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**Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1994.**

*I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent.  
If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?*

As you might know from my earlier book note on Anne Lamott's *Help, Thanks, and Wow*, she is a devout Christian, of a certain kind. She finds spiritual formation and reformation in a small Presbyterian church in Marin City, California. She came to faith (and is still coming, in many ways) through "a series of staggers" from one lily pad to another that allowed her to keep afloat in the midst of the traumas of personal and social life. Singing plays a big part in her faith. It was the music in that little Presbyterian congregation, with a solid core of black women who sang great gospel, that "pulled me in and split me wide open." Here's how she describes that experience of hearing the music in that little church in *Travelling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (1999):

*Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life. (48)*

Her return from addiction led to some of the most earthy and convincing theological reflections I have read. It's rooted deep in stories – hers, her family's, her church's, her country's, and her world's. I find the ways the Spirit uses her writing transformative. And *Bird by Bird* explores her approach to that craft. It's one of the best books on writing that I have ever read.

I'm only going to touch on three of the wealth of insights she offers. They are some of ones that draw on her faith as a source of inspiration and direction.

In college, as Lamott was considering following her father, dysfunctional as he was, into a career as a writer, friends introduced her to Soren Kierkegaard and C.S. Lewis. She remembers

Lewis referring in *Surprised by Joy* that within himself he was “a zoo of lust, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds.” She could identify with that. She also knew that her father and his editor had faith in her. That kept her writing, and observing, and taking notes on index cards, and revising (over and over again). Finally, a year after her father died of brain cancer, she published her first book at the age of 26. Publication, she discovered, was not all that it is cracked up to be. Writing, however, was. It had its own reward. And that kept her at it.

A community that has faith in you, a passion to give voice to your insights, and a resilience in revising and refining – those are the dynamics that come through in this part of her story.

Her chapter on dialogue reminds me of the importance of conversations. She has a wonderful eye and ear for the flow and rhythm of a character’s speech acts. Again, it didn’t come easy and she has to keep honing it. If you’re writing dialogue, she advises, say it out loud. Make sure each character is unique, sounds like their own voice, gives expression to their particular way of being in and with the world. Then, with a twinkle in her pen, she encourages you to put two characters in conversation who really want to avoid each other. They will hold off on some thoughts, drop some bombs, and get to know each other more deeply.

The way we talk with each other is important. Our conversations blend instinct, emotion, and intellect together into a sound that has an impact. Writers would do well to watch and listen carefully for the many levels of such interactions. Speakers would do well to do the same.

Writers, Lamott believes, have a responsibility to be clear about their moral point of view. It’s not a message, but “a passionate caring inside you.” The crucial thing now is to take care of one another. Write/speak about what is most important to you – love and death, sex and survival, and, if you are in Lamott’s immediate circle of inspiration and influence, God and ecology. Tell the truth, write about freedom, and fight for it. That’s Lamott’s moral point of view. I concur.

In the last chapter, she pens this bracing challenge:

*Becoming a writer is about becoming conscious. When your conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about the truth, you have the ability to throw lights on for your reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say, in the pictures painted, and this decreases the terrible sense of isolation that we have all had to much of. ... Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life; they feed the soul. (225-226 & 237)*

I pray and strive for that reverence in everything that Brentwood does. I pray that you may be pulled into our circle of inspiration and influence and that the Spirit will split us wide open.