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Remaking the World

Hannah Stevens
& Will Buckingham

Remaking the World

Making a difference through writing

Wind&Bones Shorts

Hannah Stevens

Will Buckingham



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*Dedicated to the many storytellers who have transformed our
lives for the better.*

A word after a word
after a word is power.

— Margaret Atwood

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صفتش از اشیرم
شسته آینه و اکس
دشمن از روی شاک
چون نوسان از مدی

نیتش از سحر و جادو
نزدیکی از روی



Welcome!

Welcome to this Wind&Bones short course on changing the world through writing. We've taught this course all over the world, and because we really care about how writing can be used to bring about real, significant change, we have made a version of this course available free of charge.

But before we launch in, we should introduce ourselves. We are Dr. Hannah Stevens and Dr. Will Buckingham. Together, we run Wind&Bones, a non-profit organisation registered in Scotland, dedicated to exploring the meeting points between writing, creativity, and social change.

We are also writers ourselves. Will's latest book is *Hello, Stranger: How We Find Connection in a Disconnected World* (Granta 2022), and Hannah's is *In Their Absence* (Roman Books 2021).

We work with individuals and with organisations to explore how writing can be used to make the world a better place to live in. Between us, we have thirty years of experience working as writers, workshop leaders, and creative producers.

In this course, we want to show you how the words you

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write can make a real difference to your life, and to the lives of others.

This is a self-contained self-study course, and it should only take a few hours to complete. Whether you have lots of experience as a writer, or whether you are just starting out, this course is for you.

The course has three components:

- A course booklet, full of ideas and inspiration
- A series of writing exercises
- Suggested further study materials to enrich your creativity

You can work through the course on your own, or team up with a friend and work through it together. It's entirely up to you.

Please do share this course with others, email your friends and colleagues, pass it on to your family, and help get the word out. Together, we can change the world!

And finally, we love hearing from people who are interested in writing and social change. So if you want to say hello, just email us on contact@windandbones.com. We reply to all the emails we receive.

So let's get started. It's great to have you joining us!

All the best,

Hannah & Will



Writing Reshapes the World

When faced by the world's many problems, it is easy to be overwhelmed. When we teach this course, we often have students who are sceptical. They ask us: but can writing really change the world? Isn't this a bit ambitious?

To answer this question, first we need to talk about what we mean by 'changing the world.' Then we need to look more closely at what writing can do to contribute to this.

One starting point for thinking about this is recognising that the world is always in a state of constant change. If you look at our society today, it is very different from the society of ten years ago, or fifty years ago, or one hundred years ago. Some things may have changed for the better, and some may have changed for the worse. But human societies and cultures are always in a state of constant change and flux. Change is inevitable. And although we don't have complete control over the way in which things are going, we have some agency. Our actions affect the changes that take place around us. And recognising this is the first stage in being able to think about how to contribute to positive change.

The Glacier Principle

We like to think about the way that writing brings about change as ‘the Glacier Principle.’ This is an idea we have borrowed from the writer and activist Tiffany Lee, who is based at the University of Wisconsin. According to Lee, it is easy to underestimate how writing brings about change because it often works slowly, almost imperceptibly. But, Lee writes, ‘like a glacier, writing can eventually reshape the world.’

The physical landscape of which we are a part, with its hills and the valleys, was carved out over millennia by the slow movement of glaciers. The same is true of our mental landscapes, the concepts that shape our lives and our worlds. They have been fashioned over time by the things that others have thought, written, and handed down. We haven’t chosen these landscapes, but they have given shape to us, and they help shape the possibilities that are open to us.

Of course, things don’t always have to happen imperceptibly slowly. Sometimes, writing can bring about change much more quickly than this (we’ll see an example of this later on). But it’s worth remembering when you are working hard on writing, hoping to bring about positive change, that without a longer view, you can overlook how powerful writing is as a way of bringing about change.

The Power of Imagination

If writing does indeed bring about change, it is because it changes the ideas and perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of individual human beings.

We often underestimate the role that imagination plays in our lives. Collective imagining fashions all aspects of our soci-

eties. It shapes our politics, our approaches to social organisation, our sense of what matters in life, our view of ourselves and each other, and our vision of human possibilities. The writer Anatole France once wrote, ‘To imagine is everything; to know is nothing at all.’ We don’t entirely agree with France: we think that knowledge matters too. But it matters only in the context of how we imagine the world. In some senses, imagination is more fundamental than knowledge, because how we imagine the world sets the agenda for how we explore and investigate it. It tells us what things are worthy and unworthy of attention, what things are worth knowing. It tells us what we can possibly hope for.

To remake the world, first we need to reimagine it.

Reimagining the World

So how do we go about reimagining the world? And how do we help other people reimagine the world? There are many ways we can do this. Here are some:

- Bringing to light problems and issues that are hidden
- Telling new stories about the world, or telling old stories in new ways
- Re-imagining possibilities for the kind of world we could live in, if only we dared.

As the writer James Baldwin pointed out, we change the world by shifting people’s perceptions, by transforming their sense of the world of which they are a part. We change the world by giving ourselves and others new ways of imagining.

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The world changes according to the way people see it,
and if you alter, even by a millimetre, the way a person
looks or people look at reality, then you can change it.

— James Baldwin, 'Writing and Talking',
New York Times, Sept 23 1979.



Writing Exercise: Words that Change Us

So let's explore this with a writing exercise.

In this exercise, you will be drawing on your experience and your own personal history to explore how you have been changed and transformed by the words of others.

Part One: The Power of Words

The first part of this exercise is about the power of words. It is about exploring your own past to see how the words of others have affected you.

For this part of the exercise, give yourself at least half an hour. If it helps you to keep focus, you can time yourself, but it is not essential. In this exercise, you will be reflecting on stories from your own life that show how words can bring about change.

Start the exercise by thinking about the following five questions:

- When have other people's words shaken you up,

and led to you changing your perspective or your life?

- Who said these words?
- What did they say?
- What change or changes did this lead to?
- How long did these changes take (were they quick, or were they glacier-like)?

Spend five or ten minutes making notes on these questions. Don't worry about writing in full sentences. Your notes can be as unruly and sprawling as you like. This first part of the exercise is just about exploring your experience and your memory.

When you have finished this part of the exercise, take a break, and do something else. Get some tea, stare out of the window, go for a stroll... it doesn't matter what. The most important thing is to let the ideas settle before you move on.

Part Two: Stories of Transformation

When you feel refreshed, come back and read through your notes. Choose one specific incident from your past, one particular story about how words have changed you. Now your task is to tell the story of this transformation. What happened? What were these words? Who spoke them? How did they change you? What changed? And why did these changes take place? In what ways did life look different before and after these changes? You might want to set aside at least twenty minutes to write this story.

If you are working with a friend, one way of preparing to write your story is to talk through it. It can often help to tell your stories orally and face-to-face (or remotely via phone, Zoom, or Skype) before you move on to writing them. Sitting down with a friend and sharing stories is a great thing to do. It builds friend-

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ship, community and solidarity. Sharing your stories with others in this way also gives you a chance to see the effect your stories have on an audience. This helps to keep your storytelling anchored, reminding you that storytelling is communication.

If you are not working with a friend, there are some tricks you can use to keep this sense of communication in mind. One way is to write your story as if you were writing a letter to a friend. If you begin your writing, 'Dear X...', then you can often bring a greater vividness to your writing.

Thinking of writing as a story that you tell to others is a good way of helping to make your writing lively and full of energy.



Case study: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring

In the early summer of 1962, an article appeared in *The New Yorker*. It was written by the biologist Rachel Carson, and at first glance, readers might have been forgiven for thinking that they were reading a work of fiction. This is how the article began (you can read the full piece online):

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to be in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards, where white clouds of bloom drifted above the green land. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines...

It is a beautiful opening. But soon it becomes clear that not all is well in this sleepy little town. One spring, Carson wrote, 'a

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strange blight crept over the area, and everything began to change.’ Livestock sickened and died. People fell ill. And the budding spring trees that were usually so full of birdsong were uncannily silent. It was, Carson wrote, ‘a spring without voices.’



Rachel Carson

Storytelling for Change

As Carson’s storytelling went on, she revealed that this town didn’t exist. But in countless towns across America and across the world, things like these had happened. And the culprit was human-created chemical compounds poisoning the land, among

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them DDT, or dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane. Carson's two articles in *The New Yorker*, and her book — also called *Silent Spring* — published later that year, wove together science and storytelling in a powerful call to action.

Carson's book ignited a new awareness of the environmental impact of pesticides. It took ten years of legal and scientific wrangling for the effects to be felt, but in 1972 the US government eventually agreed to phase out the use of DDT.

How Stories Change the World

Carson was a scientist. And if she had just sat down to write a scientific paper about the harms of DDT, her work would probably never have had the same impact. The thing that made Carson's *Silent Spring* so extraordinary was the way that she connected her deep scientific knowledge with an ability to tell stories that tapped into people's deepest concerns.

The reason that stories are so powerful is that they are all about the art of connecting. They not only connect us to each other, as storytellers and listeners or readers, but they also bridge our personal worlds and our broader political and social vision. They show us how political, social, and environmental changes impact our everyday lives. And conversely, they show us how our everyday choices and actions can lead to big changes out there in the world. Our ideas of how the world is and how it can be are fashioned out of stories. And if we want to remake the world, we can start by telling new stories about how the world could be.

Stories bring about change for several reasons:

- They provide perspectives that are new and challenging

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- They transform the way we think and feel
- They help us make emotional connections between our own lives and bigger concerns and issues
- They open up new possibilities for action
- They are a way of fashioning new communities.



The Art of Connecting

The most powerful and transformative writing is often structured around two opposing poles. At one end is the writer's personal experience. Each of us comes from unique, unrepeatable conditions. Nobody has ever seen the world quite like we see it, from our own particular angle or perspective. And nobody will ever see the world like this again. This means that we all have something to contribute. There are things we know that nobody else knows, or not in quite the same way. There are ideas we have that are not quite the same as anybody else's. And sharing these perspectives, these ideas, and this knowledge, in community with each other, provides a robust basis for collectively bringing about change.

So, our own experience matters. But also, at the other pole, powerful writing is often born out of the fact that there something out there in the wider world that intrigues, fascinates, or preoccupies us. This may be something big (climate change), or small (public transport in our community). But because this thing, whatever it is, affects not just ourselves, but also others, there is something about this that is shared. You could call this the political dimension of your writing, in the broadest sense.

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Here, ‘political’ doesn’t mean party politics. It means all those aspects of our shared life that go beyond our own individual experiences and concerns: the challenges of collectively building a society worth living in.

You may remember the old saying: the personal is political. This came out of the feminist movement in the late 1960s. It was an assertion that the fine details of what is now often called our *lived experience* are hugely consequential. These fine details reflect bigger questions about how we organise ourselves collectively. But if the personal is political, the reverse is also true: the political is also personal. These bigger questions impact us in every corner of our lives. So politics and individual experience are always entwined.

Transformative writing takes its energy from the tension and interaction between these two poles: the personal (our own experience) and the political (the broader, shared concerns we have about the world). It is writing that shows how big, seemingly abstract issues impact individual lives. Think again of Rachel Carson. She drew on her own experience of rural life in America as a way of helping her readers connect with the bigger, urgent political issues that mattered to her.

Walking the Streets of Sofia

We want to share with you an example, from a class we were teaching in Sofia, Bulgaria. We asked our students to make notes about things that annoyed them: because where there is irritation, there is energy, and where there is energy, there is opportunity for good writing! One student from Italy had an idea, but was worried it was too trivial to write about. What annoyed her about Sofia, she said, was that the pavements were so uneven, it was difficult to navigate the streets: there were always potholes,

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and weird bits of street furniture in the way. So she walked around town all day staring at her feet.

That was the external pole of her essay. It was a collective problem, one faced by all of us who had to navigate the streets of Sofia. But when we asked her why this was so annoying, she said, 'Well, my grandmother always told me a woman should walk down the street with pride. She should have her back straight, and look straight ahead.' So, from a starting point of thinking about walking the streets of Sofia, and her memories of her grandmother, our student suddenly found herself grappling with other issues too: issues of identity, self-worth, and how gender expectations shape entire lives and cultures.



Writing Assignment: Making Connections

The second and final exercise in this course is a longer assignment. It is designed to get you thinking about how your own ideas, perspectives, and experiences can feed into change that really matters.

In this second exercise, we are going to ask you to write a short nonfiction essay that bridges the public and private (or personal and political) realms.

In school, you may have been given a very narrow definition of what an essay looks like. An essay, you may think, is serious, and written in unfriendly-sounding prose. It is hard to write, and hard to read, and strangely impersonal. But we want you to put this narrow definition to one side.

The word ‘essay’ literally means ‘to try out’, ‘to test’, or even ‘to explore.’ The English term ‘essay’ comes from the French, *essai*. And the great originator of the essay as a form of writing was the French philosopher and writer Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). Montaigne’s famous book, *Essais*, is collection of wildly creative explorations of different subjects — from the art of conversation, to inequality, to the sense of smell, to the nature of sleep and dreams. He even wrote about his cat, asking,

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‘When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?’

For Montaigne, the essay was an *experimental* form of writing. It was a way of trying out ideas, and imagining new possibilities. This is the spirit in which we want you to undertake this final assignment. We want you to produce a piece of writing that tells stories about your own experiences, and explores how these stories are connected to the issues that preoccupy you in the wider world.

As we’ve seen, change comes from connecting big issues and individual lives. This is why the essay form is so powerful. It is a form of storytelling that explores a question or a problem out there in the world, while also exploring how that problem impacts individual lives. And when readers see this impact, they connect more strongly with the need for change.

Assignment: an Essay for Change

In this assignment, you’ll be planning and writing an essay that can address your desire for real and lasting change.

To get started, write down a list of three things you want to change about the world as it currently is. These could be big things (you want a solution to the climate crisis), or relatively small things (you want to walk down the street without tripping over or falling down potholes).

Now, for each of these things, start to think about how they affect you personally. Note down any personal incidents or experiences that connect with these bigger issues. Be as concrete and specific as you can.

When you have done this, you’ll have a list of things you want to change, and notes on how these things impact your own life and experience.

If you are working with a friend, it might be worth talking

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this through with them. It can take time to trace all the subtle ways that bigger issues and concerns impact your everyday life, but exploring all this is a fascinating process. And if you want to bring about change, there's no better way than showing others how these issues impact the lives and experiences of their fellow human beings.

Once you have a list, select just one topic to explore or 'try out' in the form of an essay. Keep your writing anchored in personal experience. As you write, feel free to move between telling stories and making arguments. A powerful essay will have three things:

- A vivid sense of what the problem is
- Powerful stories about how this problem impacts everyday lives (your own and others)
- A clear idea of how we can change things for the better.

As you write, don't get too systematic or mechanical. The essay form is very fluid. Think about how you can communicate most powerfully with your audience, using all the resources you have as a storyteller and as a human being.

Good luck!



Going Further

By now, you have written an essay that really focusses in on what you want to change about the world, and why this matters. The next thing to do is to get your words out there in the world. Share your work online. Write it up as a blog. Send it to a journal or a magazine. Read it out loud at an event. Ultimately, writing for change is about connecting, about building community and inspiring others.

Books for Writers and Activists

And finally, here are some books and resources we'd recommend.

- Mary Pipher's *Writing to Change the World: An Inspiring Guide for Transforming the World With Words* (Riverhead, 2008) is well worth reading.
- Kajal Odedra's book *Do Something: Activism for Everyone* (Hachette, 2019) is a great startup manual for those who want to change the world.

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- Will Storr's *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human, and How to Tell Them Better* (William Collins, 2020) is full of insight into how stories work.
- We love Rebecca Solnit's work, and *Hope in the Dark* (Canongate, 2005), is a great reminder of the role of hope and imagination in social change.
- Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing and Life* (Canongate, 2020) doesn't talk directly about social change, but it explores why writing matters, and is both wise and funny.

Go Further With Wind&Bones

If you want to take your writing even further, we'd love to work with you! If you are looking for individual support and mentoring, have a look at our mentoring programme. We work one-on-one with writers at all stages of their careers, providing tailored mentoring according to your project and your needs.

<https://www.windandbones.com/mentor>

Let's Collaborate

We're always open to new collaborations and projects that bring together writing and positive change. If you have any ideas, we'd love to talk more. Just email us on the address below:

contact@windandbones.com

Good luck with your writing, and let's change the world!

Acknowledgments

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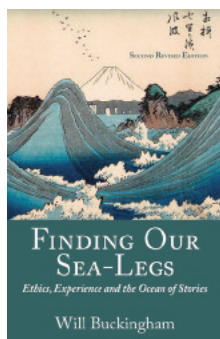
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Finally, we are grateful to all our collaborators and colleagues, mentors and students over the years — from Myanmar to Bulgaria, and from Scotland to Taiwan and beyond — who have taught us so much about the creative power of words and stories, and how, through telling better stories, we can bring about positive change. Remaking the world is a big job. We can't do it alone. But together, we have the power to make a difference.

Also from Wind&Bones

Kiú-kiong, Lisa MacDonald, Naomi Sim & Elissa Hunter Dorans: *Tàigael: Stories from Taiwanese and Gaelic*.

Four writers, four stories, and four languages. Weaving together myth, dream, and daily life, *Tàigael* brings together the cultures of Scotland and Taiwan. In Taiwanese, Mandarin, English and Gaelic.



Will Buckingham: *Finding Our Sea-Legs: Ethics, Experience and the Ocean of Stories*.

How are we to think through ethics, without any hope of reaching the solid ground of agreement? From Indonesian gods drunk on palm-wine to Kant and Plato, Will Buckingham argues ethics cannot flourish without storytelling.

books.windandbones.com

About Wind&Bones

Wind&Bones is a Scotland-registered social enterprise run by Dr Hannah Stevens & Dr Will Buckingham. We work all over the world producing projects that bring together writing, creativity and positive social change.

We also publish books that we care about through Wind&Bones Books.



