Anyone who publishes a book is immediately asked versions of the same question, “How do you get published?”

I have been asked by everyone from colleagues and former students to healthcare providers and complete strangers. Behind the question used to be the assumption that the published author has access to some secret, insider knowledge. A former editor of mine spoke occasionally at conferences, and told me he wondered if writers believed that there might be a magic font—Garamond 12.5!—that hypnotized acquisition editors into saying yes.

It’s a simple question to ask but not easy to answer. You can be glib, of course, and give an answer like the punchline to the old joke about how to get to Carnegie Hall (“Practice!”). But it’s more complicated than that. Now with so many new platforms and venues, so many new ways to make written work public, I suspect that for all the writers frustrated and disappointed because they did not publish, that there are just as many who are published, and still are, if not bitter exactly, at least not entirely happy and satisfied. Whatever they thought was going to happen didn’t happen.

Well, what did they think was going to happen? It strikes me as a real and important and fascinatingly complex question. What do you think is going to happen when you publish your book? What do any of us think is going to happen? If perhaps now with fewer so-called gatekeepers, “how to get published?” is not the dark and menacing question it once was, it seems to me that it is worth all of us to explore, on the front end, what our motivations and hopes might be, not how, but rather “Why To Get Published?”

I spent a great deal of mental and emotional energy early in my writing life untangling writing from publishing. I understood that I could control whether or not I worked on any given day; whether my story or poem or novel was published was then beyond my control. Writing was something you did; publishing was something that was done to you. I didn’t want discouragement in publishing to diminish my enthusiasm for writing, which was then and remains now, one of the great joys and satisfaction of my life.

In the 1990s, when I was still in my 30s, I was granted a sabbatical and, for the first time in my life, had several months of uninterrupted time to write. On my desk I had the draft of a 12-page short story, with as many characters, all with problems too big to solve in a handful of pages: it was a narrative, I came to believe, that wanted to be a novel.

For me, though, there were as many psychological, emotional, and social pitfalls and traps as there were technical problems to solve. How was I going to take on a project bound to last several years, for example, with no promise of success, especially when the
most obvious and generally accepted measure of success, publication, seemed so
uncertain, and ultimately beyond my control? Meanwhile, I was aware of all the people I’d
known who told me that they “were going to write a book someday.” I didn’t want to be
someone who was going to write a book someday, definitely not the person who talked
about it. I wanted to be the person who had written a book.

So this is how I thought about it. My first, goal, I told myself, was to write a novel.
Beginning, middle, and end—first page, check, last page, check. It’s not an easy thing to
write a novel, any more than it is to run a marathon—with a good time, or a terrible time,
doesn’t matter, it’s an accomplishment, it’s, you know, a marathon. I want the t-shirt, I
told myself, I want the bumper sticker, I want the Novel Writing Merit badge. I sensed
rightly that writing a book changes you in important ways, in ways that only someone who
had the experience could understand. And lo and behold, a couple of years after
embarking on the journey, I staggered across the finish line. It was probably six in the
morning when I finished my draft, I was in a room by myself, there was no one to hand me
water or give me a high five, but nevertheless I felt something, something not easy to put
into words.

So I had written a novel. My second goal was to write a good novel. I didn’t feel
qualified to make that judgment myself. With some trepidation, then, I mailed my fat
manuscript off to my writing mentor, now a close friend, a fiction writer who has published
a novel and several story collections over the years, a man whose literary judgment I
trusted and whose honesty I had come to rely on. He sent me a long letter with lots of
notes, but made it clear: he thought it was a good book.

But had I written a publishable novel? That’s the tricky question, still tricky today
in some form or another as it was 25 years ago. Had I written a book that if made public,
would gratify anyone but myself, that anyone would pay for and not regret? Turned out, it
was. I bought a booked called A Writer’s Guide to Publication, read it carefully, did what it
said, researched literary agents, connected with a terrific one, and had my book sold at
auction to a well-respected New York imprint.

My own motives for wanting to be published, like everyone’s else’s, I suspect,
were and remain mixed and murky and somewhat mysterious even to myself, but I can
tease out at least several threads. I am a college professor, and in addition to teaching
and service, one of the primary responsibilities of my job is to do research: I wanted to
publish, not perish. Publication, juried by experts in one’s field, is the measure of the
quality of your work. So there was that.

Maybe because I was fortunate enough to have a decent day job, maybe because so
many of the writers I admired were not themselves bestsellers and commercial successes,
I can’t say that my publication fantasies involved any dreams of great wealth. I have
received generous advances for some things I have written, and I have received a couple
of free copies for other things: I can honestly say that the satisfaction I took in seeing
various pieces in print did not seem to correlate in any clear way with my compensation. I
do understand that many writers hope for financial rewards from their writing. The great
18th-century writer Samuel Johnson famously said, “No man but a blockhead ever wrote
except for money.” It’s a brave and quotable sentiment, but even Johnson himself was a
blockhead by his own definition who frequently wrote with no compensation, often as a
favor to his many friends.

But all things being equal, who wouldn’t want to become rich with a bestseller?
Who wouldn’t want to win the lottery? I will celebrate with anyone whose book gets
optioned by HBO and earns millions in royalties, but we all know how long the odds are. If you read literary history, if you read Publisher’s Weekly, you know how fickle and unpredictably tied to literary merit financial reward is. “Sometimes no one wants what you got,” observes Bob Dylan, who has written plenty for plenty of money, in a recent song lyric. “Sometimes you can’t give it away.”

If not fortune, then, how about fame? It’s true that in my writing life, I have enjoyed certain of the ego-gratifying rewards that at one time comprised my fantasy of being a published writer. In Manhattan, the day of a reading for my first novel, for example, I bought a copy of the New Yorker magazine that contained an ad for my book, complete with blurbs, a book jacket, and a photo of me. It was nice. The kind young man who sold it to me gave me an extra copy for free. Somewhere in my attic, in a box of stuff, those magazines are stored. On the other hand, that same first novel, after being sold for a large sum of money to a famous publisher of paperbacks, languished, with a terrible cover designed by someone who had clearly read only the first chapter of the book, if that, and I recall whining to my mentor over one of our epic breakfasts, “I’m gonna get remaindered!”

“Well,” he said. “Don’t all books eventually get remaindered?”

Today, I hear in that exchange echoes of talk about mortality. Me, the clueless, deluded center of my own universe, my mentor reminding me that there are no exceptions, all things must pass. Buddhists know that good fortune and bad fortune, fame and disrepute—they’re fleeting. They’re clouds blowing across our sky. We’re born and we die. Our books have pub dates and a date when the world has lost interest.

For me, my desire to publish always ran deeper than tenure and money and fame. If I were a postal worker or a trucker driver, with no professional standing at stake, I would still would have wanted to publish that first novel. For me, and perhaps for others, there was always a nagging sense of uncertainty: Am I kidding myself? Am I really a writer? Or am I poser, a wannabe, a guy with a couple of moleskins and a Tweed jacket, fueled by narcissism and self-delusion? I had a chorus of inner voices interrogating me: Who do you think you are? Why do you imagine that you have something fresh or compelling to say?

I would really like to tell you that publication will once and for all quench the slow burning fires of self-doubt. Oh, how I would like to tell you that. In Bird by Bird Anne Lamott describes with hilarious accuracy all the humiliations publishing may bring a writer—cruel reviews, sad and lonely book-signings, the phone that doesn’t ring on your pub date—all the ways our dreams of transformation are not fulfilled by publication. Here’s how she concludes:

All that I know about the relationship between publication and mental health was summed up in one line of the movie Cool Runnings, which is about the first Jamaican bobsled team. The coach is a 400-pound man who had won a gold medal in Olympic bobsledding 20 years before but has been a complete loser ever since. The men on his team are desperate to win an Olympic medal, just as half the people in my classes are desperate to get published. But the coach says, “If you’re not enough before the gold medal, you won’t be enough with it.” You may want to tape this to the wall near your desk.
Some words that I keep near my desk are WS Merwin’s poem “Berryman,” about the great poet, his teacher, his burning passion for great art. This is how the poem concludes:

I had hardly begun to read
I asked how can you ever be sure
that what you write is really
any good at all and he said you can’t
you can’t you can never be sure
you die without knowing
whether anything you wrote was any good
if you have to be sure don’t write

For me, the only way to feel like a writer is to write: to sit down and do some work. This feeling lasts a day. Staring at the spines of books I’ve written doesn’t help. Only writing does.

Despite these various vanities and uncertainties, I think there are also solid and enduring and wholesome satisfactions that come with publication. Foremost, it seems to me, is that most admirable and most human inclination—to create: to bring something beautiful and lasting into the world. It’s why artists draw, chiefs cook, sculptors sculpt, singer sing, and architects architect. There’s such joy we feel in holding a beautiful object—and who among us does not think books are beautiful objects?—objects born of vague imaginings and inspiration, crafted through long, long hours of labor, polished and honed, then, so often aided by a team of selfless angels, designed and printed, a unique and durable physical artifact. One of the visiting writers I’ve hosted confessed to me when he opened the first carton of his first book, he wept. We cry with joy sometimes when a baby enters the world, why shouldn’t the birth of a book, imbued with our best hopes, about to make its way into the world, likewise move us to grateful tears?

Often, when speaking with the creative writing students I’m fortunate to teach, I’ll ask them about their origins as artists, their childhood inclinations toward creative writing. A surprising number of them describe books they made as children—construction paper and colored pencils, lovingly folded and stapled, their own drawing and text combined, like William Blake, adventures of super heroes or wonder dogs. I am struck always by the pleasure these memories clearly evoke. Here is a pure and beautiful kind of indie publishing, it seems to me: these young writers did not make these books in hopes of securing a large advance, a star from Kirkus, or a sit-down with Stephen Colbert. They made something for the pure pleasure of creation and shared it freely with the world.

Recently I had another breakfast with my former teacher and mentor. Now retired,
he travels occasionally to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Northern Minnesota, where he works with a group of men and women clearing trails, keeping them accessible for hikers. Last summer, having cleared and made passable an old logging trail, he wrote a trail guide, detailing the lands’ history, flora and fauna; pointing out interesting landmarks; and providing some essential guidance concerning how not to get lost. On the same trail last summer for a dedication ceremony, he encountered a hiker who was not only in possession of his trail guide, but had a laminated copy of it that she wore on a lanyard around her neck.

Can you imagine the satisfaction he must have felt? I never have, and most assuredly never will, have the experience of seeing any reader of mine wearing anything I have written around their necks, much less laminated. This strikes me as a kind of parable, illustrative of the happy fulfillment of the best, most generous impulse to publish something, which is to be useful.

I suspect that in every publication project, there are motivations that are generous. That the books we so ardently wish to publish aim to make people feel less alone or confused; to give the precious gift of making someone laugh; to connect them with their family histories—in one way or another, to show them the trail.

So while I have been remaindered, I have also shaken the hand of a man in a correctional facility who’d just told me that my middle-grade novel was the first book he’d ever read. I have received letters from children and young adults telling me that in various ways something I’d written had given them courage or hope. I’ve written an essay about my own remarkable sister that in the last years of her life ended up connecting her to a wonderful and generous community of kindred spirits, a second family.

What I wish for those hoping to publish is simple. Pleasure in whatever acclaim and riches the world bestows on you. Heaps of positive reviews, easily dismissable poor ones, and good writer friends to weather all the storms with you. I wish for you the honest, quiet, and enduring satisfaction of finishing a job of work. The child-like happiness in beholding something you have made, a unique manifestation and expression of who you are, and then, the generous joy of giving it away