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The blank screen and the blinking cursor: for most of us, the hardest moment in the writing process is getting started. To get that cursor moving, you need to have something to say, something of interest to others. But how do you just start off being interesting? Where do interesting thoughts come from? It's a mystery—or so it seems.

The three essays in this section discuss how to begin using *Habits of the Creative Mind* to unpack this mystery. The first essay introduces learning's central paradox: when we begin to learn something new, we simultaneously have to unlearn something familiar. A beginning is also an ending. In unlearning formulaic approaches to writing pseudo-arguments, you will be on your way to learning how to think seriously about open-ended questions.

The second and third essays discuss how to use your writing to confront what is unknown to you. In some cases, this process will involve choosing to read and write about topics that are unfamiliar. In other cases, it will involve finding ways to join an ongoing conversation among experts. In every case, you will have to contend with moments of confusion and uncertainty. The more you practice confronting what is unknown to you, the more comfortable you'll become with questions that confront all kinds of complexity and with answers that never settle things once and for all.

On Unlearning

When students enter our writing classes, they often bring with them a set of rules from high school that they use to define good writing. They know that every paragraph should start with a topic sentence that states the main point of the paragraph. And they know that all good essays have five sections or paragraphs: an introduction that states the essay's thesis; three descriptive body paragraphs, each of which discusses a different example that supports the essay's thesis; and a conclusion that restates what has been said in the previous sections. And finally, they are certain that no good essay ever uses the word *I*.

I—or rather we—suspect you know these rules well, since they've been repeated in writing classrooms for decades, with good grades going to those who follow them. But do they *really* produce good writing? Think about it: When was the last time you ran across a five-paragraph essay outside of school? Try looking for one in a news source, a magazine, a book, or even a collection of essays. You might find a modified version of one in an op-ed piece, but most of the writing you find will be organized quite differently. The five-paragraph essay, it turns out, is a very limited form, one best suited to the work of making simple claims and reporting or describing supporting evidence. (It's also easy to skim and easy to grade.)

In college classes, professors often expect students' writing to do a kind of work that is simply beyond the reach of the five-paragraph essay: contending with complexity. You may have had a professor who asked you to develop an argument by working with a handful of original sources, each with a competing point of view; or to support a new interpretation of a text not discussed in class; or to synthesize a semester's worth of lectures into a thoughtful reflection on a complex problem. When professors compose assignments like these, they assume you know how to use your writing to grapple with a genuine problem, puzzle, or question related to a course; they assume you've got something else in your quiver besides the formula for the five-paragraph theme.

So why don't we just give you a new set of rules, one that is capacious enough to provide directions for handling the range of writing tasks

college students confront—the response paper in introductory history, the seminar project in advanced economics, the seven-to-eight-page argument for a 300-level psychology or politics or anthropology class? As appealing as that solution is, it's not available to us, because there's not one set of rules for generating good writing that works within any single discipline, let alone across multiple disciplines. The reason for this is not that any judgment of writing quality is inevitably arbitrary, as is often supposed, but rather that writing quality is always a function of context. Thus, what makes for a good paper in a literature class doesn't always make for a good paper in a history class or an econ class, or perhaps even in another literature class taught by a different professor.

How, then, does anyone in any discipline learn how to write about complex challenges? The first step involves unlearning the rules that are at the core of the five-paragraph essay. Taking that first step may seem impossible. We can't unlearn how to walk or how to talk. These habits are so deeply ingrained that a catastrophe of some kind (either psychological or physical) is required to unseat them. And we can't unlearn how to ride a bike or how to swim; we may forget how to over time, but when we return to these activities after a long hiatus, our challenge is not to learn how to do them as if for the first time, but to remember what's involved in keeping the bicycle upright or our body afloat and moving through the water.

Writing is unlike these other activities because each act of writing is not a straightforward repetition of what you've done before. Writing something new requires that you make choices about why you're writing, whom you're writing for, what you think, and what you want your writing to accomplish. So when we say you should unlearn what you learned about writing in school, we mean that we want you to actively resist the idea that writing is governed by a set of universal rules that, if followed, will clearly communicate the writer's ideas to the reader. We can't tell you to forget what you've learned (that would have the same paradoxical effect as telling you not to think about an elephant); and we can't say you shouldn't have been taught the rules governing the five-paragraph essay because, within an educational system dominated by the industry of standardized testing, you must be able to demonstrate that you can produce writing that follows those rules. Rather, we are asking you to question the two assumptions behind the formula for the five-paragraph essay: first,

that the primary purpose of writing is to produce irrefutable arguments; and second, that the best writing is immediately understandable by all.

What do we propose in place of these assumptions? That you practice the habits of mind experienced writers exercise when they compose. Experienced writers tend to be curious and attentive. They choose to engage deeply with sources, ideas, people, and the world they live in. They are mentally flexible, self-reflective, and open to new ways of thinking, attributes that allow them to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances and problems. And they are persistent, resisting distraction and disappointment, accepting the fact that writing what hasn't been written before is hard work. When you commit yourself to practicing these habits—curiosity, attentiveness, openness, flexibility, reflectiveness, and persistence—you will also be committing yourself to making a habit of creativity, the practice of inventing novel and useful connections, compelling ideas, and thoughtful prose. As you delve into *Habits of the Creative Mind*, you'll see that we've designed the book to give you practice developing these habits. As you work your way through the book, you won't be working toward mastery of a formula for good writing; you'll be working on developing the habits of mind that increase your sensitivity to context and that allow you to use your writing to explore the unknown. You'll be practicing using your writing to show to others and yourself how your mind—not *any* mind, not *every* mind—works on a problem.

Practice Session One

Reflecting

When we tell students to unlearn the writing rules they learned in high school, they often ask for something—anything—to put in the place of those rules. We start our students on a path toward developing curious and creative habits of mind by telling them that their writing should show their minds at work on a problem. But what does that look like on the page?

Before you can answer that question for yourself, you need to know what kind of thinker you are. How does *your* mind work? What are your mental habits? How do you know? To answer these questions, pay attention over the course of a week to how you write and how you read.

Take notes every day on *everything* you read and write (not just in school or for school). Pay attention to all the times you process words: reading a page,

a sign, a cereal box, the screen of a phone or a computer; writing a note, a Facebook post, a text message, a school assignment, a journal entry. For each instance, take note of where and when you read or wrote. Was it quiet? Were you moving? Were you alone?

At the end of the week, consider the following questions and spend at least 30 minutes composing a reflective response about what you've observed. Is the way you read and write better described as a set of rules or as a set of habits? Whichever option you choose, explain why. If you were to teach someone to read and write *the way you do*, how would you do it? What standards would apply?

Practice Session Two

Reading

Select one of the readings included in this book and read it with an eye toward seeing the habits of the writer's mind at work on the page. Read the text through once and then review it, identifying evidence of the writer's habits of mind. Where do you see signs of curiosity, attentiveness, openness, flexibility, reflectiveness, persistence, and creativity?

Next, spend at least 30 minutes jotting down notes about the habits of mind on display in the reading you selected. What do the examples you've found tell you about how the writer thinks?

Writing

The reading you chose to work with is obviously not a five-paragraph theme, and not just because it has far more than five paragraphs! Review the reading again and think about other ways the writer breaks what you thought were rules of writing. Then write an essay that considers why the writer made some surprising choices, writing in ways you thought were discouraged, or at least risky. What do these choices tell you about the writer's habits of mind?

EXPLORE

Can curiosity and creativity be learned? Unlearned? Relearned? Francine Prose recalls learning to write—outside school—by becoming a close and careful reader. In two TED videos, Ken Robinson laments the value placed on standardization and conformity in schools in the United States and United

Kingdom and asks us to reimagine schools as environments that cultivate curiosity and creativity.

Prose, Francine. "Close Reading: Learning to Write by Learning to Read." *Atlantic*. 1 Aug. 2006. Web.

Robinson, Ken. "How Schools Kill Creativity." TED. Feb. 2006. Web.

———. "How to Escape Education's Death Valley." TED. April 2013. Web.

On Confronting the Unknown

In his book *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, Laurence Gonzales recounts the story of seventeen-year-old Juliane Koepcke who was seated next to her mother on a flight with ninety other passengers when the plane was struck by lightning, causing it to go into a nosedive. The next thing Koepcke recalled was being outside the plane, still strapped into her seat, hurtling earthward towards the canopy of the Peruvian jungle.

What would you think if you were in her place at that moment? What strikes Gonzales is Koepcke's recollection of her thoughts as she fell. Her mind was not filled with shrieking terror, or a hastily pulled together prayer, or feelings of regret. No, Koepcke remembered "thinking that the jungle trees below looked just like cauliflowers." She was moving into her new reality. She passed out while still falling, and when she regained consciousness sometime later, she was on the ground, still strapped into her chair. Her collarbone was broken. There was no sign of anyone else. She decided that the planes and helicopters she could hear flying above would never be able to see her because of the thickness of the tree canopy so she began to walk out of the jungle.

Central to Gonzales's thesis about resiliency is that those who survive a life-threatening crisis see the future as unmapped. Thus Koepcke, falling two miles upside down through a storm, didn't think the obvious thought—that her future was already clearly mapped out. Instead, she was struck by the appearance of the Peruvian forest from above. And when she came to later, having crashed through the canopy, she didn't think—or didn't only think—the obvious thought about what lay ahead for a seventeen-year-old girl without her glasses, walking alone in a jungle, barefoot, slapping the ground with her one remaining shoe to frighten off the snakes that she couldn't see well enough to avoid. She walked for eleven days while she was, as Gonzales described it, "being literally eaten alive by leeches and strange tropical insects." On the eleventh day, Koepcke found a hut and collapsed inside. The next day, as chance would have it, three hunters came by, discovered her, and got her to a doctor.

Gonzales is interested in this question: Why did Koepcke survive this crash, while "the other survivors took the same eleven days to sit down and die"? Gonzales identifies a number of reasons, besides blind luck, for Koepcke's survival. First, rather than follow rules, she improvised. Second, although she was afraid, as the other survivors surely were, she used that fear as a resource for action. And third, while many better-equipped travelers have succumbed to much lesser challenges, Koepcke had "an inner resource, a state of mind" that allowed her to make do with what the moment offered.

As Gonzales pursues his research further, he finds other traits that resilient people share in common: they use fear to focus their thoughts; they find humor in their predicaments; they remain positive. The list goes on, but the item that most interests us is Gonzales's admonition that to survive a crisis, one must "see the beauty" in the new situation:

> Survivors are attuned to the wonder of the world. The appreciation of beauty, the feeling of awe, opens the senses. When you see something beautiful, your pupils actually dilate. This appreciation not only relieves stress and creates strong motivation, but it allows you to take in new information more effectively.

After we read this, it was hard not to ask: If it's possible for someone to be attuned to the wonder of the world when confronted by a situation that is *life threatening*, could writers in far less dire circumstances cultivate this attunement as a habit of mind?

Here's why this connection suggested itself to us: from our years teaching writing, we know how terrifying and humbling the confrontation with the blank screen and the flashing cursor can be—for beginning writers and experienced writers alike. This confrontation is not life threatening, of course, but it can nevertheless trigger fears: Do I have anything worth saying? Can I make myself understood? Will the struggle with the blank screen be worth it in the end? These questions arise because the act of writing, when used as a technology for thinking new thoughts, takes us to the edge of our own well-marked path and points to the uncharted realms beyond.

Ultimately, each time a writer sits down to write, he or she chooses just how far to venture into that unknown territory. To our way of thinking, the writing prompt, properly conceived, is an invitation to embark into unmapped worlds, to improvise, to find unexpected beauty in the challenges that arise. We know from experience, though, that learning to approach writing this way takes practice, and that without such practice, the writing produced in response to a prompt tends to reject whatever is unfamiliar and huddle around whatever is obvious and easiest to defend.

We have designed the prompts in this book to help you use your writing to bring you to the edge of your understanding, to a place where you encounter what is unknown to you. The more you practice using your writing in this way, the further you will be able to take your explorations; you'll find yourself moving from writing about what is unknown to you to what is more generally unknown, and then to what is unknowable. Making this journey again and again is the essence of the examined life; the writing you do along the way tracks your ongoing encounter with the complexity of human experience. The more you do it, the more you know; and the more you know, the more connections you can make as you work through your next encounter with what is unknown to you. You'll never make it to absolute knowledge, but the more you practice, the more comfortable you'll be with saying, "I don't know, but I'm sure I can figure it out."

Or so we say.

We can pose our position as a challenge: Can you make your writing trigger an inner journey that is akin to falling from a plane over the Amazon, with everything that seemed solid and certain just moments ago suddenly giving way, question leading to question, until you land on the fundamental question, "What do I know with certainty?"

We all can count on being faced with challenges of comparable magnitude over the course of our lives—the death of a loved one; the experience of aging, disease, separation, and suffering; a crisis in faith; a betrayal of trust. Writing, properly practiced, is one way to cultivate the habits of mind found in those who are resilient in moments of crisis: openness, optimism, calm, humor, and delight in beauty.

Practice Session One

Writing

One could say that seeing the future as unmapped is something children do, and that part of growing up is learning to have reasonable expectations about what the future holds. What interests Gonzales is how a person responds, regardless of his or her age, when disaster strikes. When the plane you're on splits in half miles above the Earth, it's reasonable to assume that your future is mapped: you are going to die. Gonzales's contention is that those who respond to disaster by suspending that sense that the future is known have, perhaps paradoxically, a better chance of surviving.

The thing is, you don't know how you're going to respond to hugely significant and unexpected events until they happen. What is the most unexpected event that has taken place in your life so far? What made it unexpected? How did you respond to this confrontation with the unknown? In the event, did you settle into the moment, or did your sense of what the future held remain constant and unshaken?

Spend at least an hour writing a profile of how you responded to the unexpected. Feel free to discuss what you would do differently if given another chance, knowing now what you didn't know then.

Practice Session Two

Reflecting

The kinds of crises that interest Gonzales have a cinematic quality to them: planes split apart in midair; a hiker is trapped, miles from anyone else, with his arm pinned by a boulder; a mountain climber dangles over the edge of a cliff, his partner unable to pull him to safety. (Indeed, the last two cases have been made into major motion pictures.) But writers rarely find themselves in predicaments of this kind; their crises tend to be internal and to center on getting to the heart of a matter, finding a way to express a fugitive truth, struggling to put a new thought into words.

What has been the most striking event in your *mental* life? A crisis of faith? An existential crisis? A realization that your way of thinking about love or friendship, truth or beauty, justice or politics, or any other of the concepts that are central to human experience was grounded in a false assumption? How did

you respond to this confrontation with the unknown? What happened to your experience of time while this event unfolded? Did you find yourself living from moment to moment, or did your sense of what the future held remain clear?

Spend at least an hour writing a profile of how you responded to the most striking event in your mental life. Feel free to discuss what you would do differently if given another chance, knowing now what you didn't know then.

Practice Session Three

Researching

The writers whose work we've included in *Habits of the Creative Mind* can be said to use the form of the essay to confront something that is unknown to them. Choose one of these readings and write an essay that describes the writer's strategies for confronting the unknown. In tales of survival and resiliency, it is common to stress the hardships confronted and overcome, as well as acts of courage and ingenuity. If these terms strike you as out of place in a discussion of a writer grappling with a question, then provide terms of your own that you find more appropriate.

EXPLORE

What constitutes "the unknown" can take many forms. Jo Ann Beard writes about a radical change in her personal circumstances. Charles Mann imagines a world where people live to be 150 years old. Neil deGrasse Tyson discusses the edge of scientific understanding. And Amy Wallace looks at the deadly consequences of responding to life's uncertainties with inaction. Whatever form "the unknown" takes, writing about an encounter with it involves a confrontation with fear and an effort to get that fear under control.

Beard, Jo Ann. "The Fourth State of Matter." *New Yorker.* 24 June 1996. Web.

Mann, Charles C. "The Coming Death Shortage." *Atlantic.* May 2005. Web.

Tyson, Neil deGrasse. "The Perimeter of Ignorance." *Natural History.* Nov. 2005. Web.

Amy, Wallace. "An Epidemic of Fear: How Panicked Parents Skipping Shots Endangers Us All." *Wired Magazine.* 19 Oct. 2009. Web.

On Joining the Conversation

The literary critic Kenneth Burke described the exchange of academic ideas as a never-ending parlor conversation. "Imagine," he wrote,

> that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

With this extended metaphor, Burke offers us a way to think about how to write academic arguments. Preparing to write a paper about a topic that is new to you is like entering a parlor where a "heated discussion" is already taking place. For a while, all you can do is read what others have written and try to follow the debate. Then, after a bit, you begin to figure out what's being discussed and what the different positions, conflicts, and alliances are. Eventually, after you catch the "tenor" or drift of the conversation, a moment arrives when you feel you have something to contribute to the conversation, and you "put in your oar." And so you begin writing, even as you know that you won't have the last word—that no one will ever have the last word.

Doubtless, there is much about Burke's vision of academic writing that won't surprise you: to write, you need to understand what others have written about the problem or question that intrigues you, and you

must be able to represent, analyze, and synthesize those views. You also have to be interested enough in joining the conversation to develop a position of your own that responds to those sources in compelling ways. What *is* surprising about Burke's scenario is that the conversation never ends: it is "interminable." There are no decisive arguments in Burke's parlor, or even any strongly persuasive ones; there is only the ceaseless exchange of positions.

Why, it's reasonable to ask, would anyone choose to engage in a conversation without end? To answer this question, we'd like to walk you through an example of a writer working with multiple sources to explore an open-ended question.

Magazine journalist Michael Pollan writes about places where nature meets culture: "on our plates, in our farms and gardens, and in the built environment." In his article "An Animal's Place," Pollan grapples with the ideas of Peter Singer, a philosopher and the author of an influential book, *Animal Liberation*, which argues that eating meat is unethical and that vegetarianism is a moral imperative. Pollan makes his own view on meat eating clear from the very first sentence of "An Animal's Place": "The first time I opened Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium-rare." He's being purposely outrageous, dramatizing his resistance to what he knows of Singer's ideas. But he hasn't yet read *Animal Liberation* and he knows that engaging with Singer's text is going to be a challenge, because it's "one of those rare books that demands that you either defend the way you live or change it."

When Pollan opens *Animal Liberation* at his table at the Palm, he transforms the steakhouse into his own Burkean parlor. Having entered the conversation late, he tries to catch "the tenor of the argument." He discovers that Singer not only opposes eating meat but also objects to wearing fur, using animals in experiments, or killing animals for sport. While these practices may seem normal today, Singer argues that they will someday be seen as expressions of "speciesism," a belief system that values humans over all other beings, and that will be looked back upon, in Pollan's phrasing, as "a form of discrimination as indefensible as racism or anti-Semitism." At the core of Singer's book is this challenging question: "If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not

entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?"

Pollan discovers that, although Singer's ideas were far from mainstream when *Animal Liberation* was first published in 1975, Singer's campaign for animal rights has since gained many intellectual, legal, and political allies. At the time that Pollan's article was published in November 2002, German lawmakers had recently granted animals the constitutional right to be treated with respect and dignity by the state, while laws in Switzerland were being amended to change the status of animals from "things" to "beings." England had banned the farming of animals for fur, and several European nations had banned the confinement of pigs and laying hens in small crates or cages. In the United States in 2002, such reforms had not yet been addressed by legislation, but today animal rights are no longer a fringe issue.

Pollan also discovers that a crowd of scholars and writers is clustered near Singer in Burke's parlor. Among them is Matthew Scully, a political conservative and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush who wrote *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, a best seller about the routine cruelty toward animals in the United States. Also present is eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who argued that even though animals cannot reason or speak, they are owed moral consideration because they can suffer. Beside Bentham are legal scholar Steven M. Wise and the contemporary philosophers Tom Regan and James Rachels, and off to the side is novelist J. M. Coetzee, who declares that eating meat and purchasing goods made of leather and other animal products is "a crime of stupefying proportions," akin to Germans continuing with their normal lives in the midst of the Holocaust.

Pollan wants to resist Singer's insistence on the moral superiority of vegetarianism, but before he can build his argument, he needs to find his own allies in the ongoing conversation. He is intrigued by John Berger's essay "Why Look at Animals?" which argues that humans have become deeply confused about our relationship to other animals because we no longer make eye contact with most species. This helps Pollan to explain the paradox that, even as more and more people in the United States are eager to extend rights to animals, in our factory farms "we are inflicting more suffering on more animals than at any

time in history." From sources as varied as Matthew Scully's *Dominion* and farm trade magazines, Pollan learns that these farms, also known as Confined Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs, reduce animals to "production units" and subject them to a life of misery.

But these sources don't particularly help Pollan to stand up against Singer's insistence that everyone who considers eating meat must choose between "a lifetime of suffering for a nonhuman animal and the gastronomic preference of a human being." Unhappy with either option before him—to refuse to pay attention to the suffering of animals in factory farms or to stop eating animals—Pollan brings a completely new voice into the parlor: not a philosopher or a writer, but a farmer. Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farm in Virginia, raises cattle, pigs, chickens, rabbits, turkeys, and sheep on a small farm where each species, including the farmer himself, performs a unique role in the ecosystem. The cows graze in the pasture; afterward, the chickens come in and eat insect larvae and short grass; then the sheep take their turn and eat what the cows and chickens leave behind. Meanwhile, the pigs compost the cow manure in the barn. In this system, the mutual interest of humans and domestic animals is recognized, even when the animals are slaughtered for meat. In life, each animal lives according to its natural inclinations; and when it is slaughtered, its death takes place in the open. Nothing is hidden from sight. Pollan concludes that slaughtering animals, where the process can be watched is "a morally powerful idea." Salatin convinces him that animals can have respectful deaths when they are not, as they are in factory farms, "treated as a pile of protoplasm."

Pollan's visit to Polyface Farm is transformational. He decides that "what's wrong with animal agriculture—with eating animals—is the practice, not the principle." The ethical challenge, in other words, is not a philosophical issue but a practical one: Do the animals raised for meat live lives that allow them to express their natures? Do they live good lives? Pollan decides that, if he limits his consumption of meat to animals that are raised humanely, then he can eat them without ethical qualms. Pollan is so pleased with his creative solution to the problem Singer posed that he even writes to the philosopher to ask him what he thinks about the morality of eating meat that comes from farms where animals live according to their nature and appear not to suffer. Singer

holds to his position that killing an animal that "has a sense of its own existence" and "preferences for its own future" (that is, a pig, but not a chicken) is wrong, but he also admits that he would not "condemn someone who purchased meat from one of these farms."

Does this mean that Pollan has won the argument? Not really. The discussion in Burke's parlor has not ended. New voices have entered to engage with both Pollan and Singer, and new ideas have emerged about sustainability, agriculture, economics, and ethics. Curious, reflective, and open-ended thinkers continue to enter, mingle, and depart, "the discussion still vigorously in progress."

Practice Session

Reflecting

For this exercise, we'd like you to read Michael Pollan's "An Animal's Place" and think more about how he uses sources and what it means to be "in conversation" with words on a page or screen. Read the piece with care, taking notes about where and how Pollan uses his sources to develop his own thoughts. After reading, take at least 30 minutes to write answers to these questions about entering into a conversation with sources: Where did Pollan engage with sources in ways that surprised you? Where did he use sources in ways that you'd like to emulate? What different kinds of conversations did Pollan engage in with his sources? Why did he choose to be in conversation with some sources more than others? What have you learned from these exercises about writing "in conversation" with sources?

Reading

Next, we'd like you to read Harriet McBryde Johnson's "Unspeakable Conversations." Johnson's article is also in conversation with Peter Singer, but unlike Pollan, Johnson is primarily interested in Singer's controversial views on euthanasia. Read the article with care, observing the many different ways Johnson joins in conversation with her sources. To start, you might notice sources that serve as the focus of analysis; supply background or information; provide key ideas or concepts; provide positions or arguments to grapple with; or shift the direction of the conversation.

After you've read, spend at least 30 minutes making a list of the many ways Johnson uses her source material. Notice that she may name or quote some sources explicitly, while not identifying every source of information. This is one way in which journalistic writing differs significantly from academic writing, where, of course, all sources must be cited.

Writing

Now that you've read both "An Animal's Place" and "Unspeakable Conversations," we'd like you to compose an essay in which you enter a conversation with Pollan and Johnson and answer the question: To what extent is it possible to define what makes a "good life" (or a "good death") for humans and other animals? Use Pollan's and Johnson's essays both as sources and as models of how to join a conversation in writing.

EXPLORE

Essays about ethical quandaries invite readers to join the fray. Michael Pollan challenges philosopher Peter Singer on the ethics of eating meat. Harriet McBryde Johnson also argues with Singer, but she objects to his stance on the ethics of killing severely disabled newborns. We invite you to join those conversations, and also to see how biologist Sandra Steingraber connects the words of early environmentalist Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, to current debates about the dangers of fracking.

Johnson, Harriet McBryde. "Unspeakable Conversations." *New York Times Magazine*. 16 Feb. 2003. Web.

Pollan, Michael. "An Animal's Place." *New York Times Magazine*. 10 Nov. 2002. Web.

Steingraber, Sandra. "The Fracking of Rachel Carson." *Orion Magazine*. Sept./Oct. 2012. Web.

Curiosity at Work: Rebecca Skloot's Extra-Credit Assignment

Rebecca Skloot's best-selling book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* tells the story of a poor African American woman in Baltimore who was hospitalized with cancer in 1951. Before Lacks died, a surgeon removed some of her cancer cells for research without her knowledge, and they were used to grow human cells in a lab for the first time. Lacks's cells, now known as HeLa cells, are still alive today and have been essential to medical research for more than sixty years. Every person who has received a polio vaccine or who lives in a country where polio has been eradicated, for example, is a direct beneficiary of research that used HeLa cells. And yet, before Skloot's book, few people knew of Henrietta Lacks and her immortal cells.

The path that led Skloot to write Lacks's story was long and circuitous. At age sixteen, Skloot registered for a community college biology course to make up the credit she lost when she failed the subject during her freshman year of high school. When the class was studying cell division, Skloot's teacher, Mr. Defler, told his students about HeLa cells and then wrote HENRIETTA LACKS in big letters on the blackboard. He told them that Lacks had died of cervical cancer, that a surgeon had taken a tissue sample from her tumor, and that "HeLa cells were one of the most important things that happened to medicine in the last hundred years." Before erasing the name from the board and dismissing the class for the day, Mr. Defler added one more fact: "She was a black woman."

Skloot followed her teacher back to his office, asking questions: "Where was she from? Did she know how important her cells were? Did she have any children?" Lacks's life is a mystery, Mr. Defler told her, and then he made the kind of comment teachers make: "If you're curious, go do some research, write up a little paper about what you find and I'll give you some extra credit."

That night, Skloot couldn't find any information on Lacks beyond a parenthetical reference in her biology textbook, but she didn't forget about this mysterious woman whose cells had helped protect millions

from contracting polio. Some ten years later, when Skloot was working on her undergraduate degree in biology, she took her first writing course, and the teacher began by asking the students to "write for 15 minutes about something someone forgot." Skloot immediately scrawled "Henrietta Lacks" on her page and wrote about how Lacks had been forgotten by the world. Over time, Skloot resolved to write "a biography of both the cells and the woman they came from." As her commitment to her project deepened, her research became "a decade long adventure through scientific laboratories, hospitals, and mental institutions, with a cast of characters that would include Nobel laureates, grocery store clerks, convicted felons, and a professional con artist." She met Lacks's five adult children and their families, which raised new questions for her about race, ethics, and medical research, among them: If Henrietta Lacks's cells were so important to medical science and had given rise to a multibillion-dollar industry, why couldn't Lacks's children and grandchildren afford health insurance?

More than two decades after Rebecca Skloot first heard the name Henrietta Lacks, she finished her book. Putting her research skills to use once more, she tracked down the biology teacher who first told her about HeLa cells and sent him a note: "Dear Mr. Defler, here's my extra credit project. It's 22 years late, but I have a good excuse: No one knew anything about her."

Note: The quotations in this essay are from Rebecca Skloot's blog post, "What's the Most Important Lesson You Learned from a Teacher?" *Rebeccaskloot.com* 8 May 2012.