

“Advice for Masters of Fine Arts Entering Trump’s America.”

By Allan Gurganus

You’ve been given a life sentence, Masters of Fine Art. But it’s also a reprieve from the governor: you will spend the rest of your life-sentence stuffing life into sentences. You could do worse.

You mailed your last assignment and blood roared in your ears. You felt your writing cresting at a whole new level. With this one tale, you’ve sort of forgiven your step-mom, plus the ending resolves in a major chord that would make Mozart weep. But the nanosecond that packet leaves your hand, its mistakes burn into you like phosphorous. Last night you changed your heroine’s name from “Amber” to “Martha” but, oh no, you only made her Martha in the *first* half. Shoot! And, though you’re not yet free of a mobbed post office parking lot, the narrative structure comes apart on you like some feather boa in a rinse cycle.

Writing is essential but no one said it was efficient, right? So, welcome, brave graduates, to the glory and quicksand and the glory again... If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. And we beggars? We run the Derby every day.

Some mornings, the trifecta comes in. But little is harder than writing badly and knowing it and going on, and we’ve all done our fair share of that. Some *rational* people actually know to quit once they’ve written stinkily for about three days running. Darwin called that “natural selection.” But us? Not us, thank God! Congratulations, good and faithful servants, the race is won. You have just entered the Coliseum.

Let me confess. Dad insisted I get a Masters’ of Business Administration from Wharton. He said that way I’d become Vice President for Advertising at General Motors. I was seven when he told me. Our family had lost bigtime in the Stock Crash of 1929 and father saw in me a way to make that back and more. He said my “fresh mouth” and verbal scores might help me surpass even the poetry of GM’s leading ad men: “See the USA, in your Chevrolet.”

Dad read aloud to me the letter I’d written home from summer camp after being thrown from the same horse twice. It had made our whole family laugh. They passed it around, an early form of publication.

Literature was... no priority for my American Dad. He once caught a pal of his reading, and snapped, “That a novel, or something useful?” At 16, I spent one Sunday audibly retyping a story. Emerging just for dinner, I imagined I looked drained by excessive inspiration, like van Gogh as played by Kirk Douglas. Dad asked how many things I’d written since breakfast. I smiled, patient, “Still polishing, the one.”

“Look,” he said, “Instead of how we hear you starting and stopping, wouldn’t it be more efficient to just type it once... correctly?”

Hmmm. Yes, dad was a Republican. But, since I'm always looking on the bright side and, though in ways I miss him, at least he did not live long enough to become a TRUMP Republican.

Often we are writing for our culture despite itself. This is disappointing but strengthening. When other kids imagined becoming doctors or baseball players, we kept our heads down as if already commissioned.

"And so, dad, I've tried. God knows, I've tried. I did not take an MBA. And Business Administration did not take to me. Instead, my name is Allan. And I too am an MFA."

I admit addiction to our craft. Writing? You know all about it. It was the best of jobs, it was the all-time worst of jobs, but finally, my fellow alphabet-addicts, it is the only-est of jobs.

You treasure your private insights but the immorality of elected officials turns you into a street corner scold. Somebody's got to do it. And certain folks' respect for literature requires that they make their own quarterly payments.

Who signed us up? Character? Destiny? No, *we* did. Congratulations, self-appointed Mod Squad fire-volunteers, it's just us here. Or is it *we*? We!

When men with white beards are let near microphones, most want to give advice. Dad sure did. Frank Sinatra used to say to his Mafia bodyguards "Don't *tell* me what to do next. Suggest. Sug-gest!" So, deciding how to best excite you further forward—I've found myself listing, not bullet points, thank God, but wishes for you.

I jumped at (Bennington Director of Seminars) Mark Wunderlich's invitation because I love his work and so respect this program. I'm glad to be the first commencement speaker in a golden age likely known hereafter as "the Wunderlich Years."

My start-up wish for you is simple but immense: I wish you *time*. (Not just that coveted snowed-in month at an art colony but our usual hours mosaicked together after others' bedtimes, with only the somehow-feline sound of the dishwasher for company.) I wish you unlimited InkJet cartridges. But mostly I wish you WORK. That's where the joy is. Of course it can lead to *over-work*. (We Protestants are good at turning our favorite pleasure into crucifixion. It's almost a religion with us.) If you are writing stories or poems, set them all in one town, or house, or space-capsule. Know that recent MFA's can experience something called: "being sick and tired of your own voice." Writers who've been Jane Austen replicants can suddenly decide they were, all along, a scabby standoffish James Joyce. If you feel such a seizure coming on, first finish what you started here. Sometimes the difference between completing a book or not involves a few reckless sprinting weeks. "Beware enterprises that require new clothes." Cleave to your fellow students who've naturally become your readers. And promise them today, as in a marriage contract, you'll likewise read them alive throughout the rest of time. Acknowledge in real prose or poetry your brilliant teachers. We have no idea what

teachers give till we ourselves open that large vein. You will soon go home to write forever. That's all you can control.

Subject matter, you've claimed. Voice, you've sung into your own hearing. The talent? Decided, with your eye color, at the moment of conception. "Talent" is no app you can buy, at whatever price they'll soak us for internet service dead-ahead. The more risks you take, the more value your work can have. I'd rather see somebody try un-successfully to jump over a three-story house than watch someone's Olympic leap over a shoebox. Auden says, "All writers must be a little in love with the drudgery of their profession." Why is it hard? It is a form of magic that has not yet been understood. Not even by some of its most skilled practitioners. Issue yourself a free-pass to your own superstition. Today, in fact, I wish you magic.

Robert Frost's notebook offers this consoling line, "Since writing is the last of your childhood, it may be followed somewhat irresponsibly." Consoling, your inability to stop. You could not go on; you went on. Some dinners were late, more rock salt kept being needed to de-ice backstairs. Your notes to self? "Third paragraph sux, needs to come out like a molar." Sitting at a green light, thinking only of Thematic Consistency. Your Bible written on yellow Post-It notes, but written. So, how do you proceed in a job where no one gives you orders? Now that Americans live to be a hundred, they can have *three* great careers. Is this your first, second or third?

I am here to urge you to stay right on this tightrope, keep moving forward content with a weekly centimeter. The headwinds buffet us from both our nation's capitals, Washington and Moscow. Don't look down. Because, below, national parks are being given to brothers-in-law in the oil industry. Bitcoin gains respect as all else loses it. But... if there is no one left in national life to admire, we might have to actually find and admire... each other. Even, last ditch, ourselves. The overlords can make us feel underground for simply staying on-guard at our makeshift desks. Since you all are starting your careers as I not-unhappily circle the wagons of my own, may I note: You'll be the Argonauts inscribing us into the future. Your group effort will be both richly private and, of necessity, public-square allegorical. Are you ready for some of both?

A reader's request? Take us someplace new if ancient, interstellar. On each page remind us to laugh. Cozy up to any unexpected beauty. Don't write another dystopian novel intentionally. Create a paradise and let somebody lose it, inch by inch, as Adam and Eve had to. If a situation says "Break Glass Only in Case of Emergency," know it's an emergency and break the frigging glass. Remember everything you were ever ordered to forget.

Can there still be intelligent life on an earth that's writing its own suicide note in toxins? When a nation gets this "dumbed down" can surges of moral intelligence correct the hideous imbalance, one book at a time? Yes. Artistry is a form of citizenship. Artistry is a sacrificial if exalted form of citizenship. The future wants to read you. How else will it know what it IS?

The Bible's greatest literary advice: SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE.

Wish 5 or 6: “Let it to be said, When you are dead, That you rewrote, To be reread.” I think this is going pretty well, right? On a day so glad, it seems Barack Obama is still president. NOT. Now we reach the meta moment of our conversation. If I go on reassuring you, we can rush still faster toward limitless champagne at the dance afterwards. Is that a crime? Yes, *now* it is. Face it—ours is a truth-telling profession. If I sidestep, in the service of middle-class good taste, the sad fact of our current politics, I’d be lying to you. I’d be implying that—with two years’ work—you and your teachers have been making nothing more than doilies, pot holders, ash trays. I’d be telling you what Trumpian Washington keeps telling us: That fiction? It’s just fake news. Non-Fiction? Journalistic overstepping. And poetry? Poetry is... Bling. Anybody who believes that wouldn’t be here today. So we must acknowledge literacy’s threatened solar eclipse. I’ll admit I’m not a little scared.

Fellow writers and readers, you tell *me*: How is this year unlike any other? Surely some revelation is at hand. Carnival workers are running the world; the lunatics are ruining our asylum. Am I sentimental to pine for a world where the worst lacked all conviction; where the best were full of the passionate intensity I feel in this bright room? How to shield ourselves from leaders more vested in their trivial family dynasties than the fate of our time-share planet?

More than ever I am full of questions. In a few months, dilemmas I solved forty years ago have come untied on me.

Writers should not be called upon for Fortune Cookie answers, only ever-larger queries into the puzzle of the present-tense. This is where you come in. Why do I have so many wishes for you in this age of corruption?

Because I was a reader before I wrote. Because, godless as I am, I believe in literature. Its care and feeding, especially in its daily making. Given our so-called leadership—let me put you on notice: I am really going to need to read you up ahead. Is that okay? Say you’ll speak the truth in love in poems and prose. Your subject need not be the service economy, please. Instead, go local, militantly natural. Snakes in your hen house can do. Speak about your children and your garden and your disappointing Russian lover and let them stand for themselves and everything else.

Tell me something we once knew, but they don’t want us to remember. I really hope to read you at your best. Enriching the language is one joyous rite and chore of ours that makes us stronger than the others. We, after all, are in daily touch with hand-tools more powerful than their nuclear stockpile.

I refer, of course—and don’t tell strangers—to what we’re celebrating here today: “The Sentences.”

YES. In our generalized panic over headlines, even *we* forget we still have access to the illimitable variety of these extraordinary units. Their blasting caps? Tri-partite: subject-

object-verb. Together they produce heat, light, and power that can be adjusted solely to and by your own, heat, light, power.

These cellular building blocks are free to any age, class, race—but only to those of us who live *within* language, not *despite* it. Language is more than a Trumpian means to an end. You know the only reason there is not already a Language Tax? The commissars have not yet *noticed* language. (Very much to our advantage, this). New Masters of Fine Arts, it is not too late. Some cling to Father, Son, Holy Ghost. For the rest of us Subject-Object-Verb is our last best shot.

May whatever there is of God go on blessing The Sentences. It is time to unchain them to defend themselves and us. Just our forming more of them implies our faith, goads our conscience, stirs our music, engenders our redemption. May you continually produce. That will make us all confederates even as it makes us spies in our own nation. Empathy earned and learned through language is our way of life. And the honest, imaginative, comic use of language is the thing that can go on saving us.

Earlier this year, the president's chief strategists described their boss as "semi-literate, unable to process information, and unwilling to listen." Can *our* literacy ramp way up to compensate? Can *we* hold fast to all that science knows, putting our faith in evidence? Can we all please us *hear* evermore acutely? Not just others' voices but—through the screaming din—our own. *Shall* we overcome? *We shall* overcome. Can I hear an *amen*? But I end, as I started, with my father. He retired—to Florida, of course—to play golf with sports celebrities and captains of industry, hounding them afterwards for autographs. His bias against fiction held. But, one day he phoned me, agitated. In a doctor's waiting room, he'd found a left-behind paperback. "Zane Grey. That name ring a bell, son? Zane was really a dentist, but the guy died with 80 westerns under his belt. You can't put them down! Shall I mail you some?" I lied, I begged for some. This was no time for snobbism: they were novels after all.

Driven money-mad by the Depression, dad stayed peeved at what I'd wasted on fiction. Noting my sense of humor and a certain idiot willingness to sometimes speak in public, he kept saying, "Think what General Motors might've paid you through the nose!" But now, through the magic of the Sentences, I can make still more of dad. It happened after I left home. On a Palm Beach golf course—him playing through with a famous Detroit magnate, a Ford of the auto Fords—my father got quizzed. Mr. Ford asked if dad's strange Welsh last name might be related to that of the author of a fat new novel. And when my father acknowledged we were kin, the industrialist reached into a side pocket of his costly white leather golf bag. He pulled out a thumbbed hardback copy of my book and asked my father to autograph it. Which dad immediately did. And to his credit, he phoned me from the club house and, excited, told me this had just happened.

Being asked to sign made him seriously reconsider whether fiction might not, after all, have certain social uses. And when (going too far as usual) I risked asking him *what* he had signed in Ford's copy of my book, dad paused.

Well, he said, he had simply inscribed his name—you know, legibly, as you would on a check. “But,” he added. “In the space under that? I just wrote ‘His Father.’”

So here, O Fellow Masters of Fine Arts, is my last wish for you. That your whole family, your culture, our glorious gullible country and, yes, our very literature will countersign *your* writing.

“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

And today, through you, that happens. (So, ride, my valiant fellow beggars, ride!)