

In Your Own True Voice

BY SUSAN LAWSON

*It sounded, as she told her story,
looking from picture to event,
like two great wolves crying to each other
their searing pain.*

This is a dream fragment, spoken to me by an inner voice. What struck me most was the *sound* it conjured—mournful, haunting, lonely, and ultimately, scary, because of its wildness. Yet the implication of the context in which it occurred was that my writing—images, my words—should fill the page in the same way.

When writers speak of voice, that's what they mean: how their words resonate, even when read silently. The oldest usage listed for *voice* in the Oxford English Dictionary goes back to 1290 C.E. and refers to sounds made "by a single person or animal ...regarded as characteristic and as distinguishing him from another or others."

This is definitely true for wolves, who, like humans, are pack animals. The many different qualities within one wolf's howl allow others to know who he is and whether or not he's part of their pack.

During mating season, the howl may signal loneliness. But most of the time, wolves howl to call together their pack. Once one wolf sets in, other pack members approach and join the primal community chorus. Some wolves travel great distances when they hear others in their pack howl, and they arrive panting but eager to join the festivities. Howling is clearly the glue that keeps the pack together.

The late writer and actor Spalding Gray resorted to a simple exercise to help his students find their unique "howl." First he had them speak their life story extemporaneously into a tape recorder. "Then I'd have them transcribe it and begin to work on making the transcript like writing," he said. "My theory was, and it works, that they will find their personal voice in that

way because it *is* their voice. It is their spoken voice. It comes from the life, the breath, the rhythm."

Pat Schneider, who founded Amherst Writers & Artists, agrees. "Writing is talking. It is hunkering down around the cave fire at night and telling about the day. And however it may be disguised, fear is close to the center of the first stories we will want to tell....At times, fear keeps us from writing at all, or keeps us from writing as truly, clearly, and brilliantly as we might."

She then relates how as a young writer she confided to an established author there were things about which she couldn't write. "I would hurt my mother," she said, or "My husband might not like it."

"It sounds to me," the older writer replied, "like there are a lot of absentee landlords of your soul."

What Schneider says she learned from this was crucial: "If you are to write, you must move out of the 'rented rooms' in your mind, rooms that you have allowed to belong to someone else....You must own yourself, have no 'absentee landlord.'"

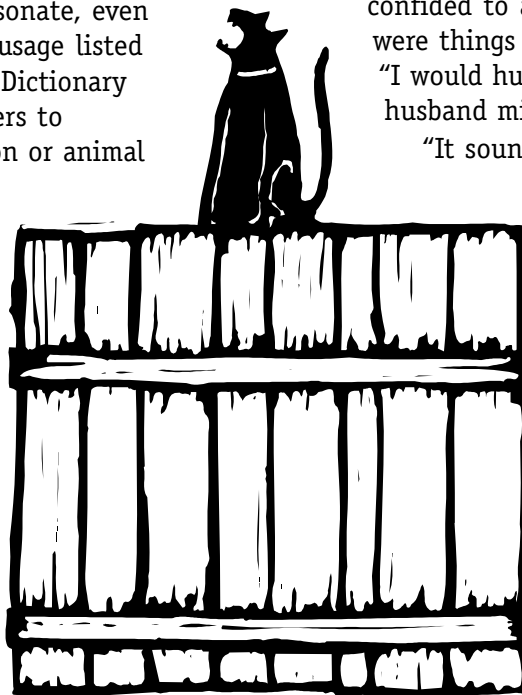
Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird*, says when she asks her students why they want to write, over and over

they tell her, "I will not be silenced again."

"They were good children who often felt invisible and who saw some awful stuff," she says. "But at some point they stopped telling what they saw because when they did, they were punished. Now they want to look at their lives—at life—and they don't want to be sent to their rooms for doing so."

Being sent to your room as a child is something we all identify with, and it sounds akin to the "rented rooms" Schneider voluntarily banished herself to as an adult.

I've heard writers say, as Schneider once did, they would embarrass family if they wrote what



they experienced, as if sacrificing one's self to family was a merit badge worth earning. Because of my own experiences, I know that's a hard one to get past. It was the hardest thing I, personally, have ever faced.

I've also heard writers say they avoid certain topics because they don't want to make even a *general* audience uncomfortable, and I know these people have missed the last boat of the season, not just the day. That's the whole point about writing, isn't it? To shake things up a bit? All the really good writers did, didn't they? It may not be your purpose, but it's bound to happen anyway, and if you're not willing to let the chips fall where they may, what's left?

"The great writers *keep* writing about the cold dark place within," Lamott observes. "The water under a frozen lake or the secluded, camouflaged hole. The light they shine on this hole, this pit, helps us cut away or step around the brush and brambles; then we can dance around the rim of the abyss, holler into it, measure it, throw rocks in it, and still not fall in. It can no longer swallow us up."

But "you cannot write out of someone else's big dark place; you can only write out of your own," she adds. "The truth of your experience can *only* come through in your own voice."

The late Leonard Michaels, who taught at the University of California—Berkeley, confirmed this with an example from a dream, quoted in Naomi Eppel's *Writers Dreaming*.

"What I see in the dream is this stone stairway leading down into a dungeon," he said. "Sprawled on these steps is this figure that I think is me. His head is twisted to the side and his tongue is nailed to one of the steps....It suggests maybe I was trying to get out of this dungeon, but was forbidden to do so. I am obliged to draw my writing career from this dreadful place."

Toni Morrison adds, "The function of freedom is to free someone else." There is duty involved, a debt to pay back. It won't be easy. Many will not appreciate your sacrifice. The rewards are subtle at best and have nothing to do with becoming

published, becoming famous or becoming rich.

"Becoming a writer is about becoming conscious," says Lamott. "When you're conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about the truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for your reader. To participate requires self-discipline and trust and courage, because this business of becoming conscious, of being a writer, is ultimately about asking yourself, How alive am I willing to be?"

With that said, Schneider reminds us that each writer must decide for herself when and how to break free of fear and learned constraints. "Freedom, and its power, comes to the writing voice out of the writer's own necessity or out of the writer's own security.

Those are profoundly personal areas and cannot be coerced, bullied, or judged into being."

Even if we're not ready for Lamott's pit or Michaels' dungeon, we can ponder more obvious aspects of ourselves, because, as Schneider says, voice takes in all the places we've been, all the persons we've loved and lived with, all the cultural nuances of original neighborhood, workplace, home, country, continent, historical period, and personal story.

"The cadence, the rhythm, the lulls and ecstatic explosions of a writer's voice belong only to the writer," she says, "and no teacher or workshop leader, no matter how gifted,

can say what that music ought to be."

It's a gift unique to each of us. A gift—like the cat's limp catches—

we don't often appreciate because it comes from our wild nature. A gift we try to "clean up" or maybe even hide in the trash.

But a gift we must learn to recognize and cheer on as we see it emerge in others in our writing group, which, come to think of it, is a kind of community not unlike the wolf pack.

I say *cheer on* because the success of others we care about means someone has gone ahead. And as we recognize their distinct howl, it calls us ever closer toward home, until someday we also can answer the call in a voice that is, distinctly, our own.

