

Welcome! ¡Bienvenidos!

Warm greetings! I'm writing you from my home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and am looking out at the piñon-and-juniper-covered hills. How I wish you were here and that we were chatting face-to-face. Because good educators are creative, adept at the art of teaching, it's not surprising that some of you confide your interest in writing, painting, or photography. You ask about how I began writing. What's my process?

Your questions prompted me to think and now to write about my life and habits as a writer, speaker, educator, and advocate, to write about the zing of creating. "Zing"? I've long loved the sound and energy of this word that sings, which means zest, vitality, energy. In these letters to you, I want to share some stories and strategies and to propose seven practices I've learned that can assist us to develop our personal creativity and professional inventiveness. The letter about each practice is followed by a companion letter on nurturing the same habit in our students, suggestions for imaginative teaching.

During my school years, I grumbled about book reports, tests, and writing assignments (about memorizing prepositions and diagramming compound-complex sentences!), but early in life, I discovered *bookjoy*. Bookjoy, *la alegría en los libros*, the pure pleasure of reading, is one of my mother's many gifts to me. When I was a little girl in my hometown of El Paso, Texas, I savored poetry, biographies, *Heidi*, Nancy Drew, books by Louisa May Alcott and Laura Ingalls Wilder. How I looked forward to the time when my teachers would read a book aloud to us.

Year after year, I read, a habit that feels natural and essential as breathing. Without a book or magazine, I'll read cereal boxes, tiny words on packets of artificial sweetener. I wouldn't be me without books that have helped me savor and understand the world. Steadily,

books made me proud to be part of the same species as the authors, to wonder how they made their language shine.

When my three children were young, we read Mother Goose, Beatrix Potter, Little Bear, Frances, and Richard Scary books, stories by E. B. White and Maurice Sendak. All were—and are—our wild and wonderful loves. I'd occasionally muster the courage in those years to submit an essay, poem, or children's book for publication, but the rejections zipped back at a startling speed. I kept reading.

Then one day, I saw a magazine ad: white paint, on black bricks, words by the Spanish writer Cervantes, "By the street of by and by, you arrive at the house of never." I stopped, clipped the words, pasted them on my spice cabinet where I knew I'd see them when I rolled pastry for a cherry pie or grated cheese for red chile enchiladas. The age of forty was coming at me. Could I make writing a regular part of my life? The wonderful language from all the years of reading welled up; I wanted to explore sounds and notions on the page. So what practices have I learned?

An undramatic word, "practice," a sturdiness to it, faith in wise repetition.

Dancers, lawyers, scientists, musicians, inventors, physicians, and carvers—all practice. I'll use writing as my main example, but these practices assist with all kinds of creative endeavors.

Seven Creativity Practices

1. Value your creative self
2. Enjoy quiet
3. Gather your materials
4. Begin your project
5. Revise
6. Share your creations
7. Steadily persist in your creative work

In one sense, all adults are teachers. By our example, we influence others. Physicians and veterinarians educate their clients. At museums, zoos, aquariums, and community centers, staff members offer informal education. Most of the librarians and teachers I write about in these letters work in classrooms and libraries at all levels. In varying

ways, the national community of educators invests its life in the next generation. I hope you know how important you are whether you work with children, teens, or adults. Teachers are powerful people in your classrooms and in society. And what a challenge you've chosen. By your example, how do you educate your students to be imaginative, literate, critical thinkers and lifelong learners? How do you guide them to be engaged, responsible, hardworking members of our democracy and our world?

Dedicated, effective teachers are wise community leaders. Treasures.

My teachers gave and give me so many gifts, my own teachers and you—the librarians and teachers who teach me now as I observe you and listen to you. This book of letters is a small thank-you.