

Reflections on My Writing

By

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Twenty years ago my wife and I were invited to a cocktail party at a friend's home on Nob Hill. It was a glorious summer evening in San Francisco and the home had a commanding view of downtown and the bay. After chatting with our hosts when we arrived, my wife and I looked around for familiar faces. I suddenly saw two, Reverend Cal Rutherford and his wife Roxanne. We walked over to them and, after the usual pleasantries, our wives sauntered off and Cal and I were left to ourselves. We continued to chat and after a few moments Cal invited me to attend his private club the following Monday evening. Through the din of the party I had a little difficulty catching the name of the club. I thought I heard "Kit-Kat Club."

"Did you just say that you want me to meet you at the Kit-Kat Club next Monday evening?" I asked. "I've never heard of it, Cal, but I have to say, the name of that club doesn't quite sound like one a priest would frequent!"

"No, Marc, I said the Chit-Chat Club, not the Kit-Kat Club!"

"Oh! The name is a bit unusual, Cal. What in the world do you do there?"

Cal smiled. "It's an essay club. You write an essay, and it's discussed after dinner."

"A writing club....very interesting."

"Yes, Marc, it's an essay club. And it's small, only 25 members. We get together for drinks and dinner and then listen to an essay written by one of the members. And then we chat about it. This San Francisco club is old too, founded in 1874, and a quick glance at one or two of the members might make you think that they could have been founding members!"

As I chuckled with that comment, Cal quickly said, "I'm kidding of course, but, honestly, I think you might like it. I certainly do!"

"Well, Cal, if it's something you like, I'd be willing to bet that I would too. OK! I'll be there."

On the way home that night I told my wife that Cal had asked me to join him at his club next Monday.

“What’s the name of the club, Marc?”

“The Chit-Chat Club,” I replied.

“Strange name for a club,” said my wife with a furrowed brow.

“True that,” I agreed.

The next Monday evening I did indeed go to the Chit-Chat Club, and it was exactly as Cal had described it albeit all the members were of 20th century vintage with maybe one possible exception, if memory serves. In those days the meetings were held at Alfred’s, a venerable steak house near Chinatown. The evening started with drinks and dinner and the gentlemen were welcoming, articulate, and highly accomplished. The essay and comments that followed were most thought provoking. Sensing I had a good time, Cal invited me to be his guest again a few months later, and I accepted right away. In short order, I became the newest, and I might add, the youngest, member of the Chit-Chat Club.

I suspect each of you in this room has a story, perhaps similar, about how you became a member of the Chit-Chat Club. Regardless of your pathway, here all of us are, members of a club dedicated to one thing: writing essays.

Writing essays. That’s the DNA of the Chit-Chat Club. So write them I did and thoroughly enjoyed doing it. As of this date I have written seven; this will be my eighth. The essays have ranged from the formal to the personal.

My first essay was certainly formal. It was a philosophical romp entitled “*Postmodernism, Have We Seen the End of It?*” The last one was unabashedly personal. Entitled “*The Magic Pencil,*” it was all about my interest in art. Other essays have dealt with the neuro-chemistry of romantic love, the origin and nature of essay clubs in the United States, my love affair with *The New Yorker* magazine, and I even wrote an essay about my dog “Cootie” of all things. The one I particularly loved writing sprung from a wild thought I had while driving to Napa one weekend, namely, if Socrates were living would he want to join our club. I titled the essay appropriately enough “*Socrates, Would You Like to Join the Chit-Chat Club?*” but I broke the rules of the Chit-Chat Club by writing it in the form of a Platonic dialogue, not an essay. No member seemed to object when I presented it, most likely because my good friend, the brilliant and wise Chit-Chat Club member Reverend Alan Jones, kept everyone entertained by reading the part of Socrates while I read the part of the always intellectually challenged Platonic interlocuter. For those of you who did not hear that essay, I shall tell you that Socrates graciously declined to join the Chit-Chat Club but suggested that his student who loves to write might be a good member. Of course, that student is Plato.

That was then, this is now. As I cogitated a few months ago the subject for my next essay, I thought to myself, why not write about writing? Not a discussion of cursive versus printing, or style versus substance...rather the personal question, “Why do I write at all? And why would I

join a club dedicated to doing that?" A good question, I thought as I sharpened my quill after having filled my inkwell.

To answer the question of why I write, I think it best to start at the beginning.

My writing had humble beginnings for sure. I wrote my first "essay" in the third grade and I wrote it not because I felt a creative urge that just had to be satiated in those tender and formative years. No, I wrote it because my teacher demanded that I, and my classmates, do so. School, remember those days, gentlemen? "Write a story!" the teacher sternly demanded. And write one I did. I can still recall what I wrote. It was about an experience I had at a game preserve in Africa watching a kudu coming to a river to take a drink of water and being surprised by a crocodile sunning itself close by. It was, and still is I am sure, the shortest short story in the history of English literature, perhaps only five or six sentences. And very simple sentences as English professors advise us to use today ... a bit Hemingway-ish really, now that I think about it. We were also required to read it in front of the class, a little bit like the Chit-Chat Club without the erudite commentary after the presentation. I did get a gold star from the teacher, Miss Covey (with whom I was madly in love I might add) and I was extremely proud of that accomplishment until I realized that everyone else got one too. But she did give me a big smile when she handed back my magnum opus. Perhaps the smile fanned my creative writing flames; it certainly fanned the flames of my ardor for her. I took my paper home where it was showcased on our refrigerator door for a day or two to the amusement of my older sister. It was finally removed, ending up, no doubt, in a landfill in New Jersey, never to be immortalized in the western canon. But it was my first foray into writing and I enjoyed it.

As I climbed the academic ladder I continued to write essays and term papers, all of them composed for the very same reason I wrote my first paper, namely it was mandatory. If I did not write, I would not pass. Plain and simple. In the prep school I attended, all the English classes consisted of reading novels and short stories and writing essays about them. A lot of essays, actually. Sure, I did have ideas to communicate, but the main reason for writing was simply that it was required of me. But, like my very first essay, I rather enjoyed doing it.

Writing essays was not required in medical school, just a lot of grinding study and hospital work. Likewise, in my ophthalmology residency I was required to take care of patients and to read textbooks and journals. Those scientific readings were interesting because they contained new scientific insights and clinical pearls, all gleaned from observations in the lab, clinic or operating room. Again, I was not required to write nor did I feel terribly compelled to do so. To be honest, I was so tired that when I was free I slept.

But one day in the ophthalmology clinic I saw a patient with a very unusual migraine headache. Research of the literature confirmed my suspicion that the case was rare. Suddenly, I experienced a different motivation to write, namely to add to the body of literature about migraine headache. I "wrote up the case" (as it is said in medical circles) with enthusiasm and submitted it for publication to the editorial board of the *American Journal of Ophthalmology*. After a month or so I received a letter telling me that the peer review board members had

agreed that the case was special and merited publication. It was published a few months later. That was my first scientific publication, and others followed. No one required me to write these papers. In short, I wrote them because I wanted to communicate scientific information to my colleagues and the field.

I must confess, however, that it was fun to see my name as an author in a scientific journal. When I had researched journals during my medical training, before my first scientific publication, I realized that, if published, one's paper would survive well beyond one's life. A Zen author, Natalie Goldberg, put it more succinctly: "Writers live twice." Perhaps that also added to my desire to write scientific papers. However, I never deluded myself into thinking that my publications would be of such a seismic nature that they would prompt a member of the Nobel committee to awaken me at 3 A.M. Pacific Standard Time letting me know I needed to brush off my tails and book a flight to Stockholm. No, these writings were miniscule incremental additions to the field of ophthalmology and neurology. However, I did get some public recognition, however fleeting, in the first week of my UCSF fellowship in neuro-ophthalmology when, after introducing myself at a small conference, the neurology professor asked, "Are you the same Cruciger who authored the recently published interesting article on ophthalmoplegic migraine?" No Nobel prize that, but I enjoyed a microsecond of fame which, I hasten to add, lasted considerably less than 15 minutes that Andy Warhol claimed all of us are due.

I also must confess that my scientific writings took a nosedive when I entered the private practice of medicine. I continued to contribute to the ophthalmic literature, albeit rarely, as private practice clinical duties took up much of my time. Most of my writing consisted of letters to colleagues about patients. But, again, I enjoyed writing them. Those communications were more telegraphic than Biblical in length. I also composed poems for my friends' birthdays or special occasions. And I enjoyed writing personal letters, although time constraints and the phone often sabotaged many of those efforts.

In retrospect, as I look back on my writing in those years, I had two reasons for writing. The first was pure unadulterated obligation, so I would not flunk in school. The second was a desire to communicate professional information. The second reason was, I would argue, nobler than the first. But, as I mentioned earlier, perhaps a bit of ego was at play when I saw my name in print and realized that I would get a modicum of professional recognition and "immortality" of a terrestrial sort. One reason to write never crossed my mind, namely for money. I had enough self-knowledge to know that, if I gave up my day job of medicine for writing, I'd be on the street in no time flat, another sad homeless case in San Francisco.

So why do I write now? Certainly not for obligation, fame, immortality or money. No, for me there are only two reasons I write now, and they are unequivocally and unabashedly selfish: the first is to learn about a subject and the second is to learn about myself.

Let's take the first selfish reason I write: to learn about a subject.

It's often said that if you want to learn about a subject, write about it. This is absolutely true. By trying to write about a subject, one has to master the information. This requires a lot of reading, evaluating and organizing thoughts. A year or so after joining the Chit-Chat Club, I faced my first essay presentation. What to write about? Cal, knowing that my first essay was "coming up" took me aside and said, "Marc, write about something that you want to learn about."

For years I had heard the term postmodernism thrown around by writers and commentators of modern culture, usually when discussing art or literature. But what did it really mean? When and where did it surface? Is it as viable today as it was in the past? Remembering Cal's advice, I decided, selfishly I mind you, to write my first essay about postmodernism. I enthusiastically delved into the subject, learning all kinds of aspects of this philosophical viewpoint with a peculiar but familiar name. When the time came to put quill to parchment, I not only knew a lot about the subject, but had come to an opinion about its viability that I wanted to share. The result was an essay entitled, "*Postmodernism, Have We Seen the End of It?*" My answer to that question was "yes, I believe we have seen the end of it."

When my next essay assignment at the Chit-Chat Club was approaching, I decided to write about a subject that had intrigued me for years and, perhaps, had its genesis in the third grade with my teacher Miss Covey. I would wager, that the subject has intrigued all of you in this room. The subject is love. In my reading of recent neurological scholarship at that time I had learned of some very interesting neurochemical imbalances and brain imaging of those in love compared with those not in love. Fascinated with this new physiological understanding on love, I wanted to learn all I could about it. The result was another selfish essay, this time entitled, "*How Little We Know, or Do We? The Neurochemistry of Romantic Love.*" In that essay I argued that, surprisingly the ancient Greeks' understanding of romantic love, that it is an imbalance of chemicals (humors) in the body, is what is actually happening according to the most modern neurochemical research. Too much dopamine is the chemical at fault.

When my next time came due to write an essay, I had been a member of the Chit Chat Club for about 6 or 7 years. During my time as a member I had become intrigued with the question of whether there are other essay clubs in the United States like ours and, if so, how many are there and where are they? I was also extremely curious about our very unusual name. Although some members would offer thoughts, no one had a definite answer to these questions of mine. Again, driven by purely selfish interests, I delved into the subject for my next essay. I learned a lot about our origins and our national brethren. I entitled that essay, "*Essay Clubs of the United States.*" I learned that there are about 8 to 10 essay clubs existent in the United States, the largest being the Chicago Literary Club. A fun, and very useful byproduct of preparing for that essay, was the connection I made with the Chicago Literary Club that resulted in their so generously posting our essays on their website. And that is why you can read our essays anytime on your laptop without taking a trip to Stanford's Green Library in Palo Alto. The answer to the origin of the name of our club I finally did discover, albeit several years following that essay on essay clubs. If time permits tonight and you wish to know the answer, I can read it

to you. But suffice it to say, it stems from the old definitions of the term “chit” and “chat” that can be found in the OED.

As you can see, the motivation of all three of my first essays was the same: my interest in learning about a subject, a selfish motivation for sure. I might add that these essays were, what I would call, “formal.” A bit like term papers, to be honest, and not terribly personal, albeit I did opine on the subject at hand.

But what about that other second selfish reason I gave for why I write: namely, to learn about myself?

Several of my Chit-Chat Club essays were the byproduct of that motivating force. Certainly, my essay explaining my love of *The New Yorker* magazine, entitled “*Come On! Try It! You Just Might Like It!*,” made me “...have a dialogue of the mind with itself...” as Matthew Arnold so succinctly characterized personal essay writing. I had been frequently asked at social gatherings why I enjoyed *The New Yorker* so much. I’d swirl my glass of wine and answer off the cuff. But when I put pen to paper, I came to better understand my reasons for that love affair. Those of you who heard me read that essay know that one of the major reasons I adore *The New Yorker* so much is because of my love for words and wordplay. Now that I think of it, I should add that selfish reason for writing essays. Constructing sentences in essays is creative word play that I find a lot of fun to do!

What about my other personal essays? In my most recent essay, “*The Magic Pencil*,” I wrote about my love of art. When I joined the board of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, I was asked often about my interest in art. Again, I would answer off the cuff. But writing that essay brought me to a much more profound understanding of my life long interest in art.

When the time came to choose a subject for this essay I decided, purely out of selfish reasons, to try to understand why I write at all! The result was much cogitation that resulted in this essay I present to you, my friends of the Chit-Chat Club.

Ayn Rand once said, “Words are a lens to focus one’s mind.” That is true for both the formal and the personal essay. But writing personal essays requires the focus to be on the writer: his thoughts, fears, doubts, successes and failures. For that reason, perhaps all personal essays should warn the reader that the pronoun “I” dominates the text. Some might find that tedious, boring, or egotistical. Let’s face it, outside of a few close friends, who really cares about what I think about art or *The New Yorker*, my dog Cootie, or my reasons for writing! In fact, very few. And that is my point! The second reason I write is incredibly selfish; namely to learn about myself!

I wish I could confess to you tonight that I have nobler reasons to write, but sad to say, I cannot. It is all about me: my learning about a subject and my learning about myself. But I hasten to say “Thank you one and all” for indulging me with your attention tonight. Unlike me, you have not

been selfish but incredibly generous by listening to me and my thoughts. And if you care to share your reasons for writing tonight, I promise to listen most attentively in return.

The Origin of Name of the Chit-Chat Club

Read on November 14, 1910 at the Thirty-Sixth Anniversary of the Chit-Chat Club

***AN ALLEGORY**

Once upon a time, --to be accurate, thirty-six years ago, in the land called the Land of Struggle, dwelt twenty-five men who labored that they might live. These men had different callings in life; some worked in the marts, some were lawyers, some were doctors, and some were ministers of the gospel, but they all had one desire: they all longed for some relief from the burdens of the day. These men did not know one another, but this common desire was the means of bringing them together. So it happened that one day they met and discovered that they all had this one desire. Thereupon they resolved that they would go to some land far from the scene of their cares. When they had so resolved they left the Land of Struggle and set out for the Kingdom of the Mind, where two fertile valleys were—one called the Valley of Imagination, the other the Valley of Meditation. No sooner had they started than they found themselves in the Kingdom of the Mind. There they beheld the Tree of Thought, and they set up two altars—one to Literature in the Valley of Imagination and one to Political Economy in the Valley of Meditation. Straightway they forgot all their cares, and each one of them took from the Tree of Thought a twig and they all went their several ways homeward to the Land of Struggle and planted the twigs from the Tree of Thought, each in his own garden; and these twigs, cherished by them, sprouted, grew and blossomed into beauty. Once a month thereafter these twenty-five men journeyed to the Kingdom of the Mind and worshiped before the altars that they had set up in the Valley of Imagination and in the Valley of Meditation. Thereafter they took no worry from the labors of the day, and they called themselves the men of the Chit-Chat, because "Chat" meant a little twig and "Chit" meant to grow, the meaning of which name to them was that they were men of the Growing Twig. To the end of their days these twenty-five men, and those who came after them, for there were always twenty-five, gathered new joys under the Tree of Thought, and they lived happily ever after in the Land of Struggle.

