

# **On Writing and the Creative Process**

Dr. Anderson Reynolds

**Presented on April 22, 2002, at the Castries Central Public Library  
in celebration of Library Week.**

## **The Discovery of my Art**

I was taken aback when I was asked to give a lecture on the writer and his role in St. Lucian society in celebration of library week, for I've no formal training in writing or in literature. A one semester fiction writing course at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, represents the totality of my formal training in writing. My surprise was even more understandable when you consider that English was my worse and most dreaded subject at secondary school.

I grew up with an unusual speech and writing impediment. It was almost impossible for me to translate my thoughts into spoken or written words. I was always able to do well enough in school to move on to the next stage, but for me school work was a last minute get away game. I usually did class assignments, especially those that involved writing essays, at the last minute or not at all. Putting my thoughts on paper was like having a nightmare in which I'm being chased by a monster, but something is holding me back, preventing me from running away. Nonetheless, as the monster stretches out his hands to catch me, my fear is so great that I'm forced to surmount all my energy, break the spell of immobility, and escape from the dragon in the nick of time.

In sitting exams, I wasted most of the exam time on the first few questions, trying hard to conjure the right words that would capture what I wanted to express. It was so bad that the exam time would be almost over, yet half of the questions were unanswered. At that point, under the panic of failure, I would abandon exactitude, grammar, spelling, and punctuation marks, and in a frenzy of writing I would just barely complete the exam. So throughout secondary school and right into my PhD program, I answered most exam questions in the final minutes of the exam time. Indeed, for me sitting exams was a panic attack.

Because of the difficulty of giving expression to my thoughts, I was forced to invent my own language. A language developed under extreme pressure, and thus one that had no time for grammar, punctuation marks, and proper diction. This worked fine with family and friends, people who had accepted this idiosyncrasy of mine as a form of mental retardation. At school it also worked fine with subjects other than English, but when English was the subject, this language of mine spelled doom. So this was why English was my most dreaded subject.

At Louisiana State University I started my master's program with plenty of apprehension. Part of the master's requirement was a thesis, but how could I write an acceptable thesis, given the state of my writing? So, motivated by the fear of failure, one of my stated goals in graduate school was to improve my writing. Accordingly, I bought a large Webster dictionary, a thesaurus, and a grammar book (Harbrace). I was determined to excel; my future was at stake.

Two semesters into the program my writing was brought to the test. The graduate student association of my department was publishing a newsletter, and I was asked to write a short article in recognition of two professors in their role as editors of the Southern Journal of Agricultural Economics. With much skepticism I accepted, and, as usual, I waited till the last day before the article was due to start working on the assignment.

The heat was on. I had to complete the paper in a few hours. I hurried to the professors' offices to interview them about their role as editors of the journal and their advice to graduate

students on submitting papers for publication. Next, I went to my office and began writing. When I was through, I read over my creation, and as usual I was dissatisfied. But there was no time to give the matter much thought, my time was up. The following day, after the newsletter was out, much to my surprise, just about everyone in the department, including professors, congratulated me on the article. I was elated. That very day I realized that despite my dread and dislike of writing, I could write.

Although I'd been in school most of my life, most of the time I was sitting in the classrooms I wished I was someplace else. My dream had been to be a great soccer player—replace Pele; a great musician—make way Bob Marley; a great cricketer—watch out Gary Sobers; an Olympic gold medal track athlete—step aside Carl Lewis. Somehow I knew a creative power lodged inside, but to realize that power in concrete form had eluded me. Apart from soccer, I'd not excelled at much else. I'd tried cricket, track and field, painting, even learning to sing and play the guitar, but fortunately or unfortunately, my creative powers resided in none of the above. So after it occurred to me I could write, I began thinking that maybe, just maybe, writing was my art, the creative force I knew existed within me.

As if to reinforce this realization, a month later the department head asked me to write a letter recommending a professor for a scholarly award. However, my fear of writing was still not over, and once again I waited till the last day before the letter was due to get started. Again, after writing the letter, I was disappointed with my creation; but as usual there was no time for perfection. After getting the letter typed and turned in, I showed a copy to a colleague and he thought it was great, but I wasn't convinced. However, after three weeks, I re-read the letter, and to my disbelieving eyes it was great. Thanks to the passage of time, I'd finally discovered my art.

Despite this discovery, it was only after I'd completed my master's degree and had embarked on my PhD program that it occurred to me I was going to be writing books. How did I come to this realization? By then I'd become aware that most things I read, I'd either come across similar material or just by stretching my knowledge base a little I could have come up with similar analyses. In other words, reading was no more the fresh, tantalizing, beguiling activity it once was. This suggested to me it was time that I started writing my own books. Then I didn't know what kind of books I would write, whether fiction or nonfiction. All what I knew was that I was going to be writing books. So I began with what I knew best—myself.

I toiled for the better part of a year over a biographical novel. But after completion, I was dissatisfied with the product. Clearly, I was too green in the art of writing. The manuscript wasn't good enough to deserve publication. But there was a second reason why I didn't try to published it. Being about myself, the manuscript necessarily revealed things about my family. I wasn't sure how this would play out with them. I shelved the manuscript. But interestingly, the manuscript has proven to be far from useless. I cannot count the number of times I have gone back and mined it for other writing projects, including this lecture. However, at the time the only purpose the manuscript had served was it had gotten my feet wet in the writing process.

Shelving the manuscript left me in search of another writing project. There was a crime that took place in St. Lucia in 1971 that shocked the nation and that left a lasting impression on me. Most of my creative writing has been about things that occupied my mind since childhood. So in searching for my next writing project, I said why don't I use this crime as the ending of a novel, and then my task would be to develop a story with the crime as its ending. This second writing project would help me decide whether I could truly write a novel, whether I could dream up my own characters and come up with my own plot, a departure from my biographical novel in which the characters and plot were handed down to me. So I avoided researching the crime in question or the life of the characters involved. My task would be to create everything from scratch.

From childhood I have always been enchanted with the beauty of St. Lucia, its people, its culture, its future. In fact, during my twenty-year stay in America, every time I visited home I was always taken aback by the beauty of the island. Maybe having been born and raised in a

Seventh Day Adventist home in which I was denied my own culture (because the Adventist regarded most of the social and cultural activities on the island as worldly and ungodly, and therefore off limits), was why I'd such a hunger for St. Lucia. Nevertheless, it was this hunger for St. Lucia that made me want to capture (in this second work) as much St. Lucian culture and history as possible. So the purpose of writing this novel, which I would call *Death by Fire* was two-fold. First to prove to myself I could write a novel and second to share with the world the history and culture of St. Lucia. I completed the first draft of the novel in a year, but over a period of four years I constantly revisited the manuscript, adding, deleting, rephrasing. Also, during that time I started attending book readings and I took a fiction writing course at Washington University. After the course, I went back to the manuscript to give it the benefit of what I'd learned. Through all this, one thing remained constant. Each time I read the novel, I was totally convinced it deserved to be published, and it should be a must read for all St. Lucians.

The writing and publication of *Death by Fire* proved that I could write a novel, but what proof was there that I was a writer. In other words, when could I consider myself a writer. Early 1993 I experienced one of the best things that have happened to me in my adult life. I switched on the television and there a writer whom I was seeing and finding about for the first time was being interviewed. I asked myself who is this thoughtful and regal woman. She was Toni Morrison, an African American. Next day I hurried to the bookstore and bought one of her novels, *The Bluest Eye*. From the first sentence of that novel, I fell in love with Toni Morrison's work. I have read every one of her novels three, four times, and still counting. Why this fascination with Toni Morrison? Well, there are two reasons. First, she has that uncanny ability to get to the bare essentials of an entity, the essentials without which the entity would no longer be what it is, and then she colors those bare essentials so that they become in full bloom, in the process making the entity more of what it is. Second, Toni Morrison writes the way I think. Just imagine the thrill of reading an author who speaks the way you think. Later that same year Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature. At the time she had written six novels. So I said to myself, if she can win the Nobel Prize with six books, surely six books should qualify me as a writer. So although it was in my capacity as a writer that I was asked to give a lecture on the writer and his role in St. Lucian society, I must confess I'm an imposter, because I'm not yet a writer. I must wait until I have published six books before I could accept this honor. Toni Morrison remains my favorite writer, and she is the one who has had the greatest influence on my writing.

## **The Nature of Creativity**

I would have felt at greater ease if instead of a lecture on writing, I'd been asked to speak about the nature of creativity. For unlike writing, I have been preoccupied with the creative process since childhood. I have always been intrigued and awed by the notion that seemingly out of nowhere someone could come up with something that before then didn't exist and would not have come into existence had not that someone dreamed it up. Because of this fascination, I have devoted considerable thought to the creative process, and what follows is a summary of this engagement.

In my mind, the only truths on earth are to be found not in religion, not in politics, not in science but in art. For in a pure interpretation of art, given the nature of the creative process, art cannot lie. The artiste is directed by an unseen hand of which not even the artiste is fully aware. To a large extent creation is an unconscious act. Whether the artiste knows it or not, or likes it or not, when she creates she is revealing what she truly feels. That is why art is more about the artiste than the subject of the art. In any piece of art, the artiste is revealing things about herself and hence society of which she herself isn't aware and may never become fully aware.

That art is more about the artiste than the subject matter of the art is evident in the fact

that many great writers, artistes and creative thinkers were people who were born and raised on the fringes of the society of which they found themselves part. Derek Walcott talks about being a divided child, “a red nigger,” of European and African ancestry. This dividedness made him different and so placed him at the edges of St. Lucian society. Throughout most of their history the Jews were strangers in other people’s land. They were outsiders looking on. This outsider status can be painful and lonely, but as an outsider one gets special vantage points, and one is forced to go internal, to search for answers of why one is different. But it’s this very outlook, this sense of imbalance, this sense that something is missing, that becomes the raw material for writing, for art, for intellectualization. The habit of critical, honest, objective analysis that one develops from analyzing oneself is in turn applied to society in general. This partly explains why the Jews have contributed a disproportionate share of the world’s creative thinkers.

The creative process is its own pilot. Art is an outflow of what the artiste has inside her, her conscious and unconscious interpretation of society, her whole life history. The artiste doesn’t have a free hand in the choice of her subjects. What the artiste ends up working on depends on what she has inside her and what her environment reveals to her. The artiste doesn’t even have a choice in whether to create. She creates because she has an internal need to do so. She creates because she must. Art is a search for balance. The artiste creates because something inside of her is disturbed. There is a disequilibrium and only by creating can the artiste return to equilibrium. Therefore, for the sake of her sanctity and peace of mind the artiste has to create. When an artiste sits down to create, everything she knows, everything she has experienced, comes to bear. The artiste makes use of everything at her disposal. The urgency of creation, the dictates of art, leaves the artiste with little choice. The Bible says, “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” I say, “artistes create as they are moved by the creative spirit over which they have little control.”

Many people think that a writer writes because she loves to write, or an artiste paints because she loves to paint. I will not doubt that sometimes this is so. But the essence of creation has little to do with loving to create. After all, the process of creation, writing for example, is often a lonely, painful and sometimes depressing undertaking. Just ask a woman in childbirth, the ultimate creation. The artiste at work may have nothing to do with love. Yes, relief after the work is created; drained, emptied, and spent once the work is completed. Vindicated, may be, when society has validated the effort. An artiste creates not necessarily out of love but out of necessity, out of compulsion. A woman gives birth not because she enjoys the birth process (yes, once the baby is born she often revels in her creation), but during the creation, she, like Christ on the cross (a salvation creation of sorts), would have liked nothing better than the task to pass on to someone else. Toni Morrison said that she started writing novels because no one was writing the kind of novels she would have liked to read. So she wrote them herself. Inferring she would have been quite content to remain just a reader and leave all that writing business to someone else.

Why do I write? I write because there are some things inside me that begs for expression. Things that won’t leave me alone until I sit and write them down. My life is most complete, most gratifying, when I’m at work on a long writing project. Then, it doesn’t matter what’s happening on the outside. Writing completely absorbs me. It’s one of the few activities that when I’m at it all the empty spaces of my mind are occupied. I write for self-fulfillment. I write to find out what’s inside me. When people find out that I write they often comment “you must really love writing.” I never quite know how to respond. Because the comment is false. I have never love writing. I’m not writing because I love to write. Often when I’m about to embark on a writing project I procrastinate quite a lot, trying to avoid the painful process of sitting still for hours, day after day, with no clear idea of what exactly I want to say, and hence with little clue of what will come out. And there is always the chance that after all that pain and labor what comes out is garbage.

Creativity, not science, not academics, not religion, not sports, not politics is the highest

form of activity there is. Now, the pursuit of any of these other activities may involve a certain amount of creativity. But it's only in the case of the artist that creativity is the end goal. Thus artists, be they writers, painters, musicians, poets, actors, dancers, etc., are engaged in the highest form of activity there is. God is God because she created the heaven and the earth and everything therein. It's by this act of creation that, in our eyes, God received her legitimacy as God. In the absence of this act of creation, in our eyes, there would be no God. The Bible says God made woman (man) in her (his) own image. What this means is that God imbued us with a little bit of the creativity that made her God. So when some of the Eastern religions say we are all Gods because God exist in all of us, what they mean is that we have been blessed with some of the creative stuff that made God God.

The good news is every one of us possesses a certain amount of creativity. The only question is how much of this creative energy we have in us and to what extent have we developed it? The geniuses of the world are easy to explain. They are those who were born with large doses of that creative energy and who were able to develop it to near full potential. Therefore, they are the ones, not the priests, not the saints, not the scientists, and not the politicians, who have come closest to being Gods. For similar reasons, women, through their act of bringing forth life, the ultimate creation, come closer to God than men.

### **The Writer and St. Lucian Society**

Now, I come to "the writer and his role in St. Lucian society," which explains my presence here today. I began with a story, a true story. Late 1991 I was browsing a newspaper stand and came across the *Caribbean: Travel and Life* magazine with an article on Derek Walcott, stating it was twice in a row Walcott's name had been mentioned as a possible nomination for the Nobel Prize and it was inevitable he would win the prize. Before this article, I was only vaguely aware of Walcott as a poet and playwright. I was unaware he was such a prominent writer.

After reading the article, I hastened to the bookstore and picked up a copy of Walcott's *Omeros*, and I was in for a treat. Because there was Walcott talking about me, about the place of my birth and upbringing, about the way I felt about my people and my country. I read *Omeros* twice, and since then I've bought and read most of Walcott's plays and poems. In Walcott's work I found many gems. It was there for the first time I found out about the charboniers (coal carriers), it was there I found out that shabine means "red nigger." From one line of one of Walcott's poems, I was able to visualize the coal-loading operations of the charboniers (I since adopted a photo of the charboniers in action for the cover of *The Struggle for Survival: an historical, political and socioeconomic perspective of St. Lucia*) which, in *Death by Fire*, allowed me to write a whole passage describing the charboniers in action.

So you could well imagine how I felt, when, on the evening of the 8th of October, a few months after reading the article on Walcott, straight out of work, I flicked on the television, and as if by magic, there was Derek Walcott being asked what did winning the Nobel Prize meant to him? I jumped from the sofa and screamed, oblivious of my neighbors. Immediately after, I started calling close friends, spreading the news. But this wasn't enough, so in the morning I brought donuts to work and kept an impromptu breakfast party to celebrate with my American colleagues. But this still wasn't enough. So Saturday evening, I kept a house party to celebrate with friends. At the party, we watched a film on St. Lucia, and offered a toast to Derek Walcott and St. Lucia. Notwithstanding all this, I remained in a state of pride and excitement, so I wrote a tribute to our Nobel Laureates which was published in *The Voice*.

Then, I thought what a coincidence that only months after reading Walcott's work for the first time, he would win the Noble Prize. But when a year later the exact scenario repeated itself with Toni Morrison, I thought, coincidence my foot, someone is trying to tell me something. Like Toni Morrison's novels, I keep revisiting Walcott's work, yet on each visit I'm always

amazed at the depth, breadth, and richness of his writings.

So what role has the writer in St. Lucian Society? The writer and the artiste in general speak truths about our society and in such a way that we absorb the messages without even being aware that this is what is happening. The writer and the artiste expose truths that would otherwise remain unexposed, because either it would not pay enough to make it worth the while of other persons whose end goal isn't art itself, or because some in society would find the exposure of such messages an inconvenience to themselves. In other words, the artiste speaks when no one else dares to or is incapable of speaking. Beyond beauty, aesthetics, atmosphere, and background, of what value are the truths that writers and artistes speak.

Let's take Derek Walcott's work. Beyond bringing recognition to St. Lucia, of what value is his work to St. Lucian society. Well, from his work we get a sense of who we are as a people, where we came from, where we are heading. We get a sense of how our experiences compare with the whole scheme of human experiences, through time, and across distances and cultures.

A former prime minister of St. Lucia often talked about building a sense of nationhood, a sense of we are all in this thing together, a sense of national pride. Well, I can think of no better way of forging a sense of nationhood than by cultivating a sense of our history, how did we get to where we are, what tribulations and catastrophes that we as a people have had to overcome. I don't know of any persons better suited than writers and artistes to point out to us the mistakes of the past, and to depict, analyze, synthesize present day society, so we as a people can put our society in historical, cultural, political and geographical perspective.

Why the artiste? Well, the politicians have their hidden agendas, the pastors and priests are more concerned with the afterlife than with the now, the scientists are busy with inventions, the academicians are absorbed in the writing of esoteric papers that few other than themselves can access, the business men are occupied with profit making. But in a pure form, the artiste creates for creation sake. Their agenda is art. Hence the truths of which they speak can be better trusted. More so because the artiste herself is guided by a hidden hand. For the artiste creates as she is moved by the creative spirit.