

May 15, 2020

By Maurice Carlos Ruffin

Greetings, Scholastic Writing Award Recipients, families and teachers of the winners, and the Eudora Welty Foundation Board, Contest Administrator Sally Birdsall.

Writing is the most solitary sport of all. Our best athletes train. Then they run out onto the field, onto the court, onto the track where they are cheered by hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of strangers.

I wager that the writing of the pages that brought you to this moment was probably not witnessed by even a dozen people, if any.

There's a very good chance you wrote your work alone, perhaps in your bedroom with the lights down, long after you should have been asleep.

Yet, anyone who's ever written anything that they enjoyed knows that you have to enter the zone to write anything of value.

The zone is a kind of sleep, isn't it? When your extra thoughts drop away. When your focus narrows. When beauty emerges.

Athletes enter the zone surrounded by others. Writers enter the zone alone.

There is a connection between the athletic zone and the literary zone. But there's also a difference.

You may have noticed that the world has changed recently. Many of us were forced to go home and stay home. I wrote these words to you from my home. There's a good chance you're hearing my words in your home.

The basketball players are stuck dribbling in their backyards. The wrestlers are twiddling their thumbs. The track stars, etc. But the writers? The writers are literally and metaphorically at home. Yes, you'd like to go out more. But you can still write.

Writing is the greatest sport because it doesn't require a throng of screaming fans. Writing merely requires a soul, an intellect, a you. To write is to collect your thoughts, to cuddle and squish them. Put your thoughts in the oven, bake them, take them out, and put icing on them. Aren't they pretty? Give your thoughts water, sunlight, and love. When you do this, not only do your words flourish, you flourish.

But being a writer isn't just about helping yourself. In fact, it's not even mostly about helping yourself. Writing is a community service. Writers help us see ourselves. It helps the people in your life live their lives.

Think of all the people who live and work where you live. There are firefighters, police officers, grocery store clerks, teachers. We love teachers, right? Each person does a job that helps the other people.

Somewhere, right now, someone working for the power company. Thanks to them, you have electricity, which allows you to use your phone or laptop. Similarly, writing is about illumination. Turning the lights of the mind on. Think of your favorite book. Is it Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*? Michelle Obama's *Becoming*? Is it the Bible? Is it a book about history, vampires, adventures in space?

Think of how you feel when you read something you really like. Your mood brightens. You feel inspired. You feel like that writer really understands you. They said something that you believe but they said it perfectly.

This is what you do as a writer. You spread joy, information, connection.

I have been a lover of stories my whole life. When I was a boy, my favorite day of the school year was the bookfair. I'd go home with an armload of books that were all mine. I was the kind of geeky kid who loved reading the Guinness Book of World Records cover to cover. In high school,

I volunteered at the library. Every chance I got, I stole away to one of the reading nooks. All this reading gave me an insider's knowledge about the world. I was proud, for example, when I saw the original Jumanji movie that no one else seemed to realize the story came from book that I loved.

Later, I realized that I had my own stories to tell. So I wrote. I quickly that writing isn't always easy. So I made friends with other writers who taught me what they knew, and I taught them what I know. I also went to graduate school and got a degree in creative writing.

Since then, I've been living a dream that I never I dreamt of. Eventually, I published dozens of short stories and essays. People pay me to write. I use my writing money to buy things that help me write: my laptop, my books.

Whatever you aspire to. Whatever your dreams may be. Whatever you hope for. I wish you all the best in the days ahead. Have fun writing!