



## **THE CALL TO TRAIN WRITERS**

**Lawrence Darmani**

### **A Conversation with John Maust**

#### **Do you remember the first time you helped lead a writer training workshop? How did it go?**

This was back in 1985. I had just joined *Step* magazine as a Ghanaian student-intern of Daystar University in Nairobi, Kenya, and part of my schedule was to help facilitate the magazine's monthly writer workshop. Ten regular and five new participants turned up for the all-day training session. I was asked to share some thoughts and ideas on effective writing for publication.

It was my first teaching session at a writer training workshop, and I was aware of doing this teaching in a different culture from mine. I was 28 when I met my "first class" of writer trainees, and it was humbling that I had been given opportunity to teach what I had been doing as a freelance writer.

Not that I had any great depth of writing experience, being myself a learner, but I had published over a dozen newspaper articles and short stories and written some six drama scripts that had been acted, plus a small book for young people published in Ghana. So the organizers felt I might have some experiences to share. Basically, I shared what I had learned through practice.

My writing experience included some key disciplines that had worked for me, skills acquired on-the-job, such as: making time to write, always re-write to improve the first draft, work on an article or story idea until it is sharp, clear, and interesting to write. Because I had taught myself never to be discouraged if my manuscript was rejected by a publisher, editor, or individual who read it, I told the participants to cultivate the same attitude. I remember emphasizing the principle that the more you write the more you learn how to write, a rule I learned not from a book but from personal experience.

For the four years I spent in Kenya as a student and a staff on *Step* magazine, writer training continued to be part of my life. When I returned to Ghana and set up Step Publishers, I continued to make writer training a part of our publishing activities.

#### **How did you first get interested in helping to equip others?**

As a young Christian in my twenties, I felt led to get involved in youth ministry. I attended youth camps and was soon required to lead Bible studies, preach in high schools, and offer counseling to help equip and disciple young people. Therefore, helping to equip others stemmed from my belief that our Christian calling enjoins us to disciple others for whatever ministry the Lord leads

us into.

But the wider door in writer training was opened for me when I was invited by MAI to participate in the LittWorld 1986 conference in the USA, not only as a participant but also as a co-teacher in one of the writer workshops. Teaming up with veteran writer and trainer Tim Stafford encouraged me and sparked that desire to share my knowledge. Then-MAI president Bob Reekie had said to me, "Just share experiences of your writing life--what works for you and what lessons you are learning."

After that LittWorld, I was given opportunity at subsequent conferences to help facilitate writer workshops. Today, still serving with MAI as Africa regional trainer, I'm constantly granted the opportunity to help equip others in Christian writing. Believing that Christian writing is a calling, I realized, by extension, that training is imperative in discovering and equipping talented writers to communicate the Christian message.

**Is training a kind of spiritual gift or inherited skill that only a few select persons have? Or, can I learn to become an effective trainer? Your advice on how to do that?**

If the desire to train others is a gift, then it is a gift anybody can receive! I believe that training is a skill that anybody who decides to instruct others and does so with passion and enthusiasm can do. The Lord calls us to impart knowledge and share ideas.

The apostle Paul urged young Timothy to train others who would be able to train others also (2 Timothy 2:2). In that way, the multiplication effect of soul-winning will be a reality. I receive calls from many young writers who, after reading my books, seek help to write their own stories and articles. If you are an entrepreneur writer, editor, publisher or lead a training organization, such calls will come to you. Responding to them will open doors for mentoring and training.

Some come to my office--like the American woman working with an NGO in Accra who just wanted to know how to put all her experiences in Africa into a story book. Other writers come from the church, sometimes from seasoned speakers and preachers who want to learn how to write books based on their sermons and seminar teachings.

To become an effective trainer, we need to remember that training and equipping others is a calling and an injunction. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). The Lord wants us to sharpen others for them to write for Him. Again, we need to remember that there is a dire need for this training. Writers need to be mentored and encouraged because many quickly give up for lack of skill development and success in publishing their works.

One can learn to be an effective trainer, and here are a few tips:

- **Be passionate about it.** I've often caught myself interrupting my regular work in order to answer writers' questions. Passion must be responsible for this. Passion unlocks doors, breaks barriers, and keeps us doing what we really believe in.
- **Make the time:** I've found training to be time-consuming, and time is a resource effective trainers should be willing to offer those they train.
- **Share what you know** by practice and what you've learned from others. The more we share what we know, the more confident we become in sharing it.

- **Impart encouragement!** Every writer trainer's indispensable tool is the disposition of encouragement. The writers I've interacted with in my training rounds over the years have singled out "encouragement" as the leading benefit they've derived from my interaction with them. The axiom is perhaps true that "you cannot teach a person how to write except to provide the enabling environment for him to learn to write." But the encouragement you give can provide the much-needed strength and lubricate the writing process.
- **Make time to prepare:** I've benefitted from writer training in a number of ways. Preparing for a training helps me to learn from the masters. The saying is true that proper preparation enhances delivery performance. I prepare for lectures as though I'm learning good stuff to apply to my own works.
- **Educate yourself:** Writing is one thing, and understanding what constitutes effective writing is quite another. Simply by being able to write a novel may not necessarily mean knowing what constitutes a good novel in order to be able to teach it. Writing is a discipline, like subjects such as English and Mathematics, and there are certain rules governing it. Therefore, the trainer should regularly upgrade his or her knowledge in the *hows* and *whys* of the writing process. The field abounds with scores of learning and teaching materials on the subject of writing, and it is a useful exercise for us trainers to regularly acquire such technical knowledge.
- **Keep up your writing:** Training writers urges me to continue my own writings, for I've noticed how young writers are always encouraged by the works of those who share experiences and knowledge with them. Because writing is such a practical subject, I recommend writer trainers to keep up their own writings in order to keep the light burning.

**You are a busy publisher, editor and writer. Yet you still make training a part of your schedule, both in your office and in workshops in Ghana and elsewhere? How do you do this? WHY do you do this?**

First, why? If I'm able to do this, it's because I view training of writers as vital and urgent. Training is a platform for discovering talented persons and equipping them for service. Training ensures continuity in our mission to encourage and strengthen Christian publishing. MAI believes in the power of locally written Christian books and articles because of their relevance in dealing with specific needs of the people.

In these days of globalization, we encourage local Christian literature producers to reach out as far as they can go through the internet, but we nevertheless urge them to produce content that is first and foremost relevant for local consumption: drama in the local church, articles and stories for national newspapers and magazines, tracts that deal with issues confronting them where they live, as well as books that address challenges they face on daily basis.

I try to make training a part of my schedule because of this urgency and need. Being a beneficiary of training, I consider it critical that we give writers, editors, and publishers the opportunity to grow and effectively make their contribution to the body of Christian literature needed to nurture faith and Christian living. I must add that my involvement with MAI over two decades has enhanced this desire, for as we receive invitations from around the world and through our flagship training conference, LittWorld, the opportunity has been given me to

embark on training.

Then, how? Thanks to the Lord for the strength and guidance. As for making time to do this in the midst of my other roles as writer, editor, and publisher, the saying is true: "Where there is a will, there is a way." But the will alone won't accomplish much without the Lord providing the strength, safety, and protection to embark on journeys. Malaria, for example, can stop you in your tracks and quench all desire to step out! But the Lord has been good in providing good health for training activities. Also, I'm grateful to my board members and staff who believe with me that efforts put into training are part of our work and calling. Thanks also to MAI for the opportunity and the support.

Part of my training activities include raising up other trainers. In Ghana, I have a crop of other trainers I'm encouraging to take on some training assignments. My goal is to build a good number of such senior writers and editors whom I can confidently "send" out to conduct training. This calls for regular train-the-trainer sessions and mentoring.

### **Can you remember an especially gratifying experience from one of your training workshops?**

After co-teaching a session at the renowned Mount Hermon Christian Writers' Conference in California, I got the impression that I didn't communicate as well as I would have loved to do. I had a feeling that perhaps my message was trite and uninspiring. Whenever I feel this way after a training session I've learned to commit the entire situation to God Who I believe sent me.

That week, I was browsing the internet when I stumbled across a writer's blog with a link to the Mount Herman writer conference. I was stunned to find my name in her blog. The writer was in the session I taught. In the blog, she cited an analogy I gave about writing that she testified addressed a key struggle in her writing life.

The blogger recalled the analogy in which I compared ideas for writing to the situation where women in my hometown go out every day to fetch water from a shallow well. By late afternoon, the well dries up. However, the next day, enough water is always collected in the shallow well to serve those women who go out to fetch some. The point I made at the workshop was: writers must write daily (or regularly) in order to come up with fresh ideas for their stories. When a mental block hits and ideas fly away, don't worry: take a break, return tomorrow to your writing, and new ideas will gather like water in a shallow well.

Maybe I thought this point and any others I may have stressed at the session was commonplace, but here was one participant testifying of its effect on her writing life. The Lord must have led me to this blog to lift up my spirit and to keep me serving Him. I've come to accept that facilitating a writer training is like evangelization: Prepare well, share experience, knowledge and skill in the strength and power the Lord gives you, and leave the results to Him.

### **What is the biggest challenge you face as a trainer?**

Every workshop demands the use of heavy resources: time, energy, funds. That is certainly inevitable and may or may not constitute the actual challenge depending on preparations put in place for the journey and the training workshop. The real source of concern for me, which generates the challenge, is the question of impact and results.

From many years of training to equip writers, I like to measure success, because I like to see results. What lasting impact have I made on the many participants at the various training

workshops in Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa, Mali, Ethiopia, Uganda, USA, UK, Brazil, the Philippines? This question poses a major challenge.

As a results-oriented person, I wish I could measure every training session and see writers applying the knowledge gained to their writings. I pray regularly that participants who have spent time and money and energy to attend these MAI training workshops will not abandon their skills but will find enough encouragement in our mentoring to keep up their writings.

At the beginning of our writer-training activities in Ghana, a young man named Emmanuel was a regular participant. His enthusiasm in learning to write caused me to mentor him for a while. Later we enrolled him in our internship program during which he wrote articles. He won a national award for an environmental piece he wrote for our magazine. Today, now working on his own as a freelance writer/journalist, he has published several books and many articles. For his own outfit, he writes stories for news agencies. Discovering talented Emmanuel and nurturing him as a writer is a success story I wish might be repeated from our training workshops, internships, and mentoring around the world.

### **What role does follow-up play, and how do you feature this in your writer training?**

Follow-up is key in our training activities. I like to write encouraging letters to participants after every workshop, with one message: Please make time to write, don't be discouraged by negative forces such as rejection slips or mental blocks, and remember that the Lord has called you to write. Follow-up letters, like Paul's epistles, are helpful in reviving workshop participants' enthusiasm to write.

A stronger follow-up approach is my workshop assignments. My desire for results often leads me to create a workshop project. The practical nature of writing demands that we balance workshop lectures with serious workshop writing. I like to involve participants in producing a piece of writing during the workshop and at home afterwards.

For example, *Stories from Ibadan* was a Nigeria workshop writing assignment that led to the publication of that anthology of personal experience narratives. Another example is the Uganda workshop, where participants wrote expository articles on their country's National Anthem, soon to be published. A more recent illustration was a joint project at the writer workshop in South Africa, where participants began writing fiction to compile for publication. These writing projects lead to post-workshop activities that ensure a self-propelled follow-up.

Sometimes, it is necessary to return to a country to conduct a follow-up workshop, either as a follow-up of the previous one or to provide new direction for the group. That is why an intern can return to an organization for another on-the-job training period. Whichever way follow-up is done, it is an important part of the training process.

### **How and for what do you pray as you prepare to lead training?**

Facing every training session, whether locally or abroad, I'm always aware of that weight of responsibility. I feel like the sower in the Lord Jesus' parable going out to sow the seed. Will some fall by the roadside and be forgotten? Will some fall among rocky grounds so that despite the principles of writing imparted, understanding fails and the seed does not germinate?

What about the many cares and concerns that plague writers? Things such as, making time to write in the midst of busyness, writing and not finding an editor or publisher, rejection slips,

and financial challenges. How will I communicate my thoughts in such a way that the writers will be properly equipped? So I pray a lot for the participants and their writing life.

Then, I pray over the materials I'm preparing. Even accent (in the case of traveling abroad) can be a barrier to effective communication, so I ask the Lord for the grace to be effective in my communication

I'm aware of going to meet people I've never met before, so I pray to be humble enough to listen and befriend participants, to respect and appreciate those who spent time and energy and other resources to come to the workshop.

What you don't want to do is enter into an argument with a participant over a disagreeable statement or differences in opinion, and humility is one antidote to such a dismal situation. Moreover, some of the participants may be highly knowledgeable and much experienced. At a South Africa writing workshop in Pietermaritzburg, a couple of the participants were college professors, and one of them had written many books! I try to remember always that as a trainer, I'm only a facilitator, never a Mr. Know-All.

Then I pray for safety and protection. One time, a co-trainer and I on a West-African training assignment narrowly missed a coup d'état and riots that erupted and threw the whole country into chaos. Every time I enter a country, I pray for that country's well-being and progress.

I dedicate every writer training session to the Lord. It is His ministry, and we are only servants. One may sow and another may water, but God gives the growth.