

I write, but I am not a writer.

When I was six years old, I created an e-mail newsletter with crucial information about the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears.

Throughout elementary school I wrote countless stories, some of which were bound into books thanks to my school's annual "Publishing Center" program.

I filled several journals, starting with a delightfully gaudy Lisa Frank diary, a composition notebook in which I analyzed song lyrics, and, finally, the two blogs that I've actively maintained for the past eight years.

I wrote notes to friends that I saw every day, letters to my parents, and emails to my boyfriend despite our daily phone calls, all because I felt, instinctively, that written language was the most powerful tool I had.

My thoughts took shape in the uncertain, slanted handwriting of a first-grader, the fluid looping letters of a teenager, and finally, the smooth, even structure of computerized text against a virtual page.

I surrounded myself with words, in various styles and textures and inks; on my walls, in notebooks, and on my computer screen was a visual exposition of my insides, footholds from which I could understand and connect to the world around me.

All of this, yet I never envisioned myself as a "writer," or someone who would ever become one.

My parents and teachers, on the other hand, told me again and again that I would most certainly become a writer, praising me and filling my head with notions of "talent" and "creativity." Their confidence in my ability and the supposed ease with which I expressed myself was troubling to me.

In my mind, there has always been a disconnect between my understanding of what a writer is – inspired, creative, a master of language – and my understanding of what I do: resist, doubt, and procrastinate.

My relationship with words is not an equal partnership, but a constant negotiation, a struggle between my intentions and the words that appear on the page. It certainly is not often that they yield to my demands. Even as the holder of the pen, I do not exercise absolute control.

This process is frustrating, scary, and painful. It is hardly what I would call enjoyable, and yet, it is what I do.

How can this seemingly passionless, gloomy portrayal of writing come from someone worthy of the title of “writer”? And how could this person riddled with doubts and fears claim any sort of mastery over the English language?

They couldn't.

I couldn't.

I write not as a master of words, but as a student with an insatiable passion for language that exists independent of my ability.

I am in awe of words, and all that they can accomplish. I use them to explore and give shape to the vague, formless clouds of thought in my mind, and to emerge from this process knowing more than I did when I began. Pushing through the difficulty, I pull words out from inside of me because I feel compelled to do so, not necessarily because I feel inspired.

For years I have allowed myself to feel guilty for the resistance and sense of dread that creeps in every time I must write, either for myself or for someone else. I felt that these sentiments excluded me from an elite class of happy, enthusiastic, productive writers. However, I recently came across an interview with Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, that really struck a chord with me and made me rethink my conception of a “writer.” When asked if there was a passage in his most recent book that Foer particularly enjoyed writing, he replied:

The idea of enjoying writing something is foreign to me. I enjoy *having written* things. Someone once said that writing is like pulling teeth...out of your penis. How do I put this? I love being a writer, but I don't love writing. An analogy might be, right now, I love having a kid, but man, oh man—it's so hard. Twenty-four hours a day. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. If you were to ask me each step of the way, "Do you feel like doing this?"...

As in: Do you feel like changing a diaper? *No*. Do you feel like jiggling a kid at four a.m.? *No*. Do you feel like cleaning barf off your shirt? *No*. But at the end of the day, if someone said, "Would you have wanted to spend the day any other way?" I'd say that's how I wanted to spend the day. When I write, I don't find it enjoyable page-by-page, but I'm really glad that it's what I do.¹

Seeing my own feelings echoed by an author whom I admire was remarkably comforting, yet it was also somewhat disorienting. It forced me to reevaluate my perception of what defines a writer, and, accordingly, my potential for identifying myself as one.

I realized that despite my insecurities and reluctance to assess my work favorably, somewhere, in the back of my mind, I've always understood that writing is an integral aspect of who I am. It happened as soon as I could physically put words on a page, or perhaps even earlier.

Unfortunately, it was at this same young age that I readily absorbed and internalized the American attitude towards artistic endeavors, or personal ambitions of any kind: the only goal worth pursuing is absolute mastery. To claim an identity in this culture, one must be born with a special talent and declare, with unwavering certainty, that the development and mastery of this talent is his or her true "passion" or "purpose."

This rigid, narrow view is what made me reject the idea that I could be a writer, and predisposed me to misinterpret my parents' pride and encouragement as pressure and

misplaced expectation. It neglects the complexities, shades, and tones of ambition, focusing on the limited, unattainable, and frankly undesirable goal of mastery rather than growth and discovery.

This pressure to be the best is what prompts statements like, “I draw, but I could never become an artist,” or “I play guitar, but I’m not that good.” Kids learn to talk down to themselves, carrying this negative self-talk into adulthood. This inhibits exploration and risk-taking, stripping it of its immeasurable value and reserving it solely for natural-born geniuses.

Divorcing myself from this oppressive belief, I can finally explore this thing that I love so dearly without the obligation to be great.

I am a writer in the truest sense of the word – not an expert, but simply one who writes, and will continue to write, because it is impossible not to.

¹ "PowellsBooks.Blog – Unlocking Jonathan Safran Foer - Powell's Books." *Used, New, and Out of Print Books - We Buy and Sell - Powell's Books*. N.p., 18 Apr. 2006. Web. 26 Sept. 2012. <<http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/unlocking-jonathan-safran-foer-by-dave/>>.