*A Writer’s Life* ( April 19, 2021)

(Notes for Zoom Talk to English Chat Tutors and Students)

Let me begin with an important *confession:* *I did not always want to be a writer.*

My first career choice was to be a ballerina. I worshipped  a marble statue of Anna Pavlova. When I discovered that I had a bit of vertigo and could not quite do the turns and pirouettes, I settled next on becoming a nuclear physicist, reading my way through the out-of-date science books in my local library.

I was always a reader and early on, perhaps in junior high school or high school I fell in love with poetry. I became the editor of *Fragments*, my high school creative writing magazine and I even read some of my poems on a left-leaning Sunday night radio show.

The truth is that the decision to become a writer *took time.* At college, I majored in political science and minored in economics and studied pre-medical courses, expecting to go on to medical school after graduation.

As it turned out, although I was accepted to several medical schools, I  changed my mind and went to work for *Esquire Magazine*, then the “hot” magazine of the 1960s. It was famous for covering politics and literature and known for being one of the first magazines to publish such major American writers as Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.  I started at the bottom of the ladder, as the editorial assistant for the managing editor of the magazine and I enrolled in graduate school ((NYU) where I then earned a Masters and Ph.D. in English Literature. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the journalism and non-fiction writing of Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe.* Shortly after I received my doctoral degree in 1974, I joined the English Department faculty at Baruch College, CUNY, where, after a few years, I became the director of their small but growing journalism program.

From this moment on, I felt myself a *professional writer* -- publishing work over my career in many different venues: poetry, short fiction, essays, non-fiction, and arts and culture reporting. Whatever the type of writing, I leaned upon my love of reading, my love of digging deep into a subject and doing background research, and my love of poetic language--and visual images.

Always, when writing, I found myself following certain routines:

1. I wrote *early* in the morning. It was a habit developed to accommodate my life as a college professor. I would get up at 5:30 am and write for a couple of hours before heading out to teach my writing classes.
2. I leaned heavily on *idea notebooks*: jotting down ideas for stories, scribbling images that I saw on the street or even on the subway, taking notes on clothing that people wore, street foods sold from stands, and events listed in tiny print in the newspaper --and in the age of the cell phone, taking lots of photos so that I could vividly remember/ see the moment.

**Personal Writing**: For me, like many writers, my first and earliest writing was intensely personal. I wrote about my family, my friends, my school, and my neighborhood. This was true in my first poems but it was especially true with my first book, published in 2009, ***Boardwalk Stories***, a collection of linked fictional short stories based on growing up by the boardwalk in Long Beach NY.

I spent three years writing the book. The characters were all invented but drawn from real life observations, from real people who worked in the businesses on the boardwalk, the rides and the arcades. I even relied on my own experience working as a switchboard operator at The Lincoln Hotel, a popular summer resort. Once, when I visited the local historical society, I found a flyer advertising a lecture on vintage photography in Long Beach, NY. I attended the talk, given by the photographer’s son and soon met with him, pairing my short stories with his father’s vintage photographs. His dad, let me add, was my foot doctor, so there even was a personal connection.  Because this was fiction, I added a political theme to the story. It made sense, because I grew up during the McCarthy period and the Cold War. In fact, there actually was a family who lived nearby who were active  in socialist politics. I eavesdropped on their conversations and built pieces of their story into my book.

When writing fiction, this raises an important question: How does one integrate real facts --a concrete watchtower by the ocean, an old hotel, foods, an eccentric, odd tap dance teacher-- into the work? Somehow, the basic rule to me is that a writer has to remain credible. The environment has to seem real enough for the reader to believe the story even if some of the facts and the plot is imagined.

My second book was **Illegal Living:80 Wooster Street and the Evolution of SoHo,** a heavily researched book based on the story of how SoHo became an arts community. It took me five/six years to write.

The overarching idea for the book came to me one day as I sat in a neighborhood coffee shop: I would focus on the biography of one building. I would tell the story of SoHo’s change from a commercial neighborhood to an artist community through the prism of 80 Wooster Street. When I looked out of my living room window everyday, I saw the curved arched windows of 80 Wooster across the street. My husband Shael Shapiro, an architect, had once lived there and he told me that it was the first successful live/work artist coop building in SoHo.

My research included going way all the way back in history to the Dutch settlements and the farms that were located in lower Manhattan. The farms became tradesman’s shops and a residential neighborhood which, when it moved uptown, was replaced by Caste Iron buildings with commercial tenants.  By the 1960s, businesses were leaving, setting the stage for the artistic revival. This non-fiction book depended on extensive interviewing, including everyone who ever lived in 80 Wooster Street.  I even traveled to Hawaii to interview one of the former residents. A good tip when doing research is always take *more* notes than you think that you will need.

Throughout my writing career, I have been doing cultural reporting, interviewing artists, arts activists, and gallery directors and museum directors all over the world. At first, these pieces appeared in print publications but over the last decade they have all been published online. ***Engaging Art: Essays and Interviews from Around the Globe, (2020)*** --is a collection of 60 of my arts and culture essays and interviews from around the world -- Cuba, Colombia, Washington DC--everywhere. Cultural reporting takes a great deal of preparation: one has to set up an itinerary with specific dates to interview diverse sources. One has to make sure that the list of people you speak to represents different sides/facets of a story..

Usually, before I head out on such a reporting adventure, I pitch the story to an editor at a specific publication: to do this I research the publication to make sure that they have not done a similar story during the past two years. Having an OK from an editor, helps a reporter to get people to say *yes* to interviews. On average, it takes about three months to write and report each story. The process involves setting up interviews, travel, and writing, followed by editing. Sometimes the edits are minor, sometimes information is missing and I need to do additional reporting. For most of my online cultural reporting, my husband Shael Shapiro served as my staff photographer. Indeed his fine photos grace *Engaging Art.*

I have prepared a little slide show to accompany this talk: with images from Cuba, Colombia, *Esquire*, *Boardwalk Stories*, SoHo, and from Jill Freedman’s remarkable black-and-white photos of the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1968. Whatever the assignment, my goal always was to touch on the political, economic, and social justice context of the arts story.

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