

Why I Write

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William Saroyan (1908-1939) won the 1939 Pulitzer Prize for his play The Time of Your Life. His novel The Human Comedy (1942) is both an ironic and optimistic look at the human condition. In this essay, Saroyan writes of how tragedy, memory, and art have combined to bring meaning to his life.

It is a quarter of century, almost, since my first book was published, but as I began to write when I was nine, I have been writing for forty years: that is to say, I have lived in a special way for forty years—the way that takes hold of a man who is determined to understand the meaning of his own life, and to be prepared to write about it.

But I think it goes even farther back than forty years. I think I began to live in my own special way when I became aware that I had memory. That happened before I was three. I also had a memory that went back to a time before I was *two*, but it was an isolated one. At that age I wasn't given to remembering *everything*, or rather I hadn't yet noticed that it had come to pass that I remembered.

In the past were some of the best things I had, several of them gone: my father, for instance, who had died before I was three. My first memory, the one that went back to a time when I was not yet two, was of my father getting up onto a wagon, sitting beside my mother, and making a sound that told the horse to go. My two sisters and my brother and I sat in the back of the wagon as it moved slowly down a dusty road between vineyards on a hot afternoon in the summertime. I remembered sensing sorrow and feeling *with-with* mine, my people--a father, a mother, two sisters, a brother, our horse, our wagon, our pots and pans and books. The rest is lost in the sleep that soon carried me away. The next thing I knew my father was gone, which I didn't understand. I was fascinated by having memory, and troubled by the sorrow of it. I refused to accept the theory that things end, including people, including my father. I refused to believe that my father was dead. (In the sense that every man *is* his father, I wasn't much mistaken.)

All the same, I felt impelled from the time I knew I had memory to do something about the past about endings, about human death.

My first impulse was simple. I wanted to cause the impossible to happen, because if I was to do that, I knew I would be able to cause *anything* to happen. Thus, death would not be death, if anybody wanted it not to be.

I found two large empty cans. One I filled with water. The empty can I placed two feet from the full can. I asked myself to cause the water in the full can to pass into the empty can, by itself, because I wanted it to. The experiment failed. I had begun with the maximum, I had failed, and so I began to consider what might be the next best.

For a long time there didn't appear to be *any* next best at all. It was a matter of all or nothing, or at any rate the equivalent of nothing: continuous *gradual* loss, and finally total loss, or death.

What could a man do about this? Wait? That didn't seem to be enough. Why should I be troubled by memory at all if all memory told me was that things change, fail, decline, end, and die? I didn't want good things to do that, and I didn't think they should. How could I seize a good thing when I

saw it and halt its decline and death? As far as people were concerned, there just didn't seem to be *any* way.

And so I came to accept the theory that as far as I knew, as far as *anybody* knew, as far as there appeared to be any order to the action of things at all, the end of the order was invariably and inevitably decline, disappearance, and death.

And yet the world was full of people all the time. And the earth, the sea, and the sky were full of all manner of other living things: plants, animals, fish, birds.

Thus, something *did* stay, something *was* constant, or appeared to be. It was the *kind* that stayed. *One* of a kind couldn't stay, and couldn't apparently be made to. I myself was one of a kind, and everybody I knew and loved was one of a kind, and so what about us? What could I do about our impermanence? How could I halt this action? How had other men halted it?

I learned that they never had halted it. They had only pretended to. They had done this by means of art, or the putting of limits upon the limitless, and thereby holding something fast and making it seem constant, indestructible, unstoppable, unkillable, deathless.

A great painter painted his wife, his son, his daughter, and himself, and then one by one they all moved along and died. But the painting remained. A sculptor did the same thing with stone, a composer with musical sounds, and a writer with words.

Therefore, as the next best thing, art in one form or another would have to be the way of my life, but which form of art?

Before I was eight I didn't think it could possibly be writing, for the simple reason that I couldn't read, let alone write, and everybody else I knew could do both. At last, though, I got the hang of reading and writing, and I felt (if I didn't think), "This is for me." It had taken me so long to learn to write that I considered being able to write the greatest thing that could happen to anybody. If I wrote something, it *was* written, it was itself, and it might continue to be itself forever, or for what passes as forever.

Thus, I could halt the action of things, to achieve new forms of halting, or art. That is roughly how and why I became a writer. In short, I began to write in order to get even on death. I have continued to write for many reasons.

A long time ago I said I write because it is the only way I am willing to survive. Mainly, though, I write because I want to.