



Joyce Dinkins
Linda Washington
GENERAL EDITORS

Free to Write

Essential Insights
to Equip and Encourage
Christian Writers of Color

Free to Write: Essential Insights to Equip and Encourage Christian Writers of Color

© 2026 Global Christian Family Books, LLC. All rights reserved.

Global Christian Family Books, LLC

PO Box 8840, Los Angeles, CA 90008

gcfamilybooks.com

Copyright in the contributions to this anthology that are used by permission is reserved by the contributor. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise — without prior written permission from the copyright holder, except in brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews and as otherwise permitted under copyright law.

See Permissions for permissions information.

To request permissions or receive information about bulk purchase discounts, contact Global Christian Family Books at info@gcfamilybooks.com or 1-323-803-0104.

**Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication
(Provided by Cassidy Cataloguing Services, Inc.).**

Names: Dinkins, Joyce, editor. | Washington, Linda M. (Linda Marie), 1960- editor.

Title: Free to write : essential insights to equip and encourage Christian writers of color / edited by Joyce Dinkins and Linda Washington.

Description: Los Angeles, California : Global Christian Family Books, LLC, [2026] |

Audience: Christian writers of color, male and female, ages 18-80, with a range of book writing experience from just starting to successfully published. | Includes bibliographical references and scripture index.

Identifiers: LCCN: 2026933219 | ISBN: 9781948732000 (paperback) | 9781948732017 (hardcover) | 9781948732024 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian literature--Authorship. | Christian authors. | People of color--Authorship. | Minority authors. | Christian literature--Minority authors. | Christian literature, American--Authorship. | Marketing--Religious aspects. | English language--Study and teaching. | LCGFT: Handbooks and manuals. | Style manuals. | BISAC: LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Writing / Authorship.

Classification: LCC: BR44 .F74 2026 | DDC: 808.06/623--dc23

Free to Write was developed in collaboration with Publishing in Color, a Joyce Dinkins Publishing LLC network of diverse, professional individuals nurturing writers, authors, speakers, illustrators, designers, and other communicators to grow ethnic diversity in Christian publishing (publishingincolor.com).

Cover design by Micah Kandros

Interior design by Kay Chin Bishop and Glynes Northam

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Introduction: Let Your Words Flow for Him

Joyce Dinkins and Linda Washington

Underrepresented Voices and Stories Are Needed

A Right Word

Joyce Dinkins

Freeing Up Your Writing Voice(s)

Patricia Raybon

The First Nations Version

Terry M. Wildman

Why We Need Men of Color in Publishing

Rasool Berry

Freedom: Writing Beyond Our Forties

Mari Fitz-Wynn

Unique Responsibilities for Christian Authors

Write to Worship: The True Calling of a Christian Writer

Xochitl Dixon

A Writer's Call: It Starts with Death

Linda Washington

Wisdom When Writing About Tough Topics

Victoria Saunders McAfee

Writing Craft Essentials

All Genres

Dressed to Impress: Sensory Details and Figurative Language in Writing

Linda Washington

Legal Lessons from the Publishing Front Lines

Lluvia Augustin

Exploring the Ethical Use of AI

David Dinkins

Writing Children's Books

Kid Approved: Book Genres for Today's Young Readers

Lisa A. Crayton

A Little Respect: Writing That Welcomes All Children

Joyce Dinkins

Writing Devotionals for Children

Linda Washington

Withstanding the Warfare of Writing for Kids

Linda Washington

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Creating Children's Visual Book Content

Linda Washington

Writing Fiction

20 Craft Secrets of Writing That Sells

Patricia Raybon

Making the Brave Move from Nonfiction to Novels

Patricia Raybon

Gifts of the Imagination: Writing Genre Fiction

Linda Washington

Writing Women's Fiction

Natalie Hanemann

Building Worlds with Meaning

Anthony Jones

Writing Nonfiction

Successful Christian Living Writing

Katara Washington Patton

My Journey of Researching a Nonfiction Children's Book

Marie Chan

3 Keys to Writing Devotional Articles

Nancy Gavilanes

An Introduction to Writing Poetry

Michael Stalcup

Changing Lanes in Writing

Catering Adult Material for Younger Audiences

Katara Washington Patton

Turning Your Sermon Series or Academic Writing into a Trade Book

Dr. Sharon Norris Elliott

Often Overlooked Writing Opportunities

The Ministry of Magazine Writing

Xochitl Dixon

Writing Work-for-Hire Assignments

Lisa A. Crayton

Journaling

Michael Stalcup

Edit Your Work

Revision Strategies That Work

Lisa A. Crayton

Refiner's Fire: The Responsibility of Self-Editing

E. Danielle Butler

The Service of Editing

Linda Washington

Voice, Identity, and Editorial Partnership: What Authors of Color Need to Know About Preserving Their Voice

Jevon Oakman Bolden

Next Steps for Publishing

Publishing Options for Christian Authors

Bruce R. Barbour

Legal Snares Every Writer Should Avoid

Lluvia Augustin

Writing with Authenticity and Purpose: What Editors Are Looking for in a Book Proposal

Deborah Sáenz

Pitching to Agents and Querying Publishing Houses

Margot Starbuck

Submitting Poems for Publication: Getting Started

Michael Stalcup

Notes for the Journey

Pursue Excellence in the Craft of Writing

Edwina Perkins

“Who Am I to Write?” Three Ways to Battle Imposter Syndrome

Chanté Griffin

Confidently Called: Stepping into God’s Purpose for Your Success

Yasmin Yunes

Writers’ Need for Prayer Support

Palitha Jayasooriya

Spiritual Warfare for Christian Writers

Edwina Perkins

Flourishing Together: Building Relationships in the Writing Community

Dorina Lazo Gilmore-Young

Getting the Good Stuff from Writing Conferences

Karen Moore

Building Your Platform Without Losing Your Soul: A Vision Rooted in
Vocation and Community

Deborah Sáenz

Contributor Biographies

Acknowledgments

Scripture Index

Permissions



Underrepresented Voices and Stories Are Needed



A Right Word

JOYCE DINKINS

The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry, and a wise friend's timely reprimand is like a gold ring.

Proverbs 25:11 (MSG)

This image of timely, wise words as rare gives reason enough to treasure writing them. King Solomon, the wisest and wealthiest person (see 1 Kings 3:11-13), suggests here that words can enrich. I believe that when we create content that carries God's truth, we provide the most excellent communication. Our assurance of success in that endeavor is this: "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). What wisdom, encouragement, instruction, comfort has God spoken to your heart to share for His purposes?

Which individuals and audiences will you gift with your writing? Since many readers of this book are Christians of color, this is not to suggest that you write only for that audience. Your prospects are unlimited, contrary to opinions. And if being "diverse" is a concern, remember that diversity actually is and has been an advantage since ancient times. God chose to make us diverse, and He smooths and greases the way for us. God gave me that word *greases*, because He sets us apart for His service — anointing us with His Spirit (see Romans 8:11).

Recall the scene in Jerusalem where our spiritual ancestors at Pentecost came from some sixteen different nations and languages to gather in one place to hear from God, and received His message in their own languages.

God “published” to an exceedingly diverse group, pouring out His Spirit to empower all of the individuals for their mission of carrying the truth about Jesus Christ to Africa, Asia, Arabia, Persia, Judea, Rome, and beyond (see Acts 2:5-11).

God Is Still Pouring

Guided by His Spirit, we can create the right words about Jesus for children to adults. His blessings to us — including literacy, connectivity, opportunity — exceed what our previous generations enjoyed in this nation. And as it was in Acts, it is today; our diversity is intrinsic to His plan.

Consider how God planned for and called four *different* Gospel writers. Though varying, their witness is the same testimony: Jesus is the Savior, the Word made flesh. Likening the four accounts as the writers’ respective views of the same mountain, my friend, scholar Dr. Jim Townsend, explained that each writer saw the same Jesus but from their individual perspective. Together, their diverse reports reveal to humanity that Christ is God.

We discover diverse peoples’ witness coming together in sixty-six different books of the Bible — each writing God-inspired — to share across and overlap every edge of humanity. God’s wisdom is for every people.

Lauded for her *What the Bible Is All About*, author Henrietta C. Mears begins to explain the diversity among the inspired writers of Scripture:

Written by 40 authors, covering a period of approximately 1600 years . . . [Old Testament] authors were kings, princes, poets and philosophers, prophets and statesmen. Some were learned in the arts of the times and others were unschooled fishermen.”¹

Consider the women who “published” Jesus’ resurrection in eyewitness records different from those of the male disciples. God gave them the right words at the right time but fellow followers opposed them (Luke 24:1-12). Jesus had healed these women and honored their ministry (Luke 8:1-3), though the world devalued them. In fact, their presence reinforced that Jesus birthed a new standard based on faith in Christ alone (see Galatians 3:28), rather than submission to human power structures, and adherence to

the Law alone. God is still healing and calling male and female followers to speak and write. Has He called you?

Though there were different reports of details about Jesus' resurrection, the testimonies of biblical writers are harmonious in reiterating who God is, what He creates, and how His love redeems and sustains people in manifold moments and ways. We have the opportunity to share treasure about how His ways have changed ours — and only you can tell *your* story. We own valuable stories of gospel truth that God intended, and even when opposition tries to negate, our call is to publish and proclaim.

Our writing is comparable to that of others. When we of necessity peruse fellow writers' works, we may perceive our piece is "the same." We must identify how our proposed book, article, or other work is distinct from others' already published or planned writing. What is special about our content? What timely wisdom has God given us? Developing manuscripts that are distinctive and positioning our content among others' helps us meet unmet audience needs. What is the angle *you* can provide? In this thoughtful process, we clarify for ourselves and our readers what we bring that is different. Difference *adds to*, rather than *subtracts*; diversity is key to defining content relevance to audiences.

Individuals and Congregations

Our diversity continues to yield gifts.

I recently browsed *Just Us or Justice? Moving Toward a Pan-Methodist Theology*, which is another example of writing from one perspective while incorporating different audiences' needs. Author F. Douglas Powe Jr. hopes his readers incorporate his insights about the diverse faith lives of African American and European American Methodists.

African American scholars do not negate a Wesleyan perspective of experience but they do take a different route with respect to experience. One of the major reasons for this is that their assumptions differ from most Wesleyan scholars in the following ways: (1) Many African American scholars utilize black sources as a starting point for their work and (2) most African American scholars believe the idea of liberation is central to their theological perspective. African American scholars believe that beginning with

the black experience makes it possible to find the resources that are necessary to overcome structural oppression and eventually to move toward true liberation and justice. . . . The impact of slavery on African Americans cannot be emphasized enough, and this is especially true in relation to religion. Slaves encountered Christianity through the lens of European preachers and missionaries, who had certain prejudices in what they taught.²

Our diverse stories and experiences allow us to see and be seen. Your excellence in writing and pursuing publication opens doors not only for you but for Christian publishing to extend its reach.

Christians seem to get that when it comes to Bible publishing: serving varied audience needs. At Biblegateway.com, sixty-four English versions, nineteen Spanish-language, eight Tagalog, Cherokee, Chinese, Czech, and many other translations offer God's words. Each version is derived from ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic languages. In Bible publishing, serving diverse preferences seems to be all about *audience*.

- Publishers allow multiple Scripture versions within a single creative work for reasons of emphasis and clarification, for the sake of author and audience.
- Publishers develop Bible content in multiple formats: chronological, archaeological, devotional, interlinear, Hebrew-Greek, a "reading" Bible, and so many more formats, for audiences' sake.
- Some Christian publishers' missions include partnering in ever-greater initiatives with diverse people to serve their audiences because this dovetails with their Bible publishing. (Examine publishers' offerings and consider proposing works to those that display concern for diversity in general.)

I purchased the *First Nations Version New Testament (FNV)* and have recommended it to friends. I see its distinctive value to its primary audience of First Nations Tribes and their diverse congregations. This rendering comes from the Tribes, and respects their hearts for our Creator. Language is intentionally customized. The *FNV* speaks to my heart, too, though I'm disconnected from my grandmother's family (Muskogee) and their

reservation life in “Indian Territory.” Diverse content benefits not only the primary readers but also other audiences, whether it’s a Bible or another work, whether nonfiction or fiction.

As members of Christ’s body, we may not comprehend all the reasons certain audiences desire distinctive wording — to hear His words to us in our “own language,” as at Pentecost. However, we share the desire for stories from encountering Him. From a Christian’s point of view, welcoming diversity is simply welcoming others as we want to be welcomed and included. Diverse audiences’ desire for content that resonates and adheres to biblical wisdom while being distinctive is appropriate. You can deliver that.

Historic Black denominational publishing has been a mainstay to serve their millions of adherents. Other independent publishing ministries dedicate their efforts to partner with diverse denominations and authors.

In Spanish-language publishing in the United States, major publishers are seeking to fill the gaps in diverse content available by building their acquisitions, audiences, and distribution not only in the US but in connection with global distributors.³

There is a long list of books authored by Asian-American Christians as publishing makes room for the Asian stories anchored in Christ.⁴

Some Bible publishers and global ministries have the bandwidth to invest in titles diverse audiences desire. From my experience, publishers may do so as long as the resources do not distract from or expose their majority-White content development to backlash. Many Christian publishers have limited development of culturally appropriate content, though this content actually serves to broaden audiences.

The terms *culturally appropriate* and *contextual* are helpful in publishing conversations. Contextualization is at the foundation of North American Christianity. We worship in different church communities based on congregants’ identifiable culture and historic experiences. However, many Christian believers are committed to growing multiethnic churches and ministries out of a recognition of the beauty of diversity and the biblical basis for it (see Revelation 7:9).

Making an argument about audiences’ needs and numbers is part of the conversation since publishing is always about numbers-and-audience needs.

This “numbers” rationale is of greater importance to publishers than an author’s pure passion.

In my book *Not Easily Broken*,⁵ coauthored with my husband, our initial plan was to contribute a work on Black love. After additional research, our publisher chose to position, categorize, and promote the book to all readers. Though we include testimonies primarily from African American, Hispanic, and African people, the book’s biblical principles cross over diverse audiences’ needs the publisher and this content are meant to serve.

It’s Profitable

Though industry reports continue to show publishing’s lack of diversity overall from leadership to staffing to authors and titles,⁶ diverse ethnic authors are being agented and acquired because audiences support their work. Some are writing award-winning fiction and nonfiction that sells.

My household buys more books than clothing. Alongside Bibles and Bible resources that live in our rooms, there are multiple, short stacks of old and recent purchases: Black history books, social justice commentaries, and select fiction authored by African Americans. Many diverse people are buying many books, including children’s picture books. I especially enjoy those with ethnic representation. Books written for kids own rows on my library shelves. As an adult, the imagery captivates me due to the absence of diverse imagery from publishing houses’ books and from libraries. Throughout my childhood, I experienced its rarity in stores. Content recently banned in some states’ schools and from federal sites (productions about historical figures like Ruby Bridges) also find a home in my collection.

And I believe we will continue to see growth in diverse publishing alongside growing US populations; a greater percentage of younger audiences identify as multiethnic. In the 2020 Census, the population identifying as “White” decreased from 2010, with the fastest growing populations identified as Hispanic, and Asian.

In 2019, children of color constituted more than half of the child population in 15 states and more than two-fifths of the child population in an additional 11. In several southern states ranging from Louisiana to Virginia, Black children make up the largest

nonwhite share; however, in a number of states in the West (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada) and South (Texas and Florida) Latino or Hispanic children are highly represented. . . .

The rise of children of color is a key element of the changing demographics of America's child population.⁷

My own publishing career proves diverse audiences welcome diverse content — and that you can flourish. I have taken part in publishing board conversations and continue to watch and pray. Your perseverance encourages me!

We need to write what He gives us even as others' inquiries may persist in protest: *Who really needs what you're writing? What's so special about what you have to say? And why does contextualizing content to embrace diverse audiences matter?* The research is clear and persistent that our content matters to large audiences of diverse people. And as I said, the Holy Spirit is “greasing” the way. God is orchestrating.

A publisher recently asked about Bibles I've personally worked on. God has given me the privilege of developing content designed specifically for African American men, women, and children, as well as nonfiction Christian Living books, and other literature in Spanish. I've worked on curriculum and books designed for multiethnic and multicultural audiences, as well as for White ethnic audiences.

Audience research has and continues to support publishers' content creation when it comes to diverse audiences. Gallup Research, Barna Research, Pew Research, and more cite ethnic audiences' continued growth, and the American Bible Society reports audiences that long for biblical content.⁸ That's why publishers have produced those Bibles aimed at men, women, and children who are diverse, including children's picture Bibles. (However, the content developers I've worked with yet struggle to provide authentic biblical imagery of the diverse biblical peoples, to portray them as they were.)

Publishers have shifted some to contract diverse contributors in order to design Bibles and curriculum and to acquire more content for books, podcasts, and other resources that serve diverse readers.

Though colonization robbed the majority of many First Nations Tribes of their lives and languages, at the right time, God brought together a council of First Nations people who have persevered to pursue production of “Sacred Scripture in a Native Voice.”⁹ Christian publishers do have an ethical obligation, but it’s also simply good business given growing, diverse audiences.

It’s Personal

I have often used this anonymous quote to pinpoint why we need diverse books: “If you’ve never seen yourself in a book, it’s as if you never existed.” I treasure diverse content because, in my childhood and youth, in college and graduate school, and throughout my years parenting and serving, I have searched for dignified diversity apart from caricatures and fake stories. Rarely could I find it. Often quoted Ohio University education professor Rudine Sims Bishop reported,

When children can’t find themselves in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. . . .

In this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children may meet people *unlike* themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world — a dangerous ethnocentrism.¹⁰

I treasure diverse Christian content because of marginalization. Because inauthentic biblical iconography offended my family to the extent that we did not feel welcome at any church that displayed it. I missed the treasure of God’s Word in books, and finally heard the gospel as an adult. I can only imagine how having the treasure of diverse Christian content you’re creating would have had an impact. I support you.

Conclusion

All are enriched by God's wisdom. I have reported on the reasons the publishing industry has fallen short of matching God's enthusiasm for diversity in presentations at conferences and publishing meetings. The conference I've served for a decade and now own, Publishing in Color,¹¹ continues to expand and expound on the conversation about opening our field so those identifying as First Nations, African American, Hispanic, Asian American, and "others" can grow, write, and publish too.

I often share not only the statistics but the story about how I spent decades searching for your words — the right words in right resources — without finding them. I pray this book equips and encourages you. Your timely words from God are treasure meant to be shared with all readers who would see, hear, and be touched by God working through you. His truths in your writing are better "than thousands of pieces of silver and gold" (Psalm 119:72).

So bring the wealth of His wisdom through words and perspectives He has given to tell His stories and reflect His glory. Our writing matters; our publishing missives are gifts meant to reach an array of recipients. It is always the right time for the right word you can give. Because everyone needs God's wisdom. Publish, proclaim, tell your stories. God commands us to go and tell everyone, and He will always give reason for the hope that lies within (see Matthew 28:20; 1 Peter 3:15).

¹ Henrietta Mears, *What the Bible Is All About* (Regal Books, 1997), 1.

² F. Douglas Powe Jr., *Just Us or Justice?: Moving Toward a Pan-Methodist Theology* (Abingdon, 2009).

³ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Religion Publishers See Growth in Spanish-Language Books," *Publishers Weekly*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/93101-religion-publishers-see-growth-in-spanish-language-books.html>.

⁴ Kathryn Post, "In 'Learning Our Names,' Asian American Christian Authors Reclaim Their Stories," Religion News Service (RNS), September 6, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/09/06/in-learning-our-names-asian-american-christian-authors-reclaim-their-stories>.

⁵ Joyce and Steven Dinkins, *Not Easily Broken: Wisdom for Dating and Marriage with Christ at the Center* (Our Daily Bread Ministries, 2026).

⁶ James Tager and Christine Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf, “Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity, and Book Publishing,” PEN America, October 17, 2022, <https://pen.org/report/reading-between-the-lines>.

⁷ William H. Frey, “The Demographic Case for Investing in America’s Children,” Brookings Institution, March 1, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-demographic-case-for-investing-in-americas-children/>.

⁸ American Bible Society, State of the Bible Report: USA 2025, 2025, <https://sotb.americanbible.org>.

⁹ Terry M. Wildman, “About Rain Ministries,” <https://firstnationsversion.com/about/>.

¹⁰ Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (1990): 9–11.

¹¹ More information about Publishing in Color is available at <https://publishingincolor.com/>.



Freeing Up Your Writing Voice(s)

PATRICIA RAYBON

The truth will set you free.

John 8:32

They were young and White, and I wasn't. This was on a college campus, and I was a new professor, recently hired to teach newspaper journalism to college sophomores, among others, who looked as unsure about themselves as I felt.

"Let's do introductions," I told them on that early September afternoon. I was seeking to warm up the room, trying to create an icebreaker for my course, News Writing and Reporting. But my newness to teaching news writing, after years of doing the actual job, probably looked more obvious than I wanted.

Maybe a moment to introduce ourselves would help me teach writing and help the students learn it. I pointed to a wide-eyed young woman with dyed purple hair and a nose ring. "Who are you? Tell us."

"I'm a sophomore."

I sighed. *Right, you are.*

"But from where?"

"LA."

Or did she say Chicago? Or Kansas City? Or Colorado Springs? I can't remember, because she was saying what every other student ended up saying that afternoon: *I'm a sophomore from (fill in the blank).*

This was an on-the-surface introduction, telling us a paltry detail that should've had potential. Being from LA can mean many things. Same with Chicago, Kansas City, or almost anywhere. Every place on the globe means something, especially when introducing ourselves.

But none of the students mined deeper ground. Their answers were thin and empty, as if they were sleepwalking through their insights of who they were or how they landed in my classroom on a September afternoon.

Or maybe I was asking the question wrong, not provoking them to wake up to truths of how God made them and why that mattered — especially to their writing.

I scanned the room of young students, noticing a few were actually older — closer to my age which, at that time, was a hair past forty (and counting). Regardless of age, I walked to the whiteboard, ready to grab their attention.

“This is a writing class. Let’s start our introductions again.” I grabbed a marker. “I’ll start with myself. Who am I? What do you think?”

“A professor?” one tossed an answer at me.

“Sometimes,” I told them. “But for starters, I’m a wife.” I wrote that on the board. *Wife*.

A few looked confused. Bemused? *Wife* wasn’t what they expected their journalism instructor to say.

“I’ve been married seventeen years,” I told them. “Well, on a good day, I’ve been married seventeen years.” They laughed. So I wrote more.

Mother:

“I have two daughters — half sisters. We’re a ‘blended’ family, as it’s called. So that means, what? I’ve been married once before. In fact, yes, I’ve been this. My husband, too.” I wrote the word.

Divorced.

Students shifted in their seats. Some looked awkward, nervous, embarrassed. But all looked intrigued. So I tested them. “Want to hear more?”

“Yes!” Several called out and all nodded. Slowly, they seemed to start seeing where I was going. That the person a writer is — depending on the day, hour, week, or year — is never one thing. In fact, the deeper thing

might be hidden, like my history of divorce. In fact, the answer to *Who am I* — for a writer — can have multiple meanings. So, humbly, I identified multiple voices I’ve given to my writing. It’s this honest variety that can give writers durable careers, taking our many voices on surprising, compelling journeys — and landing our writing in, for example, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Country Living*, *Guideposts*, Tyndale House Publishers, *In Touch Magazine*, *Our Daily Bread*, and much more.

So my list continued, getting longer with each voice I added to the whiteboard. I was showing my class a skill that would never let them down — knowing thyself, as Shakespeare would put it. Or, to quote a line from his play *Hamlet*, “This above all: to thine own self be true.” Adds the character Polonius, “And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”¹

Sadly, Polonius didn’t follow his own advice. Otherwise, he’d have known that leaning into our own truth leads us to the right doors to open, for ourselves but also for God.

First we must know, however, that writing at its heart is about two things: truth and courage. Having the guts to tell our own distinct truth, no matter how uncomfortable or shocking, turns out to be a keenly direct way to unearth our best writing.

My scrawled list on my classroom’s whiteboard was my own attempt to show students how “knowing thyself” opens our eyes to all the people we are, and to all the stories those voices represent. That’s especially key when readers haven’t seen a voice like yours. Or haven’t known it even existed. As renowned author Margaret Atwood says through the character Offred in her daring novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories.”²

Writing from such gaps matters for published authors whether we’re using a life voice in our nonfiction, an authorial or stylistic voice in our fiction, or a character’s voice (as Atwood did in her novel). Even for voices that, to us, may seem small or insignificant. So I added such a voice to my list on the board.

Little sister.

I'm the youngest of two siblings, as I told my students. The "baby" of my family. I chuckled. "Any baby sisters or baby brothers in the class today?"

They laughed. Being the youngest sibling can mean a host of things in a family — taking lots of heat or getting away with mischief, depending on the family dynamic. I told them a family story about trying one day to blame some silly trouble on my big sister. But she was sharp as a tack, turning my story on its head so I got the blame. (And the spanking.) I had written about the incident in a memoir, prompting my sister and me to take another look, years later, at what had happened.

"But what about you?" I asked the students. "What's your best family story?"

Hands shot up, and soon we were talking about their family drama — including love, hate, trouble, triumph, joy, jealousy, and everything in between. The stories were entertaining.

"But have you written about these things?" I asked.

"Can we?" one student asked.

"You'd better." I cocked my head. "Your voices comprise your secret treasure trove. Your writing voice, instead of being one thing, is many things — reflecting each of your many identities. So look at another one of mine."

African American. I wrote it deliberately on the board.

In a class with only White students, the room grew still.

So I asked a question: "When you walked in the classroom today and saw me for the first time, did you see this identity? Tell me honestly."

It took a while, but one student finally chimed in. "I signed up for the class, but I didn't know you were Black. So I was surprised, to be honest, when I saw you. But, yes, the fact that you're Black, that's the first thing I noticed."

"Then what? How did you feel about me being Black?" I gave her a look. "To be honest."

"I didn't know how I should feel. Unsure. Worried. Not sure about your qualifications — "

"To be honest."

“Right.”

I searched her eyes. “You could write about that. About your surprise to see me — somebody Black — as your teacher. And your feelings about that.” I smiled at her. “So, you’d be writing from one of your voices — as a young White woman. Have you used that voice before?”

“Never.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think of myself like that — ”

“Like what?”

“In terms of race.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure — ”

“Have you written about that?”

She had not. Several others confessed to having that same point of view — leading to a detour to talk about race in America. As well, however, our introductions in class that day deepened our discussion about who any of us fully is — and how, for writers like us, each one “person” is a writing voice waiting to step forward and shout. If we’ll let our voices speak.

That was the point, in fact, of my icebreaker. That as writers, we’re not just one person with one voice. One limited identity. Trapped in a box — writing, or struggling to write, about the same, single-focused thing over and over again.

So our voices also aren’t our distinctive writing style. What’s yours? Sassy. Serious. Intense. Calm. Southern. Global. Angry. Quiet. No matter our primary writing style, we can use it smartly to write our life’s different voices.

When my children were small, for example, I wrote countless “mom” pieces — selling them to Christian and secular publications for editors who enjoyed what they described as my reflective writing style.

It’s a style that has kept me working for decades, writing in my different voices — wife, neighbor, friend, news journalist, journalism professor, African American, woman, and more — serving different audiences, publishers, publications, and purposes. Writers who deploy their voices in this manner rarely run out of ideas, staying open to the defining nature of

voices — they change. The person I was at twenty was deeply different by age thirty and beyond. The mom essays I adored writing when my children were young became urgently different when I was a mom of teens, or now as a mother and grandmother of adults.

Still, a thread will run through many of the articles and essays we each write. For my students, I finally wrote the name of my key thread.

Christian.

“It’s the most important thing about me,” I said. In fact, at the state university where I was teaching, being a follower of Christ wasn’t an identity I should’ve mentioned.

“But I wonder,” I said. “If my faith is so important to me, why isn’t it the first thing on my list?”

“Gee, you could write about that,” one of my students said.

I agreed. I was almost born on a pew. Grew up in the church. Love the Lord. Know the Bible. Love the Christian life. So why isn’t that top of my list — instead of *Wife*? Or *Divorced* and now remarried. How did all that beat out *Christian*?

I could’ve skipped past such questions. But to dig deeper would show my writing students that our deepest writing voices often point us to our hardest but best work. So we have to fight to use those voices, even when others try to muzzle them.

As Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes said, the writing life, more than anything, “is a struggle against silence. A writer hates silence.”³ It may seem easier — and safer — to stay silent about our truest selves. Or we can go to our keyboards and pound out the truth about our deepest realities, finding rich creativity to tap for a lifetime.

As Maya Angelou said, “You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.”⁴

Then, if we’re brave writers, we can do as W. E. B. Du Bois, author of *The Souls of Black Folk*, urged in his essay collection, *Darkwater*: “Thicken the thunders of man’s voice, and lo! A world awakes.”⁵ Indeed, as famed jazz poet Langston Hughes put it, “If anyone’s gonna write about me, I reckon it’ll be Me myself.”⁶

Thus, Chester Himes, a pioneer of Black detective fiction, confessed in his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, his many warts and all. As he said, “My feelings are too intense. I hate too bitterly, I love too exaltingly, I pity too extravagantly, I hurt too painfully. We American blacks call that ‘soul.’”⁷ To that end, I invited my students to turn inward to consider their own souls by answering anew these questions: *Who are you? What voices step forth from all the people you are?*

I was thrilled at their discoveries. “I’m a flower child,” one student said, looking surprised. “My parents were hippies. I grew up in the mountains with no running water or indoor toilets.”

Had she shared that in her writing? “I didn’t think I should. But after today, I see it’s the most important thing about me.”

Another student was “a product of divorce.”

It’s her top-of-the-list voice, awakened when her parents split “when I was three years old.” She was forever changed by her parents’ breakup, she said, willing only now to own that as a writing voice, among others she wanted to face.

What, then, does honoring multiple writing voices teach us? I put the question to my students, then offered to answer it.

“We see our complexity. But these layers are true for us, and they’re true for everybody — including the people you’ll interview in your life as journalists.”

Interviewing a city’s mayor about a hotly debated city budget? Probe to discover what else is happening in her life, and maybe driving her view. Or doing a man-on-the-street interview after a major election, a devastating flood, a big football game, a hot cultural trend?

“Some writers,” I told them, “will ask a question or two about the obvious and then walk away. But knowing now there’s more under the surface in you, isn’t that true for everybody else too?”

For me, I’m facing that hard truth with my latest new voice.

Widow.

It’s not a voice I saw coming. I didn’t even like the word, to be honest. True, we find “widow” in the Bible an astonishing eighty-plus times, including God’s cautions to care for “orphans and widows.” I never guessed, however, until the summer of 2025, that being a widow can feel

like that — being orphaned. True, we're not, the Lord promises. "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling" (Psalm 68:5). But after my husband Dan died in the ICU on a June day in 2025, I honestly felt abandoned. I knew I wasn't. Dan was in glory with Jesus, a glorious triumph.

But when he took his last breath and, for him, his life on earth ended, part of my life on earth seemed to end too. But would I write about that?

I had walked with Dan as his wife for forty-nine years. What a shock to find myself no longer married. That's the legal status of a widow: suddenly single. But could I write about that?

As God's writers, we are asked to trust Him to know we can speak from even our hardest narratives. Why? Each new voice — born from changes in our lives — will mean God is inviting us to trust Him with the new voice He allowed. My husband is gone to his heavenly rest. But God is still with me here, proving His faithfulness every remarkable day.

And that's my most important voice yet.

One who trusts Him.

Trusting, yes, in the storm, and through the rain, and through sickness, fire, and pain. Will you and I write from such a voice?

We had better. Because Jesus was right. The truth *will* set you free. Then, with each new voice, we can be true to the truth that God is great — especially when we need Him most. Oh, what a story. May our voices write each one. How? Brave and true and well.

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act 1, scene 3, <https://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.1.3.html>.

² Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986), 57.

³ William K. Robertson, "A Latin Author's Distinctive Vision: Carlos Fuentes and the Politics of the Write," *The Miami Herald*, November 13, 1987, 2E.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Elliot, ed., *Conversations with Maya Angelou* (University Press of Mississippi, 1989), x.

⁵ W. E. B. DuBois, “The Riddle of the Sphinx” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 55.

⁶ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 381.

⁷ Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt: The Autobiography of Chester Himes, vol. 1* (Doubleday, 1972), 351.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>