

Sitting in an Arbour*Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Sweet Muse descend and bless the Shade,
 And bless the Evening Grove;
 Business and Noise and Day are fled,
 And every Care but Love.

Jesus has all my Powers possessed,
 My Hopes, my Fears, my Joys:
 He the dear Sovereign of my Breast
 Shall still command my Voice.

Some of the fairest Choirs above
 Shall flock around my Song,
 With Joy to hear the Name they Love
 Sound from a Mortal Tongue.

His Charms shall make my Numbers flow,
 And hold the falling Floods,
 While Silence sits on every Bough
 And bends the List'ning Woods.

I'll carve our Passion on the Bark,
 And every wounded Tree
 Shall drop and bear some Mystick Mark
 That Jesus died for me.

The Swains shall wonder when they read
 Inscribed on all the Grove,
 That Heaven itself came down, and bled
 To win a Mortals Love.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***On Becoming a Writer***Kevin T. Bauder*

Now and then, somebody will ask me what he has to do to become a writer (the *he* here is deliberate: I don't recall ever receiving this query from a female). The question always seems odd since I do not consider myself to be one. Granted, I write, and some of what I write gets published. This small success is due more to circumstances than to my being a writer. I happen to live at an intellectual crossroad where an ecclesiastical community intersects an academic discipline, and neither of them is renowned for producing wordsmiths. When it comes to polished writing, I live in the kingdom of the profoundly myopic, so if I have only one eye with only partial sight, then I may be permitted to indulge an inclination to string words together.

I love to read the work of good writers. I learn from them. In the sea of writers, William F. Buckley is like waves reflecting sunshine, P. J. O'Rourke is like a nor'easter, and H. L. Mencken is a force five hurricane. In my reading I have guffawed with Clemens, harumphed with Chesterton, and nodded assent with Lewis. I know what good writers do. That is how I know that I am not among them.

I wish that I could do what they do, even if at a lower level. The masters guide their readers safely through the forest of ideas. They illuminate the path and sweep it clean for clarity, and the illumination both decorates the way and draws their readers forward. The best writers are sometimes elegant, sometimes donnish, sometimes flamboyant, and sometimes brutal, but they are always interesting. They have accumulated such large stores of words that they can pluck out the exact term to communicate a precise meaning. Their mastery of the language enables them to craft sentences of vigor or languor as occasion dictates. Their works bubble with metaphor, and they serve up similes that entice readers like popcorn draws movie goers. They avoid vagueness, ambiguity, and distraction while they make even complicated ideas seem simple.

The point of reading good writers is not to agree with them. Sometimes their views are disagreeable or even repulsive. The point is to understand why they think what they think. If they are genuinely skilled and thoughtful, then their readers can discover why an opinion that first seems implausible nevertheless makes sense to at least one intelligent, clear-minded



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person. Writers who perform that task offer a valuable service. They are worth reading even when we decide that they are wrong.

Great ideas need good writers to communicate them. Lesser writers litter the way with muddy language, jargon, affectation, bluster, or even abuse. Their works are strewn with unexamined assumptions, unpersuasive definitions, anecdotal evidence, half-truths, unsubstantiated claims, and illicit appeals to emotion, authority, popularity, or even force. At their worst, bad writers stoop to mere heckling, name calling, and threats. Choked with such debris, even the best ideas will fail to persuade thoughtful people.

I wish that I were a good writer, or even a mediocre one. Certain great ideas need fresh presentation to make them clear and persuasive. Baptist distinctives are a great idea. Dispensationalism is a great idea. Cessationism is a great idea. Fundamentalism (a right view of ecclesiastical fellowship and separation) is a great idea. Conservatism is a great idea. These ideas are true. They are good. They are powerful. They are even beautiful (as truth and goodness always are).

Many of these ideas lack recent advocates to present them in clear, simple language. I would like to do that job. To accomplish the task, however, I will have to become a better writer than I am now.

That doesn't mean that I plan to stop writing. Indeed, one cannot improve one's writing without continuing to write. But more is necessary. As I write, I am doing several things to develop. One is to put my writing in front of peers for review. At the very least, they can help to catch the bone-headed mistakes of grammar and spelling, the mistaken Bible references, and the cliches and mixed metaphors that occasionally creep into my writing. I am genuinely grateful for peers who help to keep me from embarrassing myself.

Another way I try to improve is by continuing to master English usage. I have a shelf of tools immediately above my reading desk. Strunk and White (*Elements of Style*) sits on that shelf, and I re-read it every couple of years. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* sits beside it and now also resides on my computer. Basic tools like dictionaries and thesauri also occupy that shelf, and they are used almost daily.

Another way of improving is to read good writers discussing their craft. Rudolf Flesch (*The Art of Readable Writing*) was probably the first author from whom I deliberately learned. Richard Mitchell (*Less Than Words Can Say*) delivered a good verbal kick in the pants. Others who have helped me have included William F. Buckley, Kurt Vonnegut, and William Zinsser. Most recent has been James J. Kilpatrick, *The Writer's Art*. These books not only offer good counsel for writers, but they are themselves excellent examples of the writer's craft.

When I was in seminary, one of my professors offered a word of advice: "Read less Francis Schaeffer and more C. S. Lewis." He wasn't wrong. Besides the writers I've already mentioned, authors like Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, E. B. White, Jacques Barzun, Tom Wolfe, George Will, Neil Postman, and Jonah Goldberg model good written style. They are enjoyable to read, and as one gets comfortable with their work, they help readers develop an ear and eye for what makes good writing. The only problem is that they make it look easy, as if good writing were a matter of mere nature or even accident rather than a matter of craft.

I doubt that I can ever become a genuinely good writer. Still, I can become a better writer than I am now, and that is what I want to do. I want to improve because the ideas that I find compelling deserve the best exposition and defense. I know that I will never be great or even good, but I can at least aspire to a higher level of incompetence.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
