

« Return to article

Print this

The Straits Times

www.straitstimes.com

Published on Sep 27, 2014

To keep the world in good order, look to the writers

By David Brooks

WHEN she was writing, Maya Angelou would get up every morning at 5.30 and have coffee at 6. At 6.30, she would go off to a hotel room she kept - a small modest room with nothing but a bed, desk, Bible, dictionary, deck of cards and bottle of sherry. She would arrive at the room at 7am and write until 12.30pm or 2pm.

John Cheever would get up, put on his only suit, take the lift in his apartment building down to a storage room in the basement. Then he'd take off his suit and sit in his boxers and write until noon. Then he'd put the suit back on and ride upstairs to lunch.

Anthony Trollope would arrive at his writing table at 5.30 each morning. His servant would bring him a cup of coffee at the same time. He would write 250 words every 15 minutes for 2 1/2 hours every day. If he finished a novel without writing his daily 2,500 words, he would start a new novel to complete his word allotment.

I was reminded of these routines by a book, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work*, compiled by Mason Currey. The vignettes remind you of how hard creative people work. "I cannot imagine life without work as really comfortable," Sigmund Freud wrote.

But you're primarily struck by the fact that creative people organise their lives according to repetitive, disciplined routines. They think like artists but work like accountants. "I know that to sustain these true moments of insight, one has to be highly disciplined, lead a disciplined life," Henry Miller declared.

W. H. Auden observed: "Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition." The poet checked his watch constantly, making sure each task filled no more than its allotted moment. "A modern stoic," he argued, "knows that the surest way to discipline passion is to discipline time; decide what you want or ought to do during the day, then always do it at exactly the same moment every day, and passion will give you no trouble."

People who lead routine, anal-retentive lives have a bad reputation in our culture. But life is paradoxical. In situation after situation, this pattern recurs: Order and discipline are the prerequisites for creativity and daring.

This is true on so many levels. Children need emotional and physical order so they can go off and explore. A parent's main job is to provide daily predictability and emotional security. Communities need order to thrive as where there are chaos and disorder, there are distrust and withdrawal. The main job of local leaders is to provide the basic infrastructure of security: roads, police, honest judges and orderly schools.

The world needs order, too, a set of assumed norms and routines that all nations adhere to. You can't have freedom, trust, democracy and self-determination when thugs like Russian leader Vladimir Putin are rampaging across borders and monsters like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are killing innocents.

The world's superpower has a hard and unpleasant duty. The United States is obligated to organise coalitions to impose rule of law - to beat back the wolves and

maintain that order.

Building and maintaining order - whether artistic, political or global - seem elementary, but are surprisingly hard. Writers have to go to amazing lengths to impose order on their own unruly minds. W. Somerset Maugham refused to work in a room with a view. He liked facing a bare wall. It requires toughness of mind and rigid discipline to properly serve your work.

Preserving world order is even harder. President Barack Obama showed that kind of toughness in his United Nations address this week (you knew I was going to make this leap). It was one of the finest speeches of his presidency. During his public life, he has hit the high notes of poetic romance - his 2008 campaign. He has also hit some prosaic notes of caution, realism and inaction. But this speech blended the two tones. It put tough-minded realism at the service of a high calling.

The speech was about defending the world order against enemies like ISIS. Breaking with past emphasis, he acknowledged that, sometimes, you have to use military might to fight off a military threat. He acknowledged that power-hungry thugs aren't appeased if you try to show them how non-threatening and reasonable you are. He cast off his cloak of reluctance and more aggressively championed democracy than he has recently. He was direct and forthright. We'll see what action comes behind the words.

But the larger point is that the order of global civilisation, like the order in a poet's mind, is something that has to be fought and imposed every day. The best life is a series of daring excursions from a secure and orderly base.

NEW YORK TIMES

Copyright © 2014 Singapore Press Holdings. All rights reserved.