

## ABOVE ALL ELSE, REMEMBER THAT WRITING IS A JOB

BY DANNY HEITMAN

The first writer I watched was my father, who spent part of each weekend composing the lessons he used as a Sunday school teacher. With a pen and legal pad on his lap, he sat in his bedroom rocker as he wrote, slowly gliding back and forth until the pages filled. While tackling the task, he wore the same heavy denim jacket that kept him warm during his weekday job as a carpenter.

One year, we treated my father to a plush new robe, assuming it would be more comfortable around the house than his big coat. After politely accepting the gift, he reverted to his familiar wardrobe. To make sentences, my father wore the same coat he used in making frames for walls, the arch of a roof, a new floor.

For years, I chalked this up to my father's Depression-era upbringing, which had apparently made him distrustful of even modest luxuries. But not long after my father died, when I began writing myself, I grasped a different reason for the denim jacket that cloaked him as he set down words. I think it was his way of putting on his writing game face, reminding himself that a piece of prose was a *made* object — something that

demanded at least as much precision, thought, and effort as the things he fashioned from wood.

All of this came back to mind when I learned about the writing habits of Robert Caro, who's best known for the mammoth, multivolume biography of President Lyndon Baines Johnson that's consumed most of Caro's career.

Although Caro works alone each day in a private office, he always dresses for business. "So what I do is — people laugh at me — I put on a jacket and a tie to come to work, because when I was young, everybody wore jackets and ties to work, and I want to remind myself that I'm going to a job. I have to produce," Caro told *The Paris Review*.

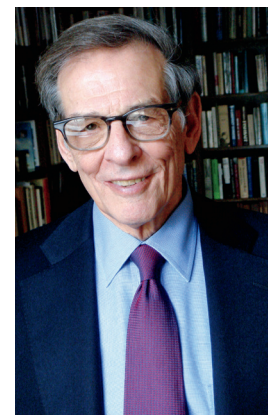
On days when I write at home, I also begin my day at the keyboard in my standard workday attire, which in my case includes khaki pants and an Oxford shirt.

Other writers might find such writing rituals unnecessary, and there are no doubt many scribes who can succeed without them.

But what I'm trying to do is honor a principle that should inform any serious writer. It's the idea that writing, however it might be touched by sublime sparks of inspiration, is inevitably a kind of labor, a project that requires effort to bear fruit.

Properly embraced, it can turn out to be a labor of love.

*In each issue, On Writing explores the basic principles of the writing craft. Have an idea for On Writing? Share it with us at [editor@phikappaphi.org](mailto:editor@phikappaphi.org).*



Author Robert Caro wears a suit and tie to his private office to remind him that he's got a job to do. Photo by Joyce Ravid.



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