickknacks; shells, Mexican rattles, Japanese netsukes, oils by artists whose careers never flowered, oak music boxes, bronze vases, porcelain peasant children; dark shelves with yellow postcards, art prints, polished wood;

dusty books, letters, photographs, souvenirs. The smell of their apartments is of good, clean dust relieved by an occasional whiff of perfume or beeswax polish.

(Paul Malamud, "Rented Rooms," *The Atlantic* July 1978)

In Medias Res ("in the Middle of Things")

The money looked good. There were tall stacks of it, mostly tens and twenties, just for the taking. There was no casing of the joint and no gunplay. The job was done in less than 60 second, and the total take came to \$1,444. Not bad wages for one minute's work. Of course, it also cost me another two years in prison, as well as additional time for my parole violation. The fact that this is my third prison stint shouldn't pose any problem. But it gets harder, especially now that my wife has told me to make arrangements to have my things moved out of the house. She cannot take it any longer, and I do not blame her.

(Marcus W. Koechig, "Paying My Debt to Society," *Newsweek* 15 Nov. 1983)

Sensational Details

My father died when his heart could no longer manage to pump through his embolismic lungs. He had a pulmonary embolism because most of his lungs' healthy tissue was covered with a swamp of killer cells. My father was not without blame for this, as he had smoked a pack of cigarettes a day for thirty-five years. He gave up smoking thirteen years ago because he was by then convinced that it wasn't good for him.

(Eric Lax, "The Death of My Father," *The Atlantic* July 1978)

A Well-known or Appropriate Question

"Hypocrisy," said La Rochefoucauld [the seventeenth-century French author] a long time ago, "is the homage that vice pays to virtue." And so it is with language -- for those groups that are the most ruthless in their acts are also the most devious in their speech.

Totalitarian governments do not "kill" dissenters and heretics; they "liquidate" them. Goering did not speak of "gassing" the German Jews; he spoke of "the final solution" to the Jewish problem.

The fine art of double-talk has been raised to the ultimate degree by modern communist and fascist governments; and the more vicious their policies, the more they seem to feel the need to use the soft word.

(Sydney J. Harris, "Guilt Gives Rise to Double Talk," *The Best of Sydney J. Harris* [Boston; Houghton. 1975])

"Our wills conflict head-on. No chance of reconciliation." These two sentences, spoken by Antigone to Creon, are the threads from which are woven Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. The two main characters, Antigone and Creon, are the tragic protagonist and antagonist. They are tragic in the sense that one leads to the other's destruction, whether directly or indirectly. The warp and woof of every episode of the play is their violent struggle: between the supposedly subservient woman and the supposedly superior man, between the representative of divine laws and the representative of man-made laws, between Antigone's love and Creon's arrogance.

-- Loretta Nuesslein

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. . . ."
." Most of us are familiar with this phrase, and not simply because we read the Bible. Most of us have taken that walk through the valley when we first encountered death, usually as children and, if we were lucky, with the guidance of our parents. In Katherine Manfield's "The Garden Party" we watch young Laura Sheridan take her walk through the valley. But she receives no guidance from her parent; she must take that walk alone.

-- Donald Uhlmeyer

The Rebuttal

There is a belief, widely held among both sexes, that whereas men are irked by monogamy, women are suited to it by nature.

Even on the face of it, this seems fishy. After all, monogamy is what we actually have; and the social, religious and legal systems which gave it to us were all invented, and until recently run, by men. I can well believe men were masochistic enough to impose monogamy on themselves as a hairshirt, but I find it a touch implausible that the hairshirt designed for the husband just happened to be a comfortable and perfectly fitting garment for the wife.

And, indeed I suspect that, if you scrutinize the notion that women are naturally monogamous it turns out to be based on no sounder authority than that rhyme which begins "higamus hogamus, woman is monogamous," and no more cogent evidence than a one-eyed view of biology which is in fact about as good science as "higamus hogamus" is good Latin.

(Bridgid Brophy, "Monogamy," *Don't Never Forget* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1966])

The Generalization

The entertainment we enjoy is a measure of who we are. Two recently ballyhooed movies – last summer's *Star Wars* and November's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – suggest that Americans are both fascinated with and horrified by the technological world we have shaped.

(Carll Tucker, "Our Love-Hate Affair with Technology," *Saturday review* 10 Dec. 1977)

All the fun and games aside, childhood is about learning to be an adult. The examples set by authority figures and the guidance they give mold children's personalities and determines the adults they will be one day. Using these examples as they endure the crisis of childhood brings them, step-by-step, closer to adulthood, wisdom, and independence. In the short story "The Garden Party," Katherine Mansfield dramatizes the quandary of young Laura Sheridan, struggling to do the right thing, struggling to follow the guidance of her authority figures, but suspecting all the while that their examples and their guidance are insufficient, Laura has to grow up almost all by herself.

-- Stephen Craig

The Definition

I'm not a gourmet. I'm a gourmand. It's a subtle distinction. A gourmet eats only the very best food. A gourmand prefers that as well, but he'll eat what he can get, or afford.

The main thing is that he likes to eat and will try anything, even fast food. I've taken my chances with them all – Arby's, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Tico Taco Toeco.

(Colin Westerbeck, Jr., "Good Fast Food," *Esquire* May 1983)

A Warning

Something fundamental must be done – and done soon – if America is not to default on its national commitment to equal educational opportunity. Unless comprehensive steps are taken in the financing of higher education – steps comparable in scope to the Morrill Act of 1862 establishing land grant colleges, or the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 establishing the GI Bill – increasing numbers of academically qualified students will be denied access and choice of higher education simply because the costs will prove unmanageable.

(John R. Silber, "The Tuition Dilemma," *The Atlantic* July 1978)

The Strong Statement

Two recent studies, one conducted by the esteemed New York Stock Exchange and the other by W.R. Grace & Co., make this observation painfully obvious: You have to have rocks in your head to invest in the stock market these days.

(William Flanagan, "Pilloried in Stocks," *Esquire* 15 Aug. 1978)

Why should any words be called obscene? Don't they all describe natural human functions? Am I trying to tell them, my students demand, that the "strong, earthy, gut-honest" – or, if that are fans of Norman Mailer, the "rich, liberating, existential" – language they describe sexual activity isn't preferable to "phony-sounding, middle-class words like 'intercourse' and 'copulate'?" "Cop You Late!" they say with fancy inflections and gagging grimaces. "Now what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Well, what is it supposed to mean? And why indeed should one group of words describing presumably the same organs and functions, be tabooed – so much so, in fact, that some of these words still cannot appear in print in many parts of the English speaking world?

(Barbara Lawrence, "Four-Letter Words Can Hurt You," *The New York Times* 27 Oct. 1973)

Just what is Ernest Hemingway trying to tell us in his sparely narrated short story "The Killers"? He must be saying more than that two men want to kill a Swede boxer they don't even know. He must be saying more than that two nasty gunmen types enjoy themselves intimidating the occupants of a small-town diner. He must be saying more than the old saw about people too afraid to get involved. Yet these few details are almost all there is to this story. Is that all there is? Let's look closer, especially at the details that create the setting and those exchanges in which the characters talk about the events that we readers have been watching unfold.

-- Lorraine Nelles

Reading about Preacher Jones in Joy Williams' "Taking Care" affected me like listening to an entire song played one half-tone out of key. The story is about a man who loves. He loves everyone and everything to such an extent that it seems nearly to consume him. And yet, as he looks around him at the people upon whom he has bestowed his love, he sees illness, confusion, emptiness and pain. Jones himself can make no sense of it. It would appear either that love is not enough or that love creates misery and unhappiness. I can find no space at all in my brain to entertain the second assumption. I love, and on the whole, the people I love seem to thrive and grow. Others have loved and left legacies of greatness and humanitarianism behind them. But poor Preacher Jones loves and reaps mostly grief and failure. I also happen not to believe that it is simply some errant stroke of fate that decrees some people will suffer terribly in their lives while others do not. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be," Therefore, I am forced to conclude that there is something missing from Jones' life, Why isn't love enough?

-- Christina Stauffer