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The Language of the Spirit: An Interview with Scott Russell Sanders

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The tradition of the American essay includes a handful of esteemed writers such as E.B. White, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, Wendell Berry, and Annie Dillard. Scott Russell Sanders, a long-time English professor at Indiana University, and the author of over twenty books, would also seem to warrant membership in this inner circle--one of the few masters of the personal essay. His essay collections, such as The Paradise of Bombs, Staying Put, The Force of Spirit, Hunting for Hope, and Writing from the Center, all demonstrate a rare honesty and emotional acuity which often enables readers to find pieces of their own lives in his. These books, like all of Sanders's work (including his novels and short story collections) explore many interrelated themes: the complex inner workings of family, the degradation and preservation of the natural world, the essential role of place in understanding self and community, and the challenges of the writing/teaching life. What is significant about his most recent books, however (including his memoir, A Private History of Awe), is how he weaves these thematic foci with another central focus of his work: the role of spirituality in writing.

TMF: The idea of the spiritual and/or the religious are recurrent themes in your work, particularly in your last two books. Where did this interest come from?

SRS: As far back into childhood as I can remember, I've been haunted by the ancient human questions: How was the world made? What are people here for? Why do we hurt one another? What happens when we die? Eventually, I would seek answers to those questions in literature and science and philosophy. But as a boy, I learned that the answers were to be found in church, in the Bible, and in prayer. My parents weren't pious, but they took religion seriously, and they made sure—especially my mother—that my sister and brother and I learned what Christianity had to say about the meaning and conduct of life. The variety of Christianity we encountered was that of rural Methodist churches, kindly places that emphasized loving your neighbor and using your own mind to seek the truth. I'm grateful for that upbringing.

TMF: In The Force of Spirit you trace the etymology of "spirit" and "religion"—the first meaning "wind or breath," the second meaning to "tie together again." You prefer spirit because it is more inclusive and doesn't carry the hypocrisy of religious history. I'm curious how you understand these two concepts today.

SRS: Anthropologists tell us that virtually every culture ever studied displays some form of religion, by which they mean a set of beliefs about the immaterial world, about life and death, right and wrong, as well as traditional practices for expressing those beliefs. It is a social institution, subject to all the glories and evils of which humans are capable. When the beliefs, taboos, and rituals of a given culture are challenged by those of another, sometimes learning occurs, but more often strife breaks out. As we all know, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms, "ethnic cleansing," and countless other atrocities have been carried out—are still being carried out—in the name of one or another religion. By contrast, "Spirit" is a word, like "Tao," that points toward the way of things, the ineffable force that brings the universe into being and shapes every quark and quasar and carries us along. Religions evolve to provide a means of

honoring and celebrating spirit and a language for speaking about it. The trouble arises when any religion confuses its own creed with ultimate truth, when it pretends to have caught spirit in a net of words.

TMF: A Private History of Awe is not a collection of essays like the books that preceded it, but a "spiritual memoir." What's the difference between a memoir and a book of essays? And what does this added modifier require of the writer? Is not all good literary nonfiction "spiritual"?

SRS: A personal essay is an effort to clarify some confusion, recount a passage of experience, tell of an inward or outward journey. A memoir is usually a larger attempt to discern the shape of a life, or a significant portion of a life. As the name implies, memoir is also implicitly about memory. It dramatizes the way the past remains with us, the way one's identity is built up and precariously held together by memory. I say "precariously" because I have seen too many elders, including my mother and mother-in-law, lose their grip on the past, and therefore a sense of self, through Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. What I meant to imply by calling A Private History of Awe a "spiritual memoir" was to suggest that the book traces my own search for answers to the perennial questions about the meaning of existence. I certainly don't lay claim to special knowledge, let alone holiness. My book tells the story of an ordinary seeker.

TMF: Creative nonfiction, or what is now sometimes called The Fourth Genre, has become very popular in the last decade. Yet it has also been problematic in that there have been a number of high profile cases of plagiarism and of "fictionalized" nonfiction. Toni Morrison once wrote "The difference between fact and truth is that truth is not random and requires human intelligence." As an essayist who has also written several novels, how do you define or distinguish between "fact" and "truth"? And then, how do they seem to interact in your work?

SRS: Facts are data; truth is the sense we make of the data. And the sense we make should always be open to revision, to new evidence, to further discovery. The writer of nonfiction has an obligation, I believe, to be faithful to the facts, so far as they can be known or reconstructed. Wherever possible, one should test one's memory against other sources—journals, photographs, scholarly works, news accounts, the testimony of other people. At the same time, the writer of nonfiction has an obligation to search out the meaning of an experience, to interpret the facts. Of course memory is imperfect; it fills in gaps, leaves things out, confuses one event or person with another, and often revises the story. Two people living through the same moment or history—an automobile accident, the civil rights movement—are likely to experience it differently, and to remember and interpret it differently. But to say that memory is imperfect does not mean that one can ignore what it reports, or that one can freely embroider the story to make it more colorful. In a society rife with fraud and hype, we shouldn't be surprised that some writers plagiarize the work of others or gussy-up their memoirs in an effort to sell more books. If they're caught lying, they make it onto the front page and the best-seller list all the more quickly. It's despicable to sell books with lies—but not as despicable, I must say, as to sell a war with lies.

TMF: The best memoirs seem to be not about a remarkable life, but about a life that is remarkably seen. So much so that readers are able to find the emotional and intellectual strands of their own life in the writer's. How do you deal with the problem of self-as-subject in your writing—particularly within a rather self-absorbed, individualistic culture?

SRS: I'm not a celebrity; I haven't led a flamboyant life, haven't parachuted behind enemy lines or recovered from a thousand-foot fall down a crevasse or spent time on death-row or starred in a film. I

haven't been addicted to alcohol or drugs. I haven't been a victim of other people's abuse or neglect. I haven't pulled off any crazy stunts or made a fortune on the stock market or patented a world-changing gismo. In short, I've led an ordinary life, neither rich nor poor, growing up in an imperfect but loving family, playing outdoors, going to school, marrying my childhood sweetheart, working at a job, fixing up an old house, rearing two children, caring for aging parents, struggling to be a good neighbor and citizen. It's not the sort of life that leads to a catchy summary on a book-jacket or elicits invitations from talk-show hosts. But, then, most people lead ordinary lives. And every life is worthy of attention —not fame, not celebrity, but serious reflection. And the more deeply one reflects about one's own life, the more one realizes one's connections to other people, other species, other times. Such reflection is in fact an antidote to self-absorption. Only a person oblivious to his or her own true self could indulge in narcissism. Each of us is bound, in our depths, to all other life. In my writing, I am trying to delve down through the particulars of my own life to that deeper ground.

TMF: It seems that your spirituality is often connected to your experiences in the natural world. This is also true of Thoreau and many other nature writers. "I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature," Thoreau once wrote. Is this also how you understand Nature—as the locus of spiritual understanding and revelation?

SRS: "Nature" is another one of those grand, inclusive words that can mean a great many things in different contexts. At its simplest, it means the out-of-doors—the woods, creeks, and critters that surround us. In that sense, nature was my first home, because I spent as much of my childhood as I could outdoors. Even now, when I lead a mostly indoor life, I am always hankering to go hiking or canoeing, to work in the garden, to stroll around the neighborhood, and I do so whenever I get the chance. In a larger sense, nature is everything in the universe that humans didn't make. It's also the raw material for everything that humans do make, and it's the power that governs the shaping and evolution of everything, from galaxies to grandchildren. Understood in this way—which is how I usually understand it in my books—"Nature" sounds a lot like "Spirit" or "Tao" or "Logos." So I would embrace the line you quote from Thoreau, who's one of my literary heroes. And I would also echo the ambition voiced by William Blake: "To see a world in a grain of sand, /And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour." If we see it aright, a flower, a grain of sand, any particle of nature may lead us to the source of things.

TMF: In Writing from the Center you say "I refuse to separate my search for a way of writing from my search for a way of living." Can you talk a bit about this simultaneous search and your "way" of living/writing? How do the art of writing and the art of living merge or blur? And how can one live such a woven and deliberate life in the frenetic ultra-compartmentalized modern world?

SRS: Certainly the hectic pace of our days, the electronic media, and the proliferating distractions make it more and more difficult for anyone to lead a gathered life. But writers face an additional risk, which is to accept the view most famously stated by Yeats: "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work." I don't expect to achieve anything near perfection in either, but I also don't believe the two pursuits must be at odds. My living nourishes my writing, and my writing guides my living. I write not to escape life but to enter it more deeply, with more awareness and appreciation. Of course there are practical conflicts. When my children were young, I felt guilty whenever I withdrew from them to work on a book. As my mother aged, I felt guilty over not building an addition to our small house so my wife and I could take her in. I earn a living by teaching, and have done so now for thirty-six years, and so I am on call to thousands of current or former students as well as to colleagues and administrators, any of whom may claim my attention at any moment. So, like any writer, I struggle to preserve the mental space necessary for creative work. But I'm not willing to

abandon the students and others who depend on me, I'm not willing to exploit my friends, and I'm not willing to sacrifice the people I love in order to produce a more nearly perfect book. So I go on struggling to make my imperfect art in the midst of relationships and responsibilities. That is one meaning of the title of Writing from the Center.

TMF: Marriage and family, two subjects you often explore, are usually viewed negatively in modern literature. Writers focus on the vulnerability, on the disintegration and the failures. You examine the vulnerability of marriage and family, but in general your work on these topics is affirming and hopeful. Why do you think this is so rare?

SRS: Trouble is more interesting than harmony. It's paradoxical: we wish to lead happy lives but wish to read about miserable ones. We hope for peace and read about strife. We want our children to love us but we read about children who scorn adults. We long to have faithful partners but we're drawn to stories about infidelity. In A Private History of Awe, I tell how I searched for works of fiction that dramatize sustained, loving relationships, especially long marriages, but I couldn't find enough to furnish a college course. I found a hundred examples of betrayal for every one of fidelity. It's easier to make breakdown seem exciting, just as it's easier to hook readers with violence than with tranquility. Of course I realize that the world is seething with trouble. I realize that many partners are unfaithful, many marriages fail, and many children hate their parents. But I know from my own experience and from the testimony of friends that such failures are far from universal. My own marriage has lasted thirty-nine years so far, and while it has been subject to the stresses and strains of any marriage, it has been an abiding joy for me. My wife and I maintain a close relationship with our two children, with their spouses, and with our grandchildren. I don't claim credit for these blessings, and I don't hold up our family as any kind of model, but I do wish to bear testimony, through my writing, to the possibilities for durable, loving relationships that rarely make their way into literature.

TMF: In your book Staying Put you write "One's native ground is the place where, since before you had words for such knowledge, you have known the smells, the seasons, the birds and beasts, the human voices, the houses, the ways of working, the lay of the land and the quality of light. It is the landscape you learn before you retreat inside the illusion of your skin." You examine the primacy of place, of roots, of connecting to a piece of land, a house, a neighborhood, and a local community. Yet this seems antithetical to the ever accelerating and wildly mobile culture we live in. Why is a sense of place and rootedness so important?

SRS: It's frequently remarked, and rightly so, that we live in a throw-away society. But we also live in a move-away society. Since the frontier days, Americans have tended to deal with problems in one place—exhaustion of the topsoil, clearcutting of the trees, quarrels with neighbors, poisoned streams—by moving somewhere else. Increasingly, we also use movement as an antidote to boredom. If life seems empty, we're tempted to pull up stakes and settle down somewhere else—maybe in a new house, a new job, a new marriage, a new state. Such shuffling only relieves our boredom temporarily. It doesn't fill up the vacuum in our hearts, but it does tear up our psyches, our families, and our communities. No community can thrive without a substantial core of citizens who are committed to the long-term well-being of that place, nor can any business, church, school, or volunteer organization. Wallace Stegner observed that Americans tend to be divided between "boomers" and "stickers"—the first kind ready to move on as soon as things get tough in one place, always dreaming of striking it rich, or finding nirvana, in the next place; and the second kind committed to making the situation they're in—the town, the workplace, the watershed, the relationship—as good as it can be, or at least better than it was. Obviously, a vibrant society needs both sorts of souls. But right now in America we could do with more stickers and fewer boomers. We have more than enough folks looking to make a killing,

craving the new thing. We need more citizens committed to the common good, people who don't give up easily, who envision how things could be improved in their neighborhood and work to make it so.

TMF: Your writing often has moral underpinnings. It critiques the ethical flaws and shortcomings in U.S. society, and sometimes suggests alternatives. How does a "literary" writer address the big questions that you do—the degradation of the environment, war and militarism, and the blind consumerism that pervades U.S. culture, without coming across as moralistic or didactic?

SRS: Much in the world troubles me, from our voracious consumption of the earth's bounty and the destabilizing of climate, to our stockpiling of ever more lethal weapons and our penchant for war. I don't claim any expertise in these matters. I speak as a citizen, as a father and, in recent years, as a grandfather. Yet we can't leave the fate of our planet to the presumed experts, whether they occupy laboratories or think tanks or executive suites or legislatures. Too many of them earn their living by serving the forces of dominion and greed. Anyone who challenges consumerism or militarism is likely to be called moralistic, whereas anyone who defends our present way of life is likely to be called prudent or realistic. Well, our present way of life is destroying the planet. It is imposing an enormous financial and ecological and political burden on future generations. It is neglecting the well-being of millions upon millions of people, including the most wretchedly poor. Right now, the U.S., with roughly four percent of the world's population, is responsible for fully half of the world's military expenditures, while our government cuts funding for daycare and health care. I try to avoid preaching in my books, because I don't pretend to have all the answers. But I also won't pretend that I am not troubled, that I have no opinions. I refuse to hold my tongue.

TMF: In spite of the difficult problems you often address, much of your work carries with it a sense of hope or the possibility of change. Given the war in Iraq and global warming and the growing religious divisions in our world, where do you find hope these days? Where do you see light trying to break through?

SRS: A few years ago I wrote a book called Hunting for Hope in an effort to answer these questions, which were put to me most forcefully, and hauntingly, by my children and my students. There is much to be troubled by. At the same time, there is much to be encouraged by. We inherit a tremendous legacy of knowledge from the generations that have gone before us. We are prompted by compassion and love as well as by aggression and greed. Nature holds no grudges, and it responds to our abuse with renewing, creative energy. The same creative potential wells up in us. No matter how dire the situation, there is always good work to be done. There are people everywhere who labor tirelessly for peace and justice and mercy. I could rattle off a list of heartening efforts underway across our nation and around the world. I wrote about these and other sources of renewal in Hunting for Hope. More than once, during the question and comment period following my reading from that book, a member of the audience would remark that the only source of hope anyone needed was to believe in Jesus. And I would respectfully point out that believing in Jesus might assure one's personal salvation in an afterlife, but that I was concerned with reducing damage and relieving suffering in this life, and not merely for myself but for all creatures. In such efforts, can we draw on some greater power, some divine healing force? I don't know; I suspect so, but I also suspect that any healing work will require our own ingenuity and sweat. It won't be done for us.

Tom Montgomery-Fate, a professor of English at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, is the author of four books, including Beyond the White Noise, a collection of essays, and Steady and Trembling, a memoir. His essays frequently air on NPR.