

## “ON WRITING” - Stephen King

– 20 –

Hardly a week after being sprung from detention hall, I was once more invited to step down to the principal’s office. I went with a sinking heart, wondering what new shit I’d stepped in.

It wasn’t Mr. Higgins who wanted to see me, at least; this time the school guidance counsellor had issued the summons. There had been discussions about me, he said, and how to turn my “restless pen” into more constructive channels. He had enquired of John Gould, editor of Lisbon’s weekly newspaper, and had discovered Gould had an opening for a sports reporter. While the school couldn’t insist that I take this job, everyone in the front office felt it would be a good idea. *Do it or die*, the G.C.’s eyes suggested. Maybe that was just paranoia, but even now, almost forty years later, I don’t think so.

I groaned inside. I was shut of *Dave’s Rag*, almost shut of *The Drum*, and now here was the *Lisbon Weekly Enterprise*. Instead of being haunted by waters, like Norman Maclean in *A River Runs Through It*, I was as a teenager haunted by newspapers. Still, what could I do? I rechecked the look in the guidance counsellor’s eyes and said I would be delighted to interview for the job.

Gould—not the well-known New England humorist or the novelist who wrote *The Greenleaf Fires* but a relation of both, I think—greeted me warily but with some interest. We would try each other out, he said, if that suited me.

Now that I was away from the administrative offices of Lisbon High, I felt able to muster a little honesty. I told Mr. Gould that I didn’t know much about sports. Gould said, “These are games people understand when they’re watching them drunk in bars. You’ll learn if you try.”

He gave me a huge roll of yellow paper on which to type my copy—I think I still have it somewhere—and promised me a wage of half a cent a word. It was the first time someone had promised me wages for writing.

The first two pieces I turned in had to do with a basketball game in which an LHS player broke the school scoring record. One was a straight piece of reporting. The other was a sidebar about Robert Ransom’s record-breaking performance. I brought both to Gould the day after the game so he’d have them for Friday, which was when the paper came out. He read the game piece, made two minor corrections, and spiked it. Then he started in on the feature piece with a large black pen.

I took my fair share of English Lit classes in my two remaining years at Lisbon, and my fair share of composition, fiction, and poetry classes in college, but John Gould taught me more than any of them, and in no more than ten minutes. I wish I still had the piece—it deserves to be framed, editorial corrections and all—but I can remember pretty well how it went and how it looked after Gould had combed through it with that black pen of his. Here’s an example:

Last night, in the well-loved gymnasium of Lisbon High School, partisans and Jay Hills fans alike were stunned by an athletic performance unequalled in school history. Bob Ransom, known as "Bullet" Bob for both his size and accuracy, scored thirty-seven points. Yes, you heard me right. ~~Plus~~ he did it with grace, speed . . . and with an odd courtesy as well,

committing only two personal fouls in his knight-like quest for a record which has eluded Lisbon ~~players~~ since the years of Korea. . .

Gould stopped at "the years of Korea" and looked up at me. "What year was the last record made?" he asked.

Luckily, I had my notes. "1953," I said. Gould grunted and went back to work. When he finished marking my copy in the manner indicated above, he looked up and saw something on my face. I think he must have mistaken it for horror. It wasn't; it was pure revelation. Why, I wondered, didn't English teachers ever do this? It was like the Visible Man Old Raw Diehl had on his desk in the biology room.

"I only took out the bad parts, you know," Gould said. "Most of it's pretty good."

"I know," I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good—okay anyway, serviceable—and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. "I won't do it again."

He laughed. "If that's true, you'll never have to work for a living. You can do this instead. Do I have to explain any of these marks?"

"No," I said.

"When you write a story, you're telling yourself the story," he said. "When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story."

Gould said something else that was interesting on the day I turned in my first two pieces: write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then it goes out. Once you know what the story is and get it right—as right as you can, anyway—it belongs to anyone who wants to read it. Or criticize it. If you're very lucky (this

is my idea, not John Gould's, but I believe he would have subscribed to the notion), more will want to do the former than the latter.