Tuesday, February 1, 2011

GUIDE TO THE SELF - 101

"What is the self?" is, in my view, the most important question in human experience. It is the central focus and starting point for modern philosophy. Yet for most of us, it is one of the questions that we make the most assumptions and have the most presuppositions about. But however you answer this question, your conclusion will have profound implications for every dimension of your daily life, and for other questions you raise in regard to ethics, epistemology, ontology, psychology, religion, political theories, and notions of (black or white, male and female, and cultural) personal identity.

For those interested in an introductory, brief Western tour through this matter, I would suggest beginning with *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Meditation II,), by Rene Descartes, the father of modern philosophy whose *cogito* ("I think") situated the subject of experience (and subjectivity) at the forefront of the philosophical enterprise.

Turn next to David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, section V on "Personality Identity," where he writes, "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself,* I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception."

Next work as best you can with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. (Believe me, it will pay dividends.) Then, because he felt "I owe what is best in my own development to the impression made by Kant's works, the sacred writings of the Hindus, and Plato," and because the dialogue continues today about his relationship to Buddhism and Eastern thought, look at Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World As Will and Representation* (1818) for a fascinating 19th century Western bridge to the East.

The Eastern part of this tour should include a study of *The Bhagavad Gita*. For those interested in a masterly text that includes a transliteration and nano-level analysis of Sanskrit grammar, I suggest the translation by Winthrop Sargeant. For lay readers

who would appreciate a lively commentary on the *Gita* as it relates to contemporary life, I recommend the three-volume translation *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living* by the late, great meditation teacher, Eknath Easwaran, who was always a witty writer, and former English professor (Obviously, that endeared him to me). I also suggest the Advaita Vedanta classic *Astavkra Samhita*.

Among the Buddhists, this tour should include Nagarjuna's "Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way," Vasubandhu's "Treatise on the Three Natures," Dogen's philosophical and cultural masterpiece *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, and the *Middle Length*, *Long* and *Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, translated in three volumes by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Maurice Walshe, and Bhikkhu Nanamoli. (Pardon me for the absence of diacritical marks with these titles and names.)

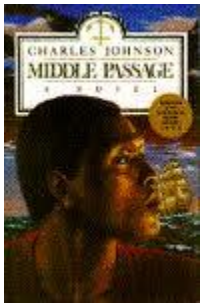
All this is but the tip of the ice berg, and just begins the tour or introductory course--- The Self 101--- for broaching the meditation, "What is the self?" The rest of the journey or course will probably take a lifetime.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:07 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/guide-to-self-101.html

Sunday, February 6, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT MIDDLE PASSAGE

I began the work on *Middle Passage* in 1971 in a research paper I wrote for a course I took on black history. Then I wrote in ten weeks of that same year (and too quickly) my first draft for a novel about the slave trade. I didn't return to the subject until 1983 (and completed the novel in 1989); but, as earlier, my intention was to dramatize and provide details for the specific horrors experienced by Africans crammed into European ships that carried them to the New World.



However, during this process it became impossible not to see how thoroughly the societies engaged in the slave trade were transformed by it. Originally, my focus was on the dramatic interplay between the ships, the sailors, the slaves, and the sea. But I soon realized, like someone pulling a thread on a sweater, the truth of interconnectedness as it manifested in the slave trade. It took all the landside resources of an entire society---a culture at a particular moment in history like the slaving port in Liverpool in the 1800s---to create those three-masted ships that sailed for centuries. Every bollard and flywheel on the sloops, schooners and brigantines pointed back not only to the financiers of those voyages, but also to the bustling shipyards, to the merchants who prepared the beer casks and barrels of salted beef and pork, and the artisans and workers who provided the tools (and instruments of torture like thumbscrews and manacles) carried on board. There were devilish inventions created specifically for the needs of the slave trade---for example, a nasty-looking device called the *speculum oris*, which was used to force open the throats of slaves and pour gruel into those who refused to eat. (Think about what it must have been like to apply your imagination and knowledge to create such an "innovation." Did someone once hold a patent on this?) In other words, everyone high and low living in societies that engaged in the trade---including those who never owned another human being---was implicated, directly or indirectly. No one was innocent. No one could be morally clean in a country that profited in any way from traffic in slaves.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:37 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/charles-johnson-talks-about-middle.html

Sunday, February 6, 2011

COMING ATTRACTIONS ...

STEVEN BARNES

I get asked a lot about my plans for my next novel. Actually, science fiction writer Steven Barnes and I have been co-writing for almost a year a sci-fi/murder mystery novel that has the working title, *A War in Heaven*. Working with Steve on this project (He's providing the meat and potatoes, I'm just adding the literary and philosophical seasoning) has been the greatest of pleasures for me, (1) Because I cut my teeth on speculative fiction when I was kid and I love this sub-genre of fiction, which is so imaginative, free, and intellectually stimulating; (2) Because Steve is an old friend I much admire who is very prolific in this field, and he is *the* most accomplished, living, black sci-fi writer working today; and (3) Because I have decades of fat folders of science articles I've been saving for this foray into science fiction. (Earlier in my life, I published two sci-fi stories, "Popper's Disease," and "Sweet Dreams.") Check out the current, Jan-Feb. issue of *Boston Review*, which carries my new, third story, "Guinea Pig," to get a feel for the kind of fusion of science, philosophy, and imaginative writing that I want to be the direction for my fiction at this stage of my life.

But the above described work is a collaborative project, one we're not rushing. Nor am I rushing my own next novel that I've been entertaining ideas for. (That's one of the pleasures of being retired: having time to think, not being rushed.) I know its central philosophical question, the one question that burns in my mind and heart every day as I look at what is happening in the world: *What does it mean to be civilized?,* a theme I've been working over in articles, essays, and short stories during the last decade. But I want exactly the right plot (conflict and sequence of actions) and central character for it, *i.e.,* a protagonist who can carry the burden of exploring---dramatically and intellectually--all the transformations I see happening around us in America and the world as old, cultural forms die and startling, new ones arise.

Typically, my novels all experiment and play creatively with one of the literary forms we inherit as writers. I do this as a way to celebrate our ancestors, and to make form itself the subject of my literary meditation. Every literary form limns a particular universe of characters and their possibilities, a specific *Lebenswelt* or *Umwelt*

(or experiential "life-world"), as phenomenologists say. So *Faith and the Good Thing* is inspirited with the form of the black American folk-tale; *Oxherding Tale* by the slave narrative, one of the oldest, native American literary forms; *Middle Passage* by the ship's log and sea adventure story; and in *Dreamer* we can glimpse the form of the gospel, and Christian writings composed by an elder monk or nun to help novices---think of St. Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* and the anonymous *Theologia Germanica*.

For my next novel, my imagination is powerfully drawn to the form of the *Bundsroman*, or "League Novel," which was popular in Germany in the 19th century. A few years ago, I sent my lovely editor at Scribner a novel synopsis and summary that uses the *Bundsroman* as its dramatic structuring device. However, I wasn't satisfied at the time with the way I envisioned Act Three.

So at this writing I have a theme ("What does it mean to be civilized?"), a possible form (the *Bundsroman*), and a likely protagonist (a black, elderly scientist/philosopher, a kind of combination of W.E.B. Du Bois and Niels Bohr). But like I said, I'm in no hurry. I want this work of fiction to draw together all the things I'm passionate about, and interpret where I think we're headed in the 21st century.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:56 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/coming-attractions.html

Monday, February 7, 2011

SCIENCE-FICTION AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL NOVEL

Back in the 1980s, the prolific science fiction writer and feminist Joanna Russ (I think her best-known book is *The Female Man*), who was also good friends with the magisterial sci-fi writer Samuel R. Delany (*Dhalgren* and *Trouble On Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia)*), was my colleague at the University of Washington. I interviewed them together for an issue of *The Seattle Review*. Both are pioneers of the "New Wave" of science fiction that emerged in the early 1970s, a science fiction that grappled with social issues, and elevated the craft of good writing (strong characters, poetic, lyrical prose) in this genre. In that interview, Russ remarked that a woman living somewhere in America, perhaps a very provincial, rural setting, once said that what she enjoyed most about science fiction was the landscapes. They helped her imagine, she said, a world quite different from the one in which she was living.

JOANNA RUSS

I've always liked that statement, because it says science fiction (like philosophy) has the power to shake up our presuppositions, our assumptions, our social and cultural conditioning, our prejudices, and nudge us to imagine *What if?* To imagine things differently is the first step in changing the world as it is given to us. It is, in fact, the first step toward freedom.

In one of his lectures, Robert Thurman, a Buddhist scholar, disciple of the Dalai Lama, and director of Tibet House in NYC (and also the father of actor Uma Thurman), said that Buddhists are naturally fans of science-fiction. Why? Once again, because philosophy, Buddhism, and science fiction at their best (as well as science itself) challenge our views and transform our perception. Philosophy does it through the rigor of reasoning and logic; science fiction does it by dramatizing the possible, especially the possible based on either science fact or theoretical science. And science fiction writers have often predicted changes in our lives decades before those changes arrived.

I much enjoyed reading recently a short story anthology entitled, *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004). Of this work, Delany said, "What an exciting book! The writers and their subject matter range through all colors and a variety of approaches to the fictions of the post-colonial. These are ripe and rare stories by some of the most imaginative writers to come along in the indistinctly

separate genres of science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism in more than a decade."

In his syndicated column yesterday (Feb. 6, 2011), "No Clue Where We're Going," Leonard Pitts Jr. marvels at the transformations in our lives since 1860, then 1961. "The point being, we have experienced---are experiencing---greater change at a faster pace than ever before," he wrote. "But as a fish in water doesn't know it's wet, we, living through this challenging, disorienting, 'tectonic" shifting of everything, don't always appreciate the blinding speed with which it is happening...We are too busy bailing water from the sinking boats of former lives and professions. We are too busy trying to define the curve of the new horizon, as familiar old media, modes, models and mores die with bewildering suddenness and new ones snap to life faster still."

His words are well said. And, traditionally, science fiction is well-equipped to turn those changes into spirited storytelling.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:00 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/science-fiction-and-philosophical-novel.html

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON CRAFT AND REVISION

The late John Gardner, my writing mentor more than thirty years ago, once told a story about revision that has stuck with me. He said he gave a reading, and during the Q&A a woman raised her hand, and said, "You know, I think I like your writing, but I don't think I like *you*." His reply was memorable. "That's all right," he said, "because I'm a better person when I'm writing. Standing here, talking to you now, I can't revise my words. If I say something wrong or not quite right, or maybe offensive and it hurts someone, the words are out there, public, and I can't take them back. I have to rely on you to revise or fix them for me. But when I'm writing, I can go over and over what I think and say until it's right."

JOHN GARDNER

I think Gardner captured the heart of the creative process. We often hear that 90% of good writing is re-writing. We also know that writing well is the same thing as thinking well, and that means we want our final literary product---story, novel, or essay to exhibit our best thought, best feeling, and best technique.

When I compose a first draft I just let everything I feel and think spill out raw and chaotically on the page. I let it be a mess. I trust my instincts. I just let my ideas and feelings flow until I run out of words. I don't censor myself. When I have this raw copy, I can then decide if this idea is worth putting more effort into. If so, then with the second draft, I clean up spelling and grammar. I add anything I forgot to include in the first draft and take out whatever isn't working.

Then the real fun begins with the third draft. There, I can begin to polish sentences and paragraphs for style. I always need a minimum of *three* drafts before I have anything worthy of showing to others, and that's only if I'm lucky. Sometimes my ratio of throwaway to keep pages is 20 to 1. From the third draft forward, I work at varying sentence length (long, short) in every paragraph, and also varying sentence forms (simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, loose sentence, periodic sentence). I see each sentence as being a unit of energy. The music and meaning of the last sentence in every paragraph should propel the reader into the first sentence of the paragraph that follows.

I try to make sure each paragraph can justify its being on the page. That is, each paragraph should have at least *one* good idea in it. I work to amplify a strong narrative voice. I rewrite and edit until the piece has no waste or unnecessary sentences whatsoever. Any sentence that *can* come out *should* come out. ("Kill your babies," as the saying goes, unless, of course you absolutely love that sentence.) I work to get music---rhythm, meter---between sentences and paragraphs, as if the prose composition is actually a musical work, one pleasing to the ear. The way to test this is to read it out loud. If I stumble when reading the piece, I know those sentences that tripped me up (that were hard to say or recite) need to be rewritten. Also, I try to be generous with concrete language, and to write always with specificity. (The Devil is always in the details.)

So for me, revision is a combination of cutting away (like sculpting the sentence from stone) and also a constant layering of the language (like working with the sentence as you would clay.) The palimpsestic layering part of the process often leads to sudden surprises---puns, oracles and revelations---that I'm always looking for. Back and forth, adding and subtracting, like that.You know when a piece is finished because you can't pull out a single sentence or change a word or syllable. If you do extract that heavily polished sentence, you create a hole in the space *between* the sentence before and after it since you have altered not only the sense but the sound that links those sentences. (It's like ripping an arm off a human body, an act that affects everything else in the organism you're creating.) Achieving this requires (for me) lots of thrown away pages: 1,200 for *Faith and the Good Thing*, 2,400 for *Oxherding Tale*, 3,000 for *Middle Passage*, and more than 3,000 for *Dreamer*. I use this same method for short stories. I love the sustained focus it requires, for it is so like the first stage in formal meditation, called *dharana* (or concentration).

I started keeping a diary when I was 12; my mother suggested the idea. In college the diary transformed into a journal in which I wrote poetry, brief essays to myself, and (as with a diary) tried to make sense of daily events. (These old journals fill up one filing cabinet in my study.) When I started writing fiction, the journals moved in the direction of being a writing tool and memory aide. I use cheap, unlined, spiral notebooks, each page like a blank canvas. Into them go notes on everything I experience; I jot down images, phrases used by my friends, fragments of thoughts, overheard dialogue, anything I flag in something I've read that strikes me for its sentence form or memorable qualities, its beauty or truth. These writing notebooks since 1972 sit on one of my bookshelves 20-inches deep, along with notebooks I kept from college classes. (I save everything, it's shameless.) After 39 years of accumulation, the notebooks contain notes on every subject under the sun.

When I have a decent third draft, I begin going carefully through my notebooks, page after page, hunting for thoughts, images I've had, or ideas about characters (observations I've made of people around me). Although it takes five days (eight hours a day), sometimes even two weeks now to go through all these notebooks and

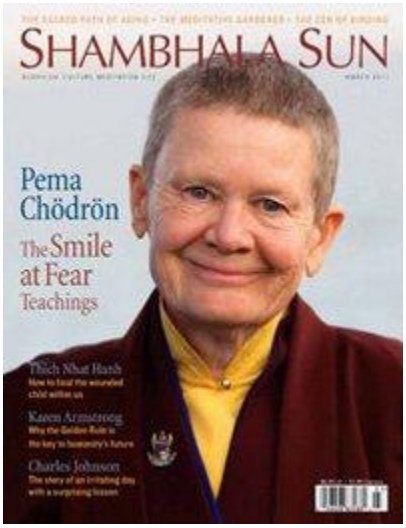
folders (since I add something new to the current one every day), I can always count on finding some sentence, phrase, or idea I had, say, 20 or 30 years ago that is perfect for a novel or story in progress. The literary journal *Zyzzyva* used to publish a feature called "The Writer's Notebook." If you look at the Fall, 1992 issue (pages 124-143), you'll see reproductions of my revised pages and an early outline for *Middle Passage*, as well as character notes for Capt. Ebenezer Falcon that I wrote on hotel stationary (The Sheraton-Palace Hotel in San Francisco) when I was on the road.

When I tell students the anecdote about Gardner, I emphasize his feeling that the result of this painstaking revision process is that for at least *once* in their lives, here on the page, they can achieve perfection or something close to that, if they are willing to revise and re-envision their work long enough. And then I say: Where else in life do we get the chance---the privilege and blessing---to lovingly, selflessly go over something again and again until it finally embodies exactly what we think and feel, our best expression, our vision at its most clearest, and our best *techne*?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:38 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/charles-johnson-on-craft-and-revision.html

Thursday, February 10, 2011

WELCOME TO WEDGWOOD



See the March 2011 issue of *Shambhala Sun* for Charles Johnson's "Welcome to Wedgwood." Page 64.
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:31 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/welcome-to-wedgwood.html

Monday, February 14, 2011

WRITERS AND EDITORS

When I was 24-years-old and writing *Faith and the Good Thing* with John Gardner looking over my shoulder, that writer/teacher gave me a bit of good advice regarding editors. He said before one turns in a manuscript to a publisher it should be as perfect as one can possibly make it. One should not rely on an editor to fix or repair anything in one's work. Furthermore, Gardner said, when an author becomes famous or well-known, editors have a tendency not to touch his (or her) work. In other words, many successful, celebrity writers don't receive the benefits a good editor can provide. Almost exactly a year later, I stumbled on an example of what Gardner possibly meant. I was at Viking Press, meeting with my editor, the late Alan Williams, for *Faith*. He told me Saul Bellow was in the building, so I asked if he'd introduce us. Alan walked me down the hallway to an empty conference room. At the end of a long table, Bellow, that literary lion, sat hunched over the galley for his novel *Humboldt's Gift*. He'd flown in from Chicago and, with his coat off and shirt sleeves rolled up, was tearing the galley apart, revising, intensely focused on those pages already set in type. That impressed me. Bellow, a perfectionist, knew that this was absolutely the last chance he had to work on this novel before it was published and he had to finally let it go. And, as we know, every contract in the early 1970s said that if an author changed more than 10% of his book when it was in the galley stage, he (the author) had to pay for those changes. (This was, of course, no problem for Bellow, who was a millionaire.) After that novel was published, Bellow received the Nobel Prize for literature.

SAUL BELLOW

I believe Gardner was right. But I also feel that even the most accomplished writer can be helped by a second pair of good eyes---those of a learned editor steeped in literary culture like my editor for *Middle Passage*, the late Lee Goerner at Atheneum---looking over his(or her) work and catching small things the writer may have overlooked in the heat of the creative process.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:59 AM

http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/writers-and-editors.html

Tuesday, February 15, 2011

THE WRITING SPACE

Just as people who seriously practice meditation have a room or space in their home dedicated to that activity, so too, writers (or artists) greatly need a location set aside specifically for the practice of their craft. A place that spiritually puts them in the mood to create.

In 1993, my wife and I remodeled our one-story home, adding a second floor, and we worked with two architects who designed the rooms (we wanted lots of book shelf space, but---sigh---quickly ran out of that) to our specifications. They built for me a second-floor study/office at the rear of the house, a carpeted room with a sliding glass door that opens onto a deck overlooking our back yard of apple, plum and pear trees.

Two walls of this room have floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Two walls also have an L-shaped work bench on which sit the PC I'm writing on right now, a printer, copy machine, fax machine, and other office supplies. Amiddlemost this room is the first piece of furniture I purchased when we moved to Seattle in 1976---a big, wooden schoolhouse teacher's desk with many drawers. (Everything I've written since that year has been composed on this surface-scarred desk on which sits a mahogany version of Thomas Jefferson's laptop desk; I also have in one corner of my study a walnut reproduction of Jefferson's spinning book stand, which every serious reader will love.) The hundreds of books in my study are, naturally, the ones about Western and Eastern philosophy I refer to most often, along with Sanskrit, Pali and English dictionaries (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, and *Webster's* 2,129-page *New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, which I read page by page in graduate school in order to build my own personal lexicon). Also there is a full set of the *World Book Encyclopedia* my parents got for me in 1956 when I was 8-years-old, which I've never been able to part with (I love reading those old entries.)

The walls of this room, which I suppose you could call my Man Cave, are covered with the awards, degrees (middle school through the Ph.D. in Philosophy), and honorary degrees I've received. Four, crammed filing cabinets contain manuscript copies of everything I've written or published since 1965. Another four contain my pens and tools for drawing, research on Buddhism, and news articles (as well as science articles) I clip every day, which I feel I may make use of in future writing, fiction or non-fiction. On the door is a copy of Carl Sagan's "Cosmic Calendar" tracing the history of the universe in 365 days (one second equals 430

years), and a wooden plaque that reads THOU SHALT NOT WHINE; and on the back of that door is a poster of the Milky Way galaxy.

On one wall below a wall clock and above a big calendar (on which I scribble appointments) there is a green blackboard on which I write in chalk my daily "To-Do" list (writing deadlines, deadlines for doing student recommendations, etc.) And there are many photos on the walls---one of Richard Wright in his Paris study, standing before a wall of books, one hand on his typewriter, the other in his suit coat pocket; a big photo of Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, which I've had since graduate school; a painting of Jesus my mother once had; photos of myself, Ralph Ellison and my editor Lee Goerner at the 1990 National Book Award ceremony when *Middle Passage* won the fiction prize, and of John Gardner (one full bookshelf in this room contains every scholarly book and work of fiction he published.) There are framed copies of Buddhist *gatha* (prayers and vows) on the walls, as well as a page of color cartoons (with an essay) I published in *The Seattle Times* in 2004 to celebrate ML King's birthday. Some objects in my study have a little, stick-on label on them in Sanskrit (Devanagri characters) to help me memorize vocabulary every day. (*Dipika* is on my desk lamp.) And there are small statues everywhere---of Martin De Porres (whom my mother loved), St. Francis, Aristotle, Dante, Mark Twain, the Greek god Apollo, Martin Luther King Jr., Bodhidharma, two small statues of Barack and Michelle Obama, and a small, bronze 16th century, Burmese statue of Shakyamuni Buddha I purchased in Thailand in 1997 (This gorgeous artwork was made before this nation existed). On my desk, too, there is an orrery; a circular Tibetan prayer-wheel; miniatures of the Mars "Spirit" rover and Da Vinci's famous flying machine; a small piece of a real meteorite; and a little statue of Disney's Scrooge McDuck. There are stacks of the science magazines for lay people that I subscribe to (*Science News*, *New Scientist, Discovery*, *Science* published weekly by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, etc.), popular Buddhist publications I publish my work in, and a soft mat my dog Nova sleeps on when he's not curled up under my desk (He's on it right now). There is also on one wall a death mask (today we call this a "life-cast") of my face made by Willa Shalit, who also made one on the same day for the late artist Jacob Lawrence at University Book Store in Seattle during one of her book tours (You can see photographs of the life-casts she did for Richard Nixon, Muhammad Ali, Richard Burton, Federico Fellini, Sophia Loren, Paul Newman, Sammy Davis Jr., Whoopi Goldberg, Rosa Parks, and many others in her book *Life Cast: Behind The Mask*, Beyond Words Publishing, Inc., 1992.)

There is more here, but you get the picture. Like the workroom of my character Ezekiel Sykes-Withers, the Transcendentalist teacher of the protagonist in *Oxherding Tale*, my study is, obviously, a projection or externalization of my own mind and spirit: a cluttered catastrophe of books, creative tools, memorabilia, and images where I always feel most at home.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:29 AM

http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/writing-space.html

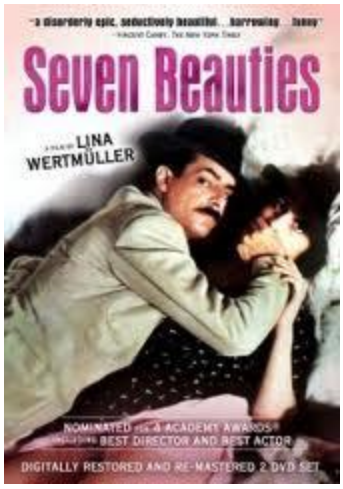
Tuesday, February 15, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON WILL MAKE YOU SMILE AND LAUGH

Given that I was a professional editorial and panel cartoonist for seven years (1965-72), starting when I was 17-years-old, it shouldn't surprise readers that my fiction exhibits irony, humor and irreverence. Bear in mind, too, that I grew up in Illinois. Not in Peoria, where Richard Pryor was born and raised, but close to there. When I was in college, my black male friends from Springfield all had an unbridled sense of humor flavored like Pryor's (maybe there was something in Illinois water that produced that), the comic genius whose style can be seen in black comedians from Eddie Murphy to Chris Rock.

RICHARD PRYOR

Nevertheless, I've occasionally heard from some readers (white and black) that the humor in my work either surprised or troubled them, especially in stories and cartoons set during the period of slavery like *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*. (Slavery isn't depicted as funny in those novels, but some of their characters *are* funny, as flawed human beings.) I imagine these dour, humorless, and dull people feel black life and literature should be filled only with tears, wailing, and the gnashing of teeth. (If so, that tells us a lot about *them*, their limited vision of black America, and you can bet I'd never want to take a cross-country drive in a Volkswagen Beetle with any of them.) Traditionally, humor is a survival mechanism. Look at the "John and Old Master" trickster tales from black folklore (where slaves often outwit their owner); or the work of that grandmaster of black American cartoonists Ollie Harrington; or the witty, racially insightful observations of Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple. Even in the Nazi concentration camps, Jewish survivors of the holocaust refused to let their oppressors take away that last vestige of their humanity, which could be seen in their humor (Does anyone today remember the work of Italian film-maker Lina Wertmuller, films such as *Seven Beauties*?)



Humor takes many forms: comedy, irony, wit, satire, the incongruous, the absurd, and it can be psychologically and spiritually liberating in, for example, Japanese Zen stories. It is as much a part of life's texture as the tragic, so here is my advice:

Beware the tight-sphinctered man or woman who cannot laugh at life's absurdities.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:19 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/charles-johnson-will-make-you-smile-and.html

Friday, February 18, 2011

MINDFULNESS ON THE MIND OF CHARLES JOHNSON

The Dharma teacher Bhikkhu Bodhi once said, "The task of Right Mindfulness is to clear up the cognitive field. Mindfulness brings to light experience in its pure immediacy. It reveals the object as it is before it has been plastered over with conceptual paint, overlaid with interpretations. To practice mindfulness is thus a matter not so much of doing but of undoing: not thinking, not judging, not associating, not planning, not imagining, not wishing."

That succinct description of Mindfulness captures how I use the phrase "beginner's mind." This is something every visual artist is familiar with. One purpose of a drawing class, for example, is to get students to liberate their perceptions, to draw the body of the individual, unique model before them, as it is presented to them *here* and *now* in direct perception, to *pay attention* to it, and not draw how they remember or think the human body looks. This exercise is akin to what phenomenologists do with the technique called the *epoche* or "bracketing" of our opinions, views, and explanatory models when we examine a phenomenon in hopes of undergoing a fresh experience with it.

Think of the old Zen masters asking us to "empty our cup," because a full cup cannot hold anything fresh or new. How often do we see not the object before us but instead our *idea* of that object (or person)? How often during the day does it happen that we perceive the world and things in it, objects and others, through our cultural and social

conditioning that dates back to childhood? How many times a day do we experience phenomenon, not directly, but filtered through the interpretations, ideas, and opinions of our teachers, parents, friends, the English language (with its concepts) and especially the media?

In my thirty-first year of meditation practice now, and as I get older, I constantly and with greater ease watch my mind and practice this "undoing" Bhikku Bodhi describes, scraping away all the accumulated layers of ossified "conceptual paint," and questioning every idea that arises in my mind *as* it arises, especially my thoughts and feelings that are knee-jerk and uncritical, the ones that make me (or my ego) feel most comfortable. (Those are always the most suspect ones.) I interrogate each idea with these questions: Is that true? What is the origin of or basis for that idea? Can I truly say I believe it? That I've earned it? Is this idea or feeling *really* true to my experience of this particular subject (or object), or is this an idea or feeling I have received second-hand from others, which I'm just repeating, parrot-like, without verification?

The result of this practice, of experiencing "beginner's mind," is both liberating and humbling. On the one hand, it makes me aware of the intentionality behind my thinking, *i.e.*, how so much of it can be defensive, reactionary, partisan, willful, self-centered, driven by desire, mired in my own conditioned and miscellaneous list of "likes" and "dislikes," with the ego working hard to protect its cherished ideas, beliefs, and itself. On the other hand, once I "let go" the ideas that stand between myself and undergoing an original experience with something, I find the "object" before me appearing in ways *here* and *now* that are fresh and unexpected.

Every day when I get up, I wash my face with hot water. That might seem like a dull, quotidian activity. But think of what we do when we meditate exclusively on our breath, following each one carefully, and thinking of nothing else. (Try doing that for just five minutes and see how hard it is.) Some breaths are long, some short. Some are fast, some slow. Some are warm, some cool. Some are deep, some shallow. Never is any breath we inhale and exhale the same as a previous one. Similarly, each day when I wash my face the experience of the "hot" and the "water" are never the same as they were the day before---or on *any* day before in my entire life.

This experience of freshness in even the most pedestrian and mundane things is, I believe, beginner's mind, for the only place any of us can live is *here* and *now*. (Not in the unrecoverable past or in a future that will never come.) Beginner's mind is also the artist's mind, which invites us to experience the world anew in all its mystery and wonder.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:57 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/mindfulness-on-mind-of-charles-johnson.html

Monday, February 21, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON RALPH ELLISON

There are at least two things I remember vividly about Ralph Ellison on the evening of Nov. 27, 1990 when I received the National Book Award for *Middle Passage*. That night, I read a tribute to 76-year-old Ellison as part of my acceptance speech (this was published in the October 1991 issue of *Tri-Quarterly*), and afterwards as we fielded questions together from reporters he said to me, "I thought I had been forgotten." Then during that joint interview when a reporter asked him if he wrote from the "Black experience," Ellison replied, "My God, you write out of your imagination, not your skin!"

Obviously, my hope is that Ellison and his aesthetic legacy are never forgotten. His one novel, *Invisible Man,* and his essays in *Shadow and Act*, have become cultural artifacts and essential texts if one hopes to understand what we once called the "American experience." Yet to this day Ellison remains a lightning-rod for controversy. Some days, late at night when I'm working, I wonder if this on-going controversy arises simply because we no longer have or believe in a unique "American" literature (or identity), or even in the motto *e pluribus unum*.

Writers from the era of Ellison, and his friend Saul Bellow, believed their job was to conjure universal truth from the rich particulars of the black and Jewish experience in this country. That project defined the aim of most of our great, canonized writers from the founding of the Republic forward. But the word "universal" is understandably radioactive for many today and, like the historical concepts of "nation" or "nation-state" it may have outlived its shelf life in an age when multi-national corporations know no geographic boundaries. Rather than striving to expand a canon of works that distinguish American literature (and identity) from that of the Old World (which Ellison's namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, devoted himself to doing), the *zeitgeist* of our moment in history directs writers to create for a specific, tribal, Balkanized audience defined by its race, class, gender, ideological or cultural orientation. In other words, *many* differing experiences within America with no apparent *eidos* (or essence), as a phenomenologist would say, providing an invariant meaning for what is "American."

Despite this cultural sea-change, which I believe is an inevitable and necessary correction for the overwhelmingly white, Eurocentric bias in American society, Ellison stuck to his old-fangled, liberal humanist position, or "stayed at his post" as Emerson might say. That night in 1990, Ellison's reply to the reporter was, in fact, an abbreviation of a famous passage from *Invisible Man*, where he wrote, "Stephen's problem (in James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*), like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record...We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something that doesn't exist? For, you see, blood and skin do not think!"

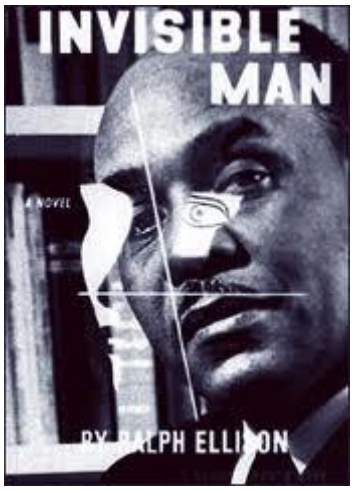
In the decades after his novel's publication, Ellison continued to believe that "by a trick of fate (and our racial problems notwithstanding), the human imagination is integrative---and the same is true of the centrifugal force that inspirits the democratic process." (I can easily see President Barack Obama including that statement in one of his speeches, and members of the Taliban and al-Qaida hating it.) He urged us to believe in the principles on which America was founded, not in the men---white and black---who betrayed those principles. Democracy, individualism, high artistic standards, and integration---these were his mantras. And his goal was always to create "a fiction which, leaving sociology to the scientists, arrived at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of a fairy tale."

There is both sadness and irony in the virulent attacks Ellison received from Black Cultural Nationalists in the 1960s. One of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal, first criticized Ellison in "The Black Writers Role, I, Richard Wright," an essay he published in 1965, then later in a stroke of honesty and contrition took back his criticism in "The Black Writers Role II, Ralph Ellison's Zoot Suit," in which he said, "*Invisible Man* is artistically one of the world's greatest novels...a great deal of

the criticism (of *Invisible Man*) emanates from ideological sources that most of us today reject."

In my own case, I was introduced to Ellison's novel in college by my friend, poet Alicia Johnson, who is mentioned with admiration in Amiri Baraka's anthology, *Black Fire*. In 1969, she told me she re-read *Invisible Man* once a year to improve her own writing. And I remember how my friend, the late playwright August Wilson, who greatly admired Baraka and always described himself as being a "Race Man," answered the question, "Do you write from the Black experience?" His answer was Ellisonian: "It never enters my mind that I'm writing Black. I'm writing what I know best---which is myself. I'm writing human, and while I'm conscious of the way history influences and in some guise controls our conduct and understanding of what it is to be part of humanity, it never defines it." (August told me often how he wanted to lead a protest against Borders and Barnes and Noble for placing the work of, say, Tennessee Williams in the section of the bookstore set aside for "American" works, and his in the section reserved for "Black" ones.)

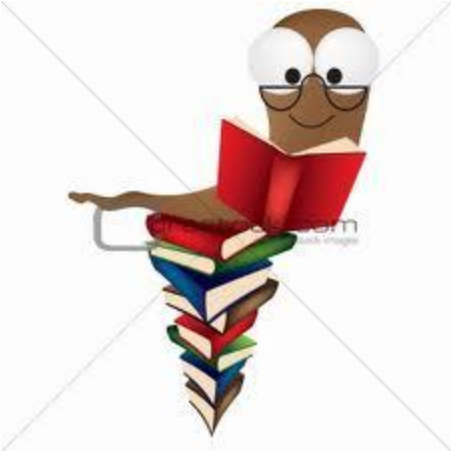
In his life, and in his literature, Ralph Ellison was one of the 20th century's American literary pioneers who courageously called for the most demanding and (for some) frightening of freedoms. He told us, "The thing that Americans have to learn over and over again is that they are individuals and they have the responsibility of individual vision."



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:14 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/charles-johnson-on-ralph-ellison.html

Tuesday, February 22, 2011

THE PRIZE AND THE JUDGE



By now I'm sure I've read thousands of novels and short stories, by students and professionals both. I've been a fiction judge three times for the National Book Awards (chairing that committee in 1999 and 2009), three times for the Pulitzer Prize, once for the PEN/Faulkner, twice for The Los Angeles Times Book Award, and I've judged so many other contests that I can no longer remember them all.

The funny thing about being a teacher---especially a teacher of writing---is that you develop the habit of reading from start to finish what*ever* anyone puts in front of you, whether you like it or not, with your red pencil in hand, because your job is to grade and comment on it. But when those contest books arrive on my doorstep from UPS, and I open the boxes, and spread out in front of me on the living room floor approximately 300 novels and story collections, I'm confronted with the same question over and over again---a question that reaches all the way back to my teens. With all these books before me, where do I *start?* What do I really *want* to read. And each time I face this dilemma, I come to the same realization. I *don't* necessarily want to start with *this* best-selling book by a famous author. Or *that* book, which had a huge publicity campaign behind it. Nor am I interested in a book because it has an award attached to it. Or because a teacher told me I should read it. Or because it's about timely social or political issues. And I'm certainly not interested because someone says that *every*body is reading it, and therefore I should read it too so I can discuss that book when it comes up in a conversation.

No, when I stare at that pile of 300 books sent by the Pulitzer committee or the National Book Foundation, what I do is try for a moment to *forget* absolutely everything I've learned about literature in the last fifty years. I want to forget all the critical and aesthetic theories. I want to forget all that I know as a teacher of writing and all I've experienced as a writer publishing since I was seventeen. What I'm saying is that when I begin looking through those books, what I'm *hungering* for is the same innocent enchantment I had when I was a

reader of twelve or thirteen. At that age, when I turned to the first page of a novel or a story, I knew *nothing* at all about the writer, his (or her) previous works, or whether the book was literary or pulp fiction. I didn't know what was good writing or bad. All I knew, at age thirteen, was that sometimes when I stumbled upon a story, my experience from the first page----in fact, from the first sentence---was that a kind of spell was cast over me. It was the experience of mystery and wonder, and needing to know *what happens next,* often after hearing that powerful, opening phrase, *Once upon a time.* In the midst of this enchantment, I didn't want to stop reading, or go to bed or do *any*thing else until I'd learned how events in the story unfolded, because I was *certain* the outcome had meaning for my own life. I know now that what I was experiencing is what the late John Gardner called storytelling as "a vivid and continuous dream."

Forty years later this is still the experience I want when I turn to a novel or a story. In works such as these, one *never* has the feeling that a writer is *trying* to tell a story. We aren't even aware of the writer, only of the compelling world he (or she) has delivered to us.

Before I retired from teaching, I once tried to see what my graduate students had to say about this matter. I went to class and before we settled down to work, I said, "Can anyone tell me the difference between a *writer* and a *storyteller*?" My younger students seemed baffled by that question. However, there was a man in that class who was a retired English professor, and an author who published one of the first Vietnam novels in the late '60s. (He was auditing my class.) When none of the other class members spoke up, he raised his hand and he simply said, "I'd much rather have dinner with a storyteller than a writer."

I think this distinguished gentleman---his name is George Sidney and his 1969 novel is called *For the Love of Dying*--- gave us something to think about. All the technique, craft, and literary theory we accumulate as writers *must* be in the service of that most deceptively simple and yet most difficult of achievements---- delivering undamaged a whopping good, imaginative and original story. A story *so* good, Aristotle says in his *Poetics,* that one should be able to just turn to the person next to him, summarize the events of the story, and his listener on the basis of that synopsis will be moved to pity and fear. A story of which we can say what John Gardner said of Par Lagerkvist's novel *The Holy Land*, that it compressed the complexity and difficulty of modern life "into a few stark and massive symbols in which all our experience and all human history are locked." As a writer, I find that these kinds of stories humble me. They are stories that endure, hold us in suspense, and liberate our perception. (All the above is excerpted from my essay "Storytelling and the Alpha Narrative" in *The Southern Review*, winter 2005.)

Do these prizes and awards help establish literary careers? The answer is yes and no. It all depends on the quality of the book. Can you tell me who won the National Book Award in 1987 or the PEN/Faulkner in 1986? An embarrassing number of award-winning books vanish after the book season when they were published. And today, in 2011, our national literary prizes (and I include the Nobel prize in this judgment; please read the Nov. 16, 2000 historical analysis of all these awards by Salon's Laura Miller) have been tarnished because they have gone to way too many books for non-literary reasons. The reading public is well aware of this and simply not as excited anymore by who wins. (But consider the case in 1953 when Ralph Ellison won for *Invisible Man*. The runner-ups on the short list that year were Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, which later won a Pulitzer, and Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, another enduring classic work of fiction. We rarely see a year like this anymore in contemporary American fiction.)

Nevertheless, a national literary prize can make a difference in a writer's life. When I won the National Book Award 21 years ago, I had a meeting with other judges for the National Endowment for the Arts fellowships to go to the day right after the ceremony. Despite all the hoopla and excitement, I had made a commitment to finish that assignment. In the cab with me as I went to the meeting was a 30-ish poet who was very excited that I'd won, and she said something to me I'll never forget. She said, "I just want to have ONE good year." What that means for a poet, I don't know. And I don't know if she ever had that one good year she hungered for----one that maybe brings a national literary prize, big sales or a MacArthur.

Whatever. But she correctly knew she needed that to lift her "career" to the next level. Before receiving the National Book Award, my novel *Middle Passage* had sold around 4,000 copies in the 6 months after its publication. After that award, it became a national bestseller, and is now in its 20th printing from Scribner.

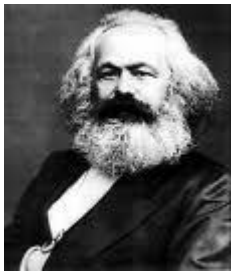
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:44 AM

http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/prize-and-judge.html

Thursday, February 24, 2011

LOOKING AT CLASS

How have issues of class shaped my understanding of the human condition? Well, the answer is very much so. In 1971-72, I was steeped in Marxism, and wrote my master's thesis on "Wilhelm Reich and the Creation of a Marxist Psychology," *i.e.*, an analysis of the influence of Marx and Freud on the thought of that psychologist in the 1930s. Then as a teaching assistant in the Ph.D. program in Philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (1974), one course I taught for a year was called "Radical Thought," which covered everything from Marx's "1844 Manuscripts" to Mao and Marcuse. (One student in that class, Richard Gelfond, went on to become the present co-owner of IMAX.) Marx led me, of course, to Hegel; and Hegel led me to phenomenology as a philosophical method and movement.



Economic class is something we always thematize in our reflections on the human condition, especially if we're creating fictional characters since one question that must be raised is, "How does he or she make money or earn a living?" It isn't a question that I privilege when creating a character's biography, but it is part of the essential mix of details we must know about characters to give them depth and the illusion of three-dimensionality, for labor (how and where we invest our energy) defines our lives in the social world.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:58 AM

http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/looking-at-class.html

Thursday, February 24, 2011

THE JOY OF SANSKRIT OR LANGUAGE BROUGHT TO FORMAL PERFECTION

"Sanskrit is learned by immersing yourself in its pure and ever blissful vibrations, and seeing, *only seeing*, and hearing, *only hearing*, the consistent and symmetrical patterns of its grammatical structure…The enjoyment of play, while developing a love for the sounds and their rhythms, as well as their visual representation, is all that's needed to learn the language."

Vyaas Houston, "The Yoga of Learning Sanskrit."

During my student days, foreign languages were never my forte. Nevertheless, I dutifully studied Spanish for seven years from middle school through undergraduate college, then I did a year of French (reading only, not speaking) as the language requirement for my master's degree in Philosophy. It was always Sanskrit, though, the elder sister of Latin and Greek, that fascinated and attracted me most because since the late 1960s I buried myself in translations of classic works in Buddhism and Hinduism. Back then, I never dreamed I'd now be in my 13th year of Sanskrit study and translation.

The opportunity came in 1998, the year I received a MacArthur fellowship. My "present" to myself was a systematic and sustained study of this ancient language. My entry point was provided by the very effective approach utilized by the American Sanskrit Institute (an approach that united mind, body and spirit), which offers 3-day intensive study sessions around the country. (You can also do a month-long intense at places they operate back east, speaking only Sanskrit during that time.) My teacher was (is) Aja Thomas, a Vedic priest who operates the Atma Institute in Portland, Oregon. For many years, Aja drove up from Portland to offer two and three days of immersion in Sanskrit to our Seattle study group, which translated large chunks of the *Bhagavad Gita, Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, the *Astavakra Samhita,* and other texts.

The ASI approach is holistic; and one has to give up limited concepts of self to make progress. (We do not study for grades or degrees or to impress or compete with anyone, only because we love the beauty of this language and the role it has played for roughly 4,000 years in influencing cultures Western and Eastern.) The toughest part of learning Sanskrit is mastering case endings for masculine, feminine and neuter nouns and pronouns, and the tense and mood endings for verbs. Aja would write in Devanagari script ("that spoken by the gods") a z*loka* (a verse of 4 lines, 8 syllables each) on the board before us. Even before we translated the four lines, everyone in our group (I was almost always the only male, the others being women who taught yoga) had to sing it (something I had to work up the courage to do in front of others---I'm no Marvin Gaye). Then all of us sang it together. After that, we'd open our Sanskrit/English dictionaries (M. Monier Williams's, or copies of a 1,768-page dictionary by Vaman Shivaram Apte that a study group member secured for us during her trip to Delhi), and begin working through the z*loka'*s vocabulary. After that, and with Aja's help, we'd turn to parsing the grammar, working through declensions, and the operations of *sandhi* (the way Sanskrit transforms vowels and consonants to harmonize sounds). With that transliteration done, we would then discuss the z*loka's* meaning, and conclude by all of us singing it again as a group. This process of working through four lines of Sanskrit in the *Gita* typically took about two or three hours, and required our complete attention "to the pronunciation of each sound, each word, and our watching vigilantly the visual construction of each letter as a moving point becoming lines interconnecting with new points and lines," as Sanskrit teacher Vyaas Houston puts it.

In other words, the ASI approach amounted to being 2 or 3 days (eight hours a day) of focused meditation, with the emphasis being on experiencing maximum, uninterrupted resonance, perfectly blended syllables for the joy they bring, and recognizing visual symbols: *speech as music.* That is somewhat different from the more academic approach one finds at universities, which emphasize memorization and a competitive, "success/failure" model that detotalizes the learning experience. (According to Houston, "…at our highest centers of learning, the best universities, the drop-out rate for Sanskrit classes can be as high as 90%.")

Over the last decade, I've developed a pretty extensive library on this language and its children, because Sanskrit shares much in common not only with the Celtic, Teutonic, Slavonic, Germanic and Anglo-Saxon languages but also Asian ones such as Pali, Hindi, Marathi and Ghandari. The oldest Buddhist manuscripts we have on fragile and brittle 2,000-year-old fragments of birch bark are in Gandhari, a dialect of Prakrit, which developed from Sanskrit; they were found in a jar in a cave in eastern Afghanistan, were written when Jesus was still alive, and are being translated by my colleague Richard Salomon and his team in the Dept. of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington; see his 1999 work, with an introduction by the Dalai Lama, entitled *Ancient Scrolls from Gandhara: The British Library Kharosthi Fragments*.

For ten years now, I've purchased and studied every book (and self-study course), tape and learning tool on Sanskrit that I've run across, academic and otherwise, and whenever I've needed a little help with some esoteric aspect of Sanskrit grammar, I've turned for clarification to Aja, or to Dr. Salomon (he is one of only a handful of Ghandari scholars in the world and speaks 12 languages), and his lovely colleague Collette Cox (I credit all three Sanskrit teachers in my book *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*).

It should be clear by now that Sanskrit is my most serious intellectual and spiritual hobby, a language I will study until the last day of my life, especially because so many studies show that for older people language study keeps their minds sharp. (I will never consider myself to be an "expert," only an always avid student.) I use it when writing articles for popular Buddhist publications like *Tricycle*, *Buddhadharma*, *Shambhala Sun*, and *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*. I end my meditation sessions by softly chanting Sanskrit mantras or lines I've memorized from texts that I love. Each line of Sanskrit is compressed, much like an equation, math or a calculus. The word itself, Sanskrit (*Sanskrta*) means "language brought to formal perfection." (NASA discovered in its early AI research that Sanskrit is the only unambiguous language on Earth.) As Vyaas Houston put it, "The extraordinary thing about Sanskrit is that it offers direct accessibility by anyone to that elevated plane where the two, mathematics and music, brain and heart, analytic and intuitive, scientific and spiritual become one."

Its rewards seem endless. It is the language of mantras. It is the language of enlightenment, and requires the one-pointedness (*ekagratha* or "single-grasping") of yoga. It demands a different way of seeing and experiencing the world. Whenever he was jailed by the British, Gandhi studied Sanskrit and the *Gita*. Writing in Devanagari is like drawing or doing calligraphy. The Buddhist texts I once studied in different translations, like the *Dhammapada* and *Prajna-Paramita-Hridaya-Sutra*, I have now translated myself, an exercise that reinforces the old truth that any translation from a foreign language (especially a "dead" one) can yield multiple interpretations. Speaking and reading Sanskrit, we find ourselves sensitized to the sound (guttural, palatal, cerebral, dental and labial) and music of language, so much so that when I was still teaching and turned to going over the English prose of my students after a Sanskrit study session (and playfully slipped into translating their sentences into Sanskrit as I do sometimes when reading news stories), I found my ear more finely-tuned to each syllable. And Sanskrit ever delivers provocative revelations. For example, the word *upadēsha* means "instruction." More specifically, *upa* means "near," and *dēsha* means "pointing." Instruction is "pointing near." In other words, when instructing others we can only point at the subject, never deliver it (Think of this is terms of the Zen trope of a finger pointing at the moon, but not being the experience of the moon itself.) Or consider the word *loka*, one of the Sanskrit words for "world."

The root of *loka* is *luj*, which means to "disintegrate," a meaning that for every Buddhist will conjure the image of *anicca* or the impermanence of all things. And I always get a kick, of course, when I meet someone from India and discover that I probably know the Sanskrit meaning of their first and last names---and can write it for them in Devanagari.

For me, then, the study of Sanskrit is a privilege, a blessing, and a pleasure I try to enjoy for at least one hour every day.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:30 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/joy-of-sanskrit-or-language-brought-to.html

Friday, February 25, 2011

AUGUST WILSON - THE NIGHT HAWK FLYS AGAIN

I've always seen my 15-year friendship with August Wilson during his time in Seattle as an enriching experience for which I am thankful. He was one of America's most celebrated playwrights, like my brother (we were only three years different in age), and in my story (or perhaps it is really an essay) "Night Hawks," I describe the 8 to 10-hour dinner conversations we had for a decade and a half.

"Race" is a subject I generally only think about when someone puts that topic directly in front of me. But August thought about it all the time, 24/7. And because he devoted so much thought to it, he always during our conversations said something about race that I found insightful, and unforgettable. For example: August once told me about his participation on a panel with other playwrights. One of them, a white writer, was talking about something and suddenly referred to August, saying his plays were about race. (Probably because his characters are black.) Well, if you know anything about August Wilson, you know that his comeback to that would be memorable. He said, "And *your* plays *aren't* about race?"

What is important here, I think, is that everything in our social experience has a racial register, whether we are aware of it or not. The white playwright on that panel probably didn't see that his work is indirectly and inevitably about race because his characters never discuss it and it is not a theme, premise or a dramatic situation in his plays. He had the social *luxury* of not seeing this, of race being invisible in the imaginative worlds he creates. But what August, for whom understanding race was a matter of survival, was pointing out (no doubt painfully to that writer) is that the very historical and existential situation of that playwright's characters in the

world---in a society where whiteness is privileged---means that their opportunities, their options in life from the moment they are born, the spaces they can move through with ease, what they read, who they associate with and marry, *every* one of their decisions small and large has a racial signature on it, whether they like that or not. Who his characters are today is linked to the history of slavery and racial segregation that precedes them and makes the specifics of their social world possible. All one has to do is look hard enough and one will see that. The absence of "race" (people of color, or black American history and culture) in his plays made the experience of "race" all the more present, if one has well-trained eyes.

The eyes of August Wilson were finely tuned to how race historically seeps into and saturates our social lives the way water does in sand.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:39 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/august-wilson-night-hawk-flys-again.html

Sunday, February 27, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON TEACHERS AND MENTORS

There is a great difference between teachers and mentors. And as I discuss my experience with both, I'm bound to reveal some things about myself I've never said publicly before. So let the chips fall where they may.

When I was 15-years-old, I studied with cartoonist/writer Lawrence Lariar in his two-year correspondence course, which today we would probably call distance learning. He was prolific (something I admired), the author of over 100 books, some of these being murder mysteries he wrote under a couple of pseudonyms. He was cartoon editor of *Parade* magazine, of the *Best Cartoons of the Year* series, and at one time he was an "idea man" (not an animator) at Disney studios. I "found" Lariar when I was 14-years-old and had the only serious argument I ever had with my father when I announced to him that I planned on a career as an artist.

LAWRENCE LARIAR

Later, my senior year in high school, I was accepted at an art school in Illinois, then bailed out at the last minute---in May, 1966---when I decided I couldn't gamble the hard-earned money my Dad was paying for my college education on a career that might be financially questionable. I was, after all, the first member of my family to go to college. So I went downstate to the only school still admitting students in late spring, and majored in Journalism, which gave me the chance to draw---and, as it turned out, write. Decades later, I relished the years my daughter went to Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, because she was living my teenage dream, and I could drool over her textbooks.

But when I told my father my plans at age 14, he was rightly concerned, and said, "Chuck, they don't let black people do that." His words were simply unacceptable to me. If I couldn't draw, I didn't want to live. Back then, I read *Writers Digest* for its profiles on famous cartoonists, and I came across an ad for Lariar's course. I wrote him a letter, explaining what my Dad had said, and asked him if he agreed with that. Lariar fired back a letter to me within a *week.* (He was a liberal, Jewish man living on Long Island, who changed his last name in the 1930s, I guess, and once delighted in infuriating his neighbors by having black artists over to his house for drawing lessons.) In his letter, he said, "Your father is *wrong*. You can do whatever you want with your life. All you need is a good teacher."

My father backed down , admitting that when it came to the arts in the 1960s, he didn't know what the hell he was talking about, and he paid for my lessons with Lariar between 1963-65. During those two years when I was still in high school, I'd take the Greyhound bus from Illinois to New York, stay with my relatives in Brooklyn for a week and, wearing a suit and tie, pound the pavement in Manhattan with my "swatch" (samples) from one publishing house to another, looking for work (It was during one of those meetings that I met a young editor/cartoonist, Charles Barsotti, who was very encouraging to me when I was a kid, and is still publishing in *The New Yorker*).

Friends of mine have often told me that they wanted to be writers since they were five-years-old. That was never me. I knew from an early age that I was good at writing, sure, and writing was fun (On weekends when I was an undergraduate, I use to write the term papers for other students in my dorm when they wanted to party, $5. per paper. Money back guaranteed if they failed to get an "A." I never had to return those payments, and the assignments I did for them meant later I would become a writer and they wouldn't). However, from kidhood forward all that I was *burning* to do was draw. Visual artists (then later philosophers) have always been my heroes. Those were the first two Tribes I belonged to. I can only say that about a handful of writers. There are, of course, many, many writers I

greatly respect, but my passions for art and philosophy pre-date my entry into the world of "creative writing."

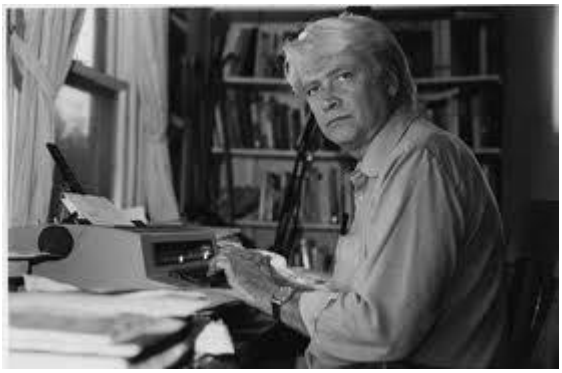
During those New York trips, I naturally visited with Lariar, who fixed me lunch (when I was in my teens) or dinner (when my wife, new-born son and I visited him during my days at SUNY-Stony Brook). He loaded me up with original art from the days when he had a syndicated strip (he wrote, someone else drew it), and regaled me with stories about the comic artists I so admired. In college, I sent him copies of every editorial, panel cartoon, comic strip and illustration I published (between 1965 and 1972 there were over 1,000 of these publications in Illinois periodicals, *The Chicago Tribune*, black magazines like *Jet*, *Ebony* , *Black World*, *Players* and some risqué places I dare not mention and would like to forget), and he'd always write back something encouraging.

My 1970 PBS series "Charlie's Pad" is based on his two-year course, and was inspired by a TV spot he did in the 1950s when at the end of a news program he drew something funny about that day's headlines. Once at his house, he told me I was more like his son than his own offsprings, who I believe went into other fields. Later, when he read *Faith and the Good Thing*, he wrote me a letter, saying "You have the 'touch." I still have a box of old correspondence between Lariar and myself, who died in 1981, the same year as my mother (and the year my daughter was born).

But while Lariar was a fine teacher, John Gardner was a true *mentor.*

When I decided to take an introductory class Gardner offered in the fall of 1972 called "Professional Writing" (which I only went to once, preferring to meet with him in his office to discuss my work since I'd already written six novels before *Faith and the Good Thing),* I read *Grendel,* which at the time was newly published. I would never take something as important as an art course without first seeing if the (literary) artist was someone I might be able to get along with. I was at that time finishing a master's degree in Philosophy, and supporting myself by working part-time on a newspaper called *The Southern Illinoisan*, writing news stories, features, obits, a weekly column, farm news, drawing their editorial cartoons, and

proof-reading the Sunday paper for eight hours on Saturday night, all for the princely sum of $50. a week, which I supplemented by drawing 25 panel cartoons each week as a free-lancer, and usually selling about five, which paid for our weekly groceries when I was in grad school. (My wife, then an elementary school teacher, was obviously doing the bulk of supporting both of us.) I was impressed by Gardner's credentials as a medievalist, by his interest in thinkers such as R.G. Collingwood and Alfred North Whitehead (and, of course, his constant disagreements with Sartre), his devotion to writing, and his appreciation for the religion of my childhood, Christianity (Gardner's father in upstate New York had been something of a preacher, and Gardner drifted into medieval studies because of his love of Chaucer and the religion that animated that artist's vision). To be perfectly honest here, I'm sure I could never have apprenticed myself in a highly personal, one-on-one relationship to a writer who was irreligious or indifferent (or hostile) to all the richness offered by life of the spirit.



JOHN GARDNER

We hit it off when I was writing *Faith*---he thought my characters had "dignity," liked the storyteller voice in that novel, and my being in Philosophy. (Unfortunately, he did make the unforgivable mistake of telling me that my work as a cartoonist had just been "practice" for writing fiction.) Early in our relationship, I saw how other students were constantly asking for his support. So I made a point of never asking him for anything. But he took me under his wing anyway, generously helping me at every turn. Again, to be honest here, I have to say that since I was in Philosophy, and training for a career in that field, the literary book world was of very little (or no) interest to me. I just wanted to write the books I felt needed to be written. A "career" in creative writing was not only the farthest thing from my mind, but I was actually turned off by the negative "wild and crazy" things I'd read over the years about the so-called "writer's life."

Even today I have slightly the same attitude, I suppose. The joy of creating---writing, drawing---is everything for me, but the "careerist" aspects of the profession have always left me cold. They don't mean much to me. Unlike some

writers I know, I'm not looking for love (or even approval) through my work---I got loads of that from my parents, and after that from my wife and children. So I'm liable sometimes to create something for free, and for an obscure publication, simply because I'm excited about and believe in the project or feel that creative contribution is for a good cause. (Thank God for my literary agents who protect me from that tendency in myself.)

Nevertheless, Gardner after *Grendel* (which won him critical praise) and 1972's *Sunlight Dialogues* (his first bestseller) brought me into the book world. He was becoming famous, and he was generous toward his students, perhaps because for 15 years he experienced so much rejection of his own work. Once or twice he canceled our conferences because he was traveling back and forth to teach at Northwestern University. Returning from one of these trips, he smiled ear to ear and thrust into my hands an issue of a Chicago-based publication called *Fiction Midwest*. The lead piece was my first chapter of *Faith*, which Gardner submitted on his own without telling me. "Now," he said, "you're published." He talked to everyone about the novel before I finished it, assuring me, "Don't worry, I won't let you make a mistake."

I took notes on even his casual remarks about fiction, and ordered all his earlier works of criticism. Not only did he engineer my first "serious" literary publication, but Gardner orchestrated my first public reading as well. In the spring of 1973, he convinced me to appear with him and eight other writers he knew and nurtured. The thought of reading before an audience terrified me. I asked, "What should I do?" Gardner shrugged and simply replied, "Eh, you put on a mask."

CHARLES JOHNSON

When Faith was finished, Gardner referred me to his agent, the best literary agency in America, George Borchardt, Inc., which has represented all my work since

1973. When I was at SUNY-Stony Brook, working on my Ph.D. in Philosophy, we were chatting by phone in 1974 and he casually mentioned he'd be reading at Hofstra. Then he said, "*Be* there." So we were, my wife Joan and I, sitting down front beside his first wife (also named Joan) in the audience as he read from his fiction. Then he said he had something better to read, and---to my shock---brought out his copy of *Faith*. I squirmed down in my seat, but oh, Gardner's mentoring did not stop there.

He put my name forward for a dozen teaching posts even before I could take my Ph.D. qualifying exams, and the letter of reference he wrote for me in 1976 when I applied for an appointment at the University of Washington (which I never saw) is, my colleagues told me, a classic example of a literary lion using all his celebrity and clout to clear a way for his former student.

In 1977, Len Randolph at the NEA was talking to two film-makers from WGBH/Boston, Fred Barzyk and Olivia Tappan, who were looking for a black writer to script a screenplay about the oldest living American, Charlie Smith, then 137. Gardner told Randolph they should call me---that reference led to 20 years of teleplay-and-screenwriting for PBS and later Hollywood studios. One of my most anthologized short stories, "Exchange Value," is a piece Gardner published in the 1981 issue of *Choice* that he edited, then he included it in *Best American Short Stories* as a guest editor. Another much reprinted story, "China," he published in his literary journal, *Mss.*, after we'd been arguing back and forth about my increasing movement toward Buddhism, a religion he---very Protestant, very Western--- once told me he felt was "wrong," though later he softened his stance in an introduction called "Meditational Fiction" he wrote for *Tengu Child*, a collection of stories by Kikuo Itaya that he edited and translated with Nobuko Tsukui. ("Since we are not Buddhists, one might ask, why should we read the stories of Itaya, a writer not widely read even in his native Japan?" he wrote. "The easy and immediate answer is because they're beautiful.")

But even the best of literary apprenticeships, those based on love and mutual respect, can have drawbacks. The elder artist, if his personality and gifts are as strong as Gardner's were, may have problems with new directions his student may take. Through his example of generosity, he showed me how to work with my own students for 33 years, always putting their interests and needs first, helping them get published, and so forth. There was no falling out between us---that could never be---but with *Oxherding Tale* I desperately needed to push beyond his conception at the time of what black literature, culture (and Charles Johnson) should be. When he read that manuscript and responded to it---we were meeting at his home in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania---he said with a bit of uncharacteristic bafflement, "This is a different Charles Johnson."

Not different, really. As a young writer, I composed *Faith* with the intention of getting a rise out of Gardner and showing him what I could do, all that I'd managed to master on my own. With *Oxherding Tale*, on the other hand, I was writing the "platform" novel, as I call it, that I would build the rest of my writing life on, the novel with which our intellectual and artistic paths would diverge. Although we never saw eye-to-eye on Buddhism, he called my publisher for that novel just before its release, and asked if he could endorse the book---"words," as critic Roger Sale pointed out, that were "among the last John Gardner wrote" before his fatal motorcycle accident on September 14, 1982. (The material on Gardner in this post is drawn from my essay "John Gardner as Mentor," published in the special issue of *African American Review* devoted to my work, Winter 1996, Volume 30, Number 4.)

JOHN GARDNER

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:10 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/02/charles-johnson-on-teachers-and-mentors.html