

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**THE FIRST DECADE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY** is nearly over. If I'd read that sentence fifty years ago, when I was a fourteen-year-old boy, I would have imagined atomic-powered flying cars and world government, not traffic jams and global warming, and not cities that looked more or less the same, and not people who still wear dresses and high heels (high heels!) and suits and ties. Ties! In 2009!

**AS WE LAY IN BED THIS MORNING, NORMA ASKED** what I was going to do today. "Save the world," I replied in a deadpan voice. "Did you say 'save,'" she asked, "or 'savor'?" I laughed. "Try 'savor,'" she said.

**BECAUSE I'M PREPARING FOR A TRIP TO CALIFORNIA** to lead a retreat about the power of personal writing, I've been too busy to write. It's a good thing I won't be talking about the importance of breathing; otherwise I'd probably be gasping for air even as I profess my love for this oxygen-rich planet — even as I remind my audience how necessary it is, if you want to be a good breather, to breathe every day no matter how busy you are.

**IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY IT TOOK SIX** months to cross the country by covered wagon. At the start of the twentieth century it took six days to make the trip by train. Yesterday I flew from North Carolina to California in a little more than six hours. The engineering marvel of a modern jetliner borders on the miraculous, yet how mundane flying has become. There I was, soaring through the air at hundreds of miles an hour, fulfilling one of humanity's age-old dreams, and all I could think about was how little legroom I had and when the couple behind me was going to shut up.

**IF I PRAY DURING TAKEOFF, WHY NOT PRAY AT** the start of each day? What distinction do I make between the gods of the earth and the gods of the sky?

**I TELL WRITERS THAT THERE'S A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE** between attending a workshop called "Into the Fire" and actually summoning the courage and perseverance to sit down, day after day, and write honestly and skillfully about an intensely personal event. I should know, I tell them, because I shy away from that fire, too.

Once I asked the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca how he keeps going into the fire. "I think if anybody stays close to their loneliness," he said, "they're always staying close to the edge. So when I'm by myself, which is a necessity when you're a writer, I have to constantly deal with that bleak, despairing feeling.

It's a funny thing about loneliness. No matter what you try to do to fill it, you can never fill it. At the end of the day it looks at you and measures you exactly. We do an awful lot of things — at least, I do — to try to escape it. But when I can blend and merge with the loneliness, there's an extraordinary feeling of fulfillment nothing else can compare with."

I've learned that loneliness isn't vanquished by living in a quaint Southern college town or marrying a beautiful woman or starting an independent magazine. For me, going into the fire means confronting the loneliness. It means confronting my own harsh judgment that I'm not up to the task, that I'm unable to tell a story the way it deserves to be told. Another writer once confided in me that when the critical voices in her head get too loud, she stands up and curses them, then shouts at them to get the hell out of the house. Then she goes back to her writing.

**I'M TOO SHY TO WALK UP TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE** and ask for a dance. She'd probably laugh at me — and who could blame her? Why would a gorgeous dame like her look twice at a lug like me? If only I were daring enough to take her in my arms, bury my face in her hair, and breathe in the words of the great poets. There'd be no need for me to finish a sentence because she'd know exactly what I was thinking; no need to question her body pressed against mine, her long, lingering kiss.

**THE CAT IN MY LAP DOESN'T CARE WHAT I ATE** last night, or what I weigh this morning. She doesn't care what words I'm writing, or whether they're good enough.

**INSIDE MY NOTEBOOK IS ANOTHER NOTEBOOK,** so secret even I rarely see it. Sometimes when I seem to be taking a nap, or walking down a street, or bending over to tie my shoe, I'm really trying to glance at my secret notebook.

**I'M GRATEFUL FOR THIS CLEAN SHEET OF PAPER.** I'm grateful for my Pilot Precise V7 Rolling Ball pen. I'm grateful for the genius who invented the alphabet and for all the punctuation marks that come bundled with it at no extra cost. I'm grateful that Norma took me seriously last night when I told her I wanted to get up especially early this morning. "Please make sure I don't sleep past my alarm," I said. Ten minutes before the alarm was set to go off, Norma rolled over and inadvertently kicked me in her sleep. I woke with a start. "You kicked me!" I cried. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," Norma murmured, then went right back to sleep. Well, I asked for help, and help came: obviously a kick in the ass is what I needed today.