Good writing facilitates the making of connections in a way that inspires openheartedness, thinking, talking, and action. All totalitarian governments achieve their ends by frightening and isolating people, and by preventing honest public discussion of important matters. The way to promote social and economic justice is by doing just the opposite: by telling the truth, and by encouraging civil, public discussion.

Good writing connects people to one another, to other living creatures, to stories and ideas, and to action. It allows readers to see the world from a new perspective. Writers are always asking people, “What is your experience?” They listen, they observe, then they share what they have learned with others. Writing to connect is empathy training. And, as Gloria Steinem once said, “Empathy is the most revolutionary of emotions.”

Writing to connect is “change writing,” which, like good therapy, creates the conditions that allow people to be transformed.

Its goal is not to evoke one particular set of ideas, feelings, and actions, but rather to foster awareness and growth. Psychologist Donald Meichenbaum defines therapists as “purchasers of hope.” Change writers are also purveyors of hope.

By definition, writers are people who care enough to try to share their ideas with other people. We are not passive, or utterly cynical, because then we would not even bother. We have a deep yearning to connect, to write things down and pass them around.

Every town has its cultural connectors. They know who to call in any crisis. They broker jobs, help with legal problems, find housing, fix schools, and raise funds for needed projects. They make sure that people meet one another, and that they understand and respect one another. Writers serve a similar function for the community of readers.

In *The Middle of Everywhere*, I coined the term “cultural broker” to describe Americans who helped refugees. Cultural brokers were those people who were willing to teach refugees what they needed to know. They introduced refugees to our hospitals, transportation systems, grocery stores, schools, libraries, and parks. They helped them locate other refugees from their homeland.

Writers are cultural brokers for the world of ideas. Our job is to share, as best we can, what we know. I write this book with the hope of making our world one connected tribe. To upend Groucho Marx’s famous saying, I would say I don’t want to belong to any club that won’t have everyone as a member.

"Great drama is great questions or it is nothing but technique."

"I could not imagine a theater worth my time that did not want to change the world." — Arthur Miller

"Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds." — Elie Wiesel

Consider the work of the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who formulated the world’s first declaration of human rights, or the work of Plato, Theresa of Avila, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Reflect on the influence of the writings of Adolf Hitler, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-tung, or Ayatollah Khomeini, whose fiery writing led to the establishment of an Islamic republic. Long after buildings and aqueducts have crumbled, writers’ words live on.

Many writers today live in countries where, no matter what they write, they are unlikely to be locked up or executed for their ideas. Yet we must remember that writers in different
times and places have risked their lives to tell the truth. Augustus Caesar sent the poet Ovid into exile. Stalin imprisoned and tortured numerous writers, including Boris Pasternak and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and he killed the poet Osip Mandelstam. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s writing to save Germany’s Jews cost him his life.

I was moved by the story of Liu Di, whose e-mail moniker was “Stainless Steel Mouse.” A graduate student in psychology at Beijing Normal University, she used her school computer privileges to tell the Chinese people about human rights. She was arrested by the government, and sentenced to several years of hard labor under the harshest of conditions at Qincheng Prison.

When you take pen to paper with the goal of making a difference, you join a community of people for whom words and issues matter. Perhaps you are a pediatrician who wants to educate parents about vaccinations, or a minister who wants to write more effective sermons. Maybe you are a high school student who wants to compose an editorial about drunk driving, or a labor organizer who plans to educate migrant farmworkers about their rights. Maybe you are a lawyer protesting the erosion of civil liberties under the Patriot Act, or a Floridian working to save the manatees. If you want to use words to change the world, Writing to Change the World is for you.

As a writer, your life goal may involve a worthy cause I cannot even imagine. Whatever it is, you are fortunate. Ossie Davis once said that his generation of African Americans was lucky because Martin Luther King Jr. had given them a moral assignment: to work for civil rights for all people. They could organize their lives around that goal. Davis worried about younger generations lacking such a clear goal. As Barbara Kingsolver put it, “The difference between happy people and unhappy ones is that happy people have found a use for themselves, like a good tool.”

"Once in East Africa, on the shores of an ancient lake, I sat alone and suddenly it struck me what community is. It is gathering around a fire and listening to someone tell us a story."
— Bill Moyers

Stories are the most basic tool for connecting us to one another. Research shows that storytelling not only engages all the senses, it triggers activity on both the left and the right sides of the brain. Because stories elicit whole brain/whole body responses, they are far more likely than other kinds of writing to evoke strong emotions. People attend, remember, and are transformed by stories, which are meaning-filled units of ideas, the verbal equivalent of mother’s milk.

Healthy cultures pass on healthy stories from generation to generation. The Lakota Sioux tell stories about the sacred hoop of life, and about their connections to the buffalo and all living creatures. Their myths created a belief system that allowed for the development of an emotionally sturdy people in a strong community. Indigenous people in Australia thought they were the tongue for the body that was the land. Their duty was to speak for the soil, water, plants, and animals. Because of how they conceptualized the world and their role in it, they were good caretakers for all of the life around them.

Today in America, shallow, tawdry stories blanket us like dirty snow. There are more films about prostitutes than about schoolteachers, more television shows about serial killers than grandparents. The old, the ordinary, and most ethnic groups are not deemed interesting enough for movies or TV.

As portrayed by the media, sex is casual, and it happens without discussion, protection, or the need for a relationship. Having sex involves about as much commitment as buying a
sandwich. And violence is presented as the way to resolve the smallest of problems, and often as the first way and not the last. Worst of all, violence is divorced from its effects. The grieving grandparents, the heartbroken friends, the children growing up without parents—these are not shown on television. Violence, like sex, looks simple and shiny.

In the world of business, all of life is boiled down to one word: “profit.” As John Muir said, “Nothing dollarable is safe.” Advertisers design narratives to sell polluting, unhealthy, useless products. Cigarettes and alcohol are depicted as refreshing. Ads miseducate our children about the nature of happiness, teaching them just the opposite of what all the world’s great religions teach. In brief, advertising tells you that to feel good you need to buy something you do not need. The comedian George Carlin eloquently expressed it this way: “Trying to be happy by accumulating possessions is like trying to satisfy hunger by taping sandwiches all over your body.”

The stories we are told by people who want to sell us things will not save us. We need stories that teach us to be patient, to share, and to put things in perspective. Tolstoy’s definition of wealth was “the number of things one can do without.” Sut Jhaly of the Media Education Foundation estimates that the average person sees or hears three thousand ads a day. Imagine a world that had no ads. Or imagine our country instead with three thousand messages a day encouraging us to eat more fruits and vegetables, brush our teeth, call our great-aunt, and behave kindly toward one another.

Healing stories give people hope, teach them empathy, and encourage action. They feature different kinds of protagonists, and they need not be superheroes. Firefighters, missionaries, teachers, doctors, biologists, actors, and parents do kind and brave things every day. Many college students take full course loads, work, and still squeeze in volunteer projects. There are disabled students who are high achievers, and children who do not tease and hurt others.

Americans have always loved outlaws, but the true heroes are likely to be in-laws and the other good people who help us travel through our lives. Many people distrust public servants and do gooders, yet right now our country desperately needs just such people to step up to the plate and try to make things better.

The title of this book, Writing to Change the World, may sound grandiose, but I truly believe that positive changes come from decent people acting properly. Most people perform good deeds every day; it is governments, institutions, and corporations that run amok. When I write this, I think of my grandmother Agnes. She and my grandfather homesteaded in eastern Colorado in the 1920s, raising five children on a ranch during the Dust Bowl and then the Depression. She worked hard all her life, and died with less than two thousand dollars in the bank. Still, she was loved and loving, and mostly content. She created a meaningful universe for herself amid tumbleweeds and rattlesnakes.

When I was a senior at the University of California, I visited my grandmother for the last time. She was widowed and dying of cancer, and I was a reader of popular psychology and full of myself. I asked her, “Grandmother, have you had a happy life?” She ignored my question. I persisted, asking again, as if she hadn’t heard me the first time. She grimaced, then answered, almost angrily, “Mary, I don’t think of my life that way. I ask, ‘Have I made good use of my time and my talents? Is the world a better place because I have been here?’”

The person who wrote “You deserve a break today” made a difference in the world, but perhaps not a contribution to it. This book is for people like my grandmother Agnes who want the world to be a better place because they were here.
I hope *Writing to Change the World* helps you clarify your thoughts, experience new hope and new energy, and communicate your best ideas as effectively as possible. My goal is to help you translate your passion and idealism into action. This is not a book on how to write; rather, it’s a book on how to write in order to improve the world. It is for competent writers with generous hearts and bold spirits.

We live in a world filled with language. Language imparts identity, meaning, and perspective to our human community. Writers are either polluters or part of the cleanup team. Just as the language of power and greed has the potential to destroy us, the language of reason and empathy has the power to save us. Writers can inspire a kinder, fairer, more beautiful world, or incite selfishness, stereotyping, and violence. Writers can unite people or divide them.

In the chapters that follow, I will focus on expository writing, because that is my medium. I write books, articles, and speeches. I hope that poets and writers of fiction will find useful ideas in the text. I set myself a double task in writing this book: to tell and to demonstrate what I wish to say about writing. That made the work more complicated for me, but also more honest and rewarding. As I struggled with the writing, I learned more about writing.

I will teach what I know best, a connecting style of writing that employs storytelling to build empathy and the motivation to help. Still, there are many roads to Rome, and I will share ideas and examples from writers very different from myself. Irony, humor, anger, and dead-on logical argument all have their place in writing that connects.

I came to writing as a therapist, and I believe that psychotherapy has a great deal to teach us about making connections and fostering change. Carl Rogers formulated his basic tenets on transformation through relationships. He discovered that the best way to facilitate change is to accept people exactly as they are. He taught generations of therapists about nonjudgmental attitudes, empathy, and authenticity.

In both therapy and advocacy writing, relationships matter. Mutual respect and trust facilitate the growth of souls. Both endeavors require openness to ideas and a willingness to reconsider and expand one’s point of view. Relationships create the environments that allow humans to extend their circles of caring. In the 1970s, psychologist Stanley Milgram theorized the now famous “six degrees of separation” between all people on earth. Since then, in our computerized, cell-phoned, outsourced world, we have grown even closer to one another. If Milgram were alive to rethink his earlier theorem, he might discover there are only three or two degrees of separation.

Lyndon Johnson said, “Let’s hope the world doesn’t turn into a neighborhood before it turns into a brotherhood.” That is what 9/11 and all acts of terrorism are about. People who share the same space do not know how to understand and help one another. I encourage you to tackle the job of turning our world into a brother- and sisterhood. Writing allows us to connect with readers all around the world. We can support and influence people we will never meet. We can’t necessarily repair damage in another country, but we can write something that may help, at least a little. With our words, we can construct a new kind of worldwide web, with strands of empathy. Together, we can formulate new metaphors for building a better world for us all. We can create a grammar of hope and a syntax of salvation. Then we will see an explosion of fresh green ideas.

The founder of Outward Bound U.S.A., Josh Miner, said, “If you are lucky, just once in your life you will be associated with a great idea.” If I have one great idea, it is that connecting people might save the world. I suspect that everyone reading this book has a
great idea. I hope I can help you sharpen, clarify, and share yours. I want you to go forth and tell your good and important stories. Are you ready to put your shoulder to the stone?

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