

June, 2007 - Raymond A. Schroth, S.J., Professor of Humanities

Fred has asked me to set down some things I learned about writing from my experience, particularly in my eight books, which include one edited collection on Jesuit spirituality, two collections of essays by me on classic books, a short co-written book on a JVC volunteer in Peru, *The Eagle and Brooklyn*, a history of the Brooklyn Eagle based on my PhD, and the recent, more scholarly *The American Journey of Eric Sevareid* (1995), *Fordham: A History and Memoir* (2002), and *The American Jesuits: A History* (NYU Press, 2007), to appear in September.

So, I'll just say what works for me, knowing well that many of you have experiences and successes that work better for you.

1. Write about something you love- You will have to spend day and night with this mystery. You may drive your family and friends nuts by talking about some exciting discovery that day; but they'll have to love you enough to put up with it, and, if not, you can get some new friends.
2. Make time- Get a semester to a year of uninterrupted research and writing. I did *Sevareid* in a year's sabbatical in Washington, including working in the Library of Congress. I did both *Fordham*, which I had started earlier, and the book of essays, *Dante to Dead Man Walking*, in my first year at Saint Peter's, with weekends at Cornwall.
3. Mechanics and habits- At the beginning I followed the old note-taking rules of putting each quote and bibliography entry on a separate card. In recent years I put everything on yellow pads, writ by hand. I leave space and go back and make a lot of changes and put the yellow pages in yellow folders one each for notes, bibl, chapters, preface, intro, chronology, acknowledgements, contents, letters, interviews, emails, etc. — stacked neatly on a big work table a few feet away from my computer. I divide the week into three main activities: library research, interviews, and weekend writing. And the day into morning writing, an afternoon of reading and writing interrupted by an hour of swimming or biking at 3:00, Mass at 5:00, drinks and dinner, then reading and correspondence, though no writing, till midnight.

I also try to emulate Francis Parkman who visited the scenes of the historic battlefields he described. **For Sevareid I explored every house where he lived** - in Velva, North Dakota; Minneapolis; and three parts of DC. I printed a notice in the *New York Times Book Review* asking those who knew him to contact me, and I interviewed dozens of them either personally or on the phone. On the Jesuit history, I began by exploring the southern Maryland counties where we first established ourselves in the 17th century and, for inspiration, the New York Jesuit graveyard at Auriesville where Isaac Jogues and his companions were

martyred and many of my old teachers and the Jesuits to whom I dedicate the book lie buried.

The first step is to establish a chronology. This forces you to research the whole story and structure it before you start telling it. NYU Press, when they invited me to do the Jesuit history, also had me develop a proposal which included the book's themes, a list of the men whose lives I would emphasize, and an explanation of how this book would relate to other books in the field. They farmed this statement out to three anonymous judges, who liked it, but stressed that I not concentrate too heavily on the East coast. Which leads to the next suggestion.

Consult. Most writers I know are generous, willing to share their research, send you articles not otherwise available, steer you straight when you slip off course. With respect for their time, ask for help. If you succeed, help others.

Personal training. Rule One: When young writers asked Hemingway and Faulkner for advice they said to *read the masters* — Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. I don't see how anyone can write well or teach writing well without reading the great writers and having one's students do the same. *Rule Two:* Publish young. If someone has not at least published in his or her school paper or some letters to the editor by the time he or she is 21, every year it will get harder. *Rule Three: Take Risks.* Years ago many Jesuits didn't write because they thought they could get tenure without it or, more likely, already in their thirties, they had not been trained to take risks. They feared rejection.

Rejection is basic to the writer's life. It's a highly competitive business, now more than ever. Yet there are hundreds of editors looking for good material. I have published hundreds of articles in papers and magazines all over the country; but I have also written three more books (two journals of my teaching years and a novel) that will never be published—for one reason: publishers, who know best, told me they aren't good enough. But not a moment spent writing them was wasted. I learned a lot about myself while going through some difficult experiences and about how to structure a complex narrative.

The rewards are enormous. George Orwell, in "Why I Write," lists four: ego, aesthetic pleasure, contribution to history, political impact. And the knowledge you've made someone happy. Or, depending on the reason, it's good to make some unhappy too.