On Question-Driven Writing

Why write?

When posting on social media, the writer's motivation is clear: to connect with friends or to say something others will "like." As in other kinds of "unsponsored writing," such as keeping a diary or maintaining a personal blog, the central activity is giving voice to the self. This can be pleasurable; it can teach you about yourself; it can relieve stress. While there are plenty of people who never feel the desire to engage in unsponsored writing, there's not much mystery as to why some do.

What *is* mysterious is why anyone, outside of a school assignment, voluntarily writes about anything other than the self, its interests, its desires, its travails, and so on. Why write a searching analysis of a social problem, for instance, or a book-length study of voting behaviors, or a biography of someone long dead and wholly unrelated to the writer? Why do something that requires so much time and mental energy, when the odds of getting published or having your work read are so low?

Cast in these terms, the motivation to write voluntarily about something other than the self does seem mysterious. But perhaps these are not the best terms for understanding how the motivation to write emerges. So let's move from the hypothetical to the particular and consider the story of how the historian Jill Lepore set out to write a book about Benjamin Franklin and ended up writing one about Jane Franklin, his virtually unknown sister. It's obvious why a historian might want to write about Ben Franklin. He's a major figure in American history; he was an inventor, an ambassador, an educator, and a philosopher; he was one of the most famous people of his time, and he interacted with others in all walks of life. If you're a scholar of American history, writing about him sounds fun.

In "The Prodigal Daughter," Lepore describes settling into reading Franklin's papers and finding herself drawn instead to the sixty-three-year-long correspondence Ben Franklin had with his younger sister Jane. Lepore discovered that Ben Franklin wrote more letters to Jane than to anyone else. As Lepore read more and more of the letters, she became motivated to ask questions that drove her research forward. How was it possible that "no two people in their family were more alike," when "their lives could hardly have been more different"? How could Jane Franklin's character and intelligence resemble her brother's when she had little

education and no formal training as a writer beyond the few lessons her brother gave her before he left home when she was only eleven. Aside from letters to family and friends, the only writing she did was to record the dates of major events in a small, handmade book she called her "Book of Ages," which Lepore describes as "four sheets of foolscap between two covers to make a little book of sixteen pages." Turn the pages of this homemade book and you'll move through a list of dates and events: Jane's birth; her marriage at age fifteen; the birth of her first child, and that child's death less than a year later; and the births and then the deaths of all but one of her twelve children over the course of her lifetime.

In contrast to her brother's life, Jane Franklin's life seemed too spare to warrant attention. And yet when Lepore told her mother what she had learned about Ben Franklin's forgotten sister, her mother said, "Write a book about her!" Lepore thought her mother was joking. How could she write a book about a phantom? Who would want to read it? It seemed like an impossible task, but when Lepore's mother's health began to fail, she returned her attention to Jane Franklin's letters "to write the only book [her] mother ever wanted [her] to write."

Lepore's personal motivation for writing a book about Jane Franklin couldn't have been stronger, but she still struggled to articulate a driving question that would transform Jane Franklin's story into a book that anyone but her mother would want to read. Not wanting to abandon Jane Franklin entirely, Lepore decided that she had enough material for a short opinion piece, "Poor Jane's Almanac," which she published in the *New York Times*. In the piece, Lepore described Jane Franklin's "Book of Ages" and the political arguments Jane had with her brother after her child-rearing days were done. Highlighting Jane Franklin's two modes of writing—the catalog of her losses and her letters to her brother—Lepore showed that Jane was born with as much potential for achievement as her famous brother, but gender, poverty, and lack of access to both education and contraception narrowed the scope of her life. "Especially for women," Lepore writes, "escaping poverty has always depended on the opportunity for an education and the ability to control the size of their families," neither of which Jane had.

Lepore was stunned by the flood of letters she received in response to "Poor Jane's Almanac." In an interview ("Out Loud: Jane Franklin's Untold American Story"), Lepore described letters from readers about how their mothers, like Jane Franklin, fought the "undertow of

motherhood" to steal the time required to read, learn, and engage with the wider world. This unsolicited reader feedback helped Lepore see why her attempt to write Jane Franklin's story as a traditional biography had failed. It had been impossible for Lepore to write a compelling story about a person whose life was largely unexceptional and unknown. Readers of "Poor Jane's Almanac" weren't moved by Jane Franklin because her life had been unique; they were moved because they saw in Jane Franklin an eighteenth-century incarnation of their own twentieth-century mothers—intelligent, but thwarted.

When Lepore realized this, she found a public reason for writing at length about Jane Franklin's life: she would use Franklin's story to explore two questions: How did poverty, motherhood, and limited access to education constrain the lives of women in the eighteenth century? And why is this history of interest to twenty-first century readers? *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, which was nominated for a National Book Award in 2013, is Lepore's book-length exploration of these two questions.

We know it's unlikely that you've had a writing experience like Lepore's, one where your motivation for writing shifted from a personal concern to an interest you shared with others. We say this because the motivation for virtually all of the writing students do in school comes not from the students' desire to explore an important question, but from the teachers' assignments and the students' desire for good grades. It doesn't have to be this way, though. One of the reasons we wrote *Habits of the Creative Mind* was to inspire you to practice writing as real writers do. Professional and aspiring nonfiction writers are motivated to write because they are driven by genuine questions that don't have simple answers, and they write for real readers who want to see the writer's mind at work on a problem. We want to encourage you, as apprentice writers, to practice imagining a public audience for your work. We want you to confront the challenge all practicing writers face when they are in the midst of a project: How do I make what interests me of interest to others?

Practice Session One: Bad Questions, Good Answers

Habits: connecting, questioning, speculating

Activities: analyzing, questioning, writing

As we noted in the introduction to this section, there really are bad questions. Audience matters: there are questions you can ask your friends that you wouldn't ask a stranger. And context matters: there are questions you can ask your friends in private that you wouldn't ask in public.

In her short essay, "The Mother of All Questions," Rebecca Solnit (*Harper's*, 2015) is concerned with a bad question that is regularly and predictably directed to adults like her who do not have children: "Why didn't you have kids?" Underlying the question is the suggestion that the person has failed and that she — this question is most often directed at women — is lacking, or selfish, or loveless.

Solnit prefers not to respond to this loaded question, but she shows how other bad, or wrong, questions can be turned into good questions by probing what they mean below the surface. One such question is, Are you happy? It's a bad question, in part because it's the sort of question we answer without paying attention. Solnit argues that this bad question is best answered with better questions. What is happiness? And why is it generally assumed to be one of life's most important goals?

We would like you to read "The Mother of All Questions" and then to write your own essay that turns the question, Are you happy? into better questions. In your essay, pose at least three *good* questions that challenge assumptions about the meaning of happiness and explore your own thoughts about the meaning or significance of this term.

Practice Session Two: Public Motives for Writing

Habits: questioning, speculating, working deliberately

Activities: analyzing, experimenting, reading

Public and intellectual motives for writing are often expressed as questions or as statements that take note of a puzzle or problem. Punctuation makes questions easy to identify. Statements of puzzles or problems aren't as readily recognizable, but they often take the form of sentences that use a complicating or qualifying word such as *but*, *however*, or *or* to point to an unexpected insight. For example, the motivating puzzle in Lepore's *Book of Ages* can be expressed by this statement: Jane Franklin's life appears to be unexceptional, *but* her life provides a valuable example of how poverty, lack of education, and motherhood severely limited what women in the eighteenth-century United States could achieve.

All the texts in the Reading section of this book are driven by the writer's desire to answer a question, grapple with a dilemma, or solve a problem.

For this practice session, we'd like you to read Rachel Aviv's essay "The Edge of Identity" (pp. 282–301). In this essay, Aviv tells a story about Hannah Upp, but her primary project extends beyond narrating the mystery that surrounds Upp. Instead, she uses Upp as a case study to think about larger questions than why this one woman periodically loses her sense of identity. Those larger questions and problems serve as the intellectual motivation for Aviv's project and make her work interesting to a general audience of readers.

But where exactly does Aviv define the puzzle that motivates her writing? After you've read Aviv's essay all the way through, see if you can identify the sentence, sentences, or paragraphs that most clearly express her project. Then experiment with restating the motive in a sentence that uses *but, or, however,* or some other complicating word. Does the statement you composed help to clarify Aviv's project for you?

Practice Session Three: Connecting Small Stories to Big Ideas

Habits: connecting, questioning, reflecting

Activities: note taking, reading, thinking

We invite you to practice a frequent motivating move in nonfiction writing: we'd like you to use a case study (a single example) to illuminate a larger issue or idea. Read Rachel Aviv's "The Edge of Identity," taking notes on how she uses her case study to bring a new idea to our attention. What is the new idea? What does she want her readers to think about this new idea by the end of her piece?

Once you have a handle on how Aviv moves from her case study of Hannah Upp to her illuminating idea, we'd like you to write up a richly detailed anecdote from your own family history. Then consider how you could use the story to shed light on an interesting cultural or social problem, puzzle, or mystery that is bigger than your particular family. In other words, define a public motive for writing. After you've selected your anecdote and before you try to make a connection to a larger idea, spend at least one hour doing research about the cultural or social issue that interests you.

After you've done sufficient research, compose an essay that links your family history to the larger issue you've researched.