Additional writing samples, for the ear

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My portfolio site has a variety of writing samples: [wayfind.com/writing/](http://wayfind.com/writing/)

This doc is a collection of other samples that were written for the ear, not the eye.   
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# AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

*BACKGROUND: My book about the late American diplomat Philip Habib won the 2002 American Academy of Diplomacy book award, presented at a luncheon at the State Department. I was given 7 minutes to speak between Jim Lehrer and Colin Powell, who were receiving other awards. The audience consisted of current and retired diplomats and senior government officials, journalists, and leaders of congressional foreign relations committee, many of whom had known Philip Habib. Watch the video at* [*http://wayfind.com/american-academy-of-diplomacy-book-award/*](http://wayfind.com/american-academy-of-diplomacy-book-award/)

In all the years I’ve been watching the Oscars, I never thought I’d get the chance to say this, but here goes: I’d like to thank the Academy…

How many of you knew or at least crossed paths with Philip Habib at some point? Fascinating character, wasn’t he? You can see why I wanted to write a book about him.

Those of you who knew him may or may not know that he did not originally set out to be a diplomat. He set out to be a forester. He was a lousy forester, because he hated doing manual labor. The one exception was that he loved fighting fires. One time, when he was a student, he had to put out a lightning fire all by himself–at 10,000 feet, armed with nothing but an ax and a shovel.

Good training for a diplomat.

A few years later, during his first assignment in the Foreign Service, he and his wife were having a picnic with some friends on the Gatineau River in Canada. The woman went wading out into the water, suddenly yelped and sank under the waves. Phil and the woman’s husband dove in time and time again, trying to find her, and they couldn’t. The police came, dragged the bottom, and brought her up–at which point Phil started working and working and working and working on artificial respiration. He continued that until the paramedics came and told him that it was no use.

Now, lots of people have tried and failed to save a drowning victim. What makes this story telling is that, by the time Phil Habib started doing artificial respiration, she had been under water for an hour and a half. There was zero chance he was going to revive her. But he would not give up! That’s the kind of man and the kind of diplomat that Phil Habib was. In time he became known as the master of lost causes: When all hope was lost and you didn’t know what to do, you sent Phil Habib, the forest fire fighter who would not give up.

Things looked particularly hopeless in the summer of 1982. Phil was special envoy to the Middle East for President Reagan. As you may recall, the Israeli defense minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, had decided the time had come to destroy the PLO once and for all. So he invaded Lebanon and laid siege to the PLO’s stronghold, West Beirut.

The siege failed. It quickly turned into a flailing, aimless fiasco. While Sharon bombed and shelled and bombed and shelled the city trying to kill the PLO fighters, by and large they were riding it out safe in underground bomb shelters. The people doing most of the suffering and dying were the civilians of Beirut. Phil Habib screamed to Sharon about that over and over again, but to no avail.

The relation between Habib and Sharon was fascinating. Representing the United States and Israel, they of course were allies. But they were also rivals in a race to determine how this siege was going to end. The two men represented the only two plausible outcomes: It was either going to be a bloodbath or a bargain. Phil Habib’s singular purpose was to stop Sharon. But Sharon was every bit as tenacious as Habib was.

The Israelis and the PLO had gotten themselves into this unholy mess, and neither was willing to risk losing face to get themselves out of it. That was Phil Habib’s job. To end the siege diplomatically, he would have to evacuate the PLO safely out of Beirut. But Sharon had not gone to Beirut to chase the PLO away: He had gone there to kill them. So the last thing on earth he wanted was some American diplomat interfering and robbing him of his military victory.

Unable to bomb the PLO out, unable to starve them out, Sharon threatened to send his troops in on the ground to dig them out–in unspeakably bloody hand-to-hand combat. The PLO, in turn, threatened to go down in a blaze of glorious martyrdom–and take as many Israelis as possible with them.

So this is the prospect Philip Habib faced: If Sharon did send his troops in on the ground and if the PLO did fight to the death, countless thousands of Israelis, Palestinians, and Lebanese civilians (caught in the crossfire) would die.

The one thing most people remember about the siege of Beirut was the massacre at the Sabra and Shatilla Palestinian refugee camps. As horrible as that massacre was, it was only a microcosm of what would have happened if Philip Habib had failed.

Well, against all odds, he did succeed. And this book is the story of how he did it. The book is never you going to make me rich and famous. It will keep me quite securely poor and obscure, thank you. But in the nine years that this project took, I learned something from Phil Habib: You do what you do because it needs to be done, and because it ought to be done. Philip Habib is the kind of man that books ought to be written about. None ever was, because the story was too hard to put together. But I am proud to be the one who finally went to the trouble to do it.

The Foreign Service was Philip Habib’s religion. This building *[the State Department]* was his magnetic north. His greatest pride was that he had the privilege of doing the same kind of work that you as diplomats have all done. For me, learning about this one episode of high-stakes crisis diplomacy–as a case in point–has given me a profound admiration for the work that diplomats do. So I can’t imagine a higher honor for me than to have the likes of you sit still for five minutes and listen to me talk.

I thank you for that, I thank you for this *[award]*, and I thank you for being here today.

# MEMORIAL SERVICE REMARKS

*BACKGROUND: Some close friends asked me to speak on their behalf at the memorial service for their 26-year-old son, Eric. The talk was to be 20 minutes, the main part of the program.*

*It was the hardest writing assignment I have ever had: Three weeks earlier, this exuberant, charismatic young man had hanged himself.*

There’s no pretty face we can put on this, no sense to be made of this, no good to come out of this. It’s a terrible tragedy, and that’s all there is to it.

But this is an occasion to recall what an extraordinary human being Eric was, the range of ways he affected so many lives, and why we all not only loved but enjoyed him so much.

Our highest calling on this earth is to give love away to whoever needs it, however they need it, whenever they need it. None of us does that consistently or nearly often enough. But Eric was the kind of person who did it more consistently than most of us.

Eric was a helper. Jennifer says he came into the world that way. When he was about 4, she broke her ankle. Coming home from the hospital, she heard this sweet little voice say, “Mom, let me help you out of the car.”

As a young adult, Eric tended to be the one to step in whenever a situation called for that.

For example, one day when he was in high school marching band, some crazy stranger crashed a rehearsal, yelling and waving his arms around. The director stopped and asked the guy to leave, but that just made him yell louder. The situation was getting out of hand. So Eric set down his drum, hopped up onto the stage, and calmly escorted the guy away – in a headlock. (You never know when those karate skills just might come in handy.)

Eric’s helping instinct is why he gravitated to some of the jobs he had. His interests and passions had not yet jelled into a specific career, but they did consistently reflect a deep and genuine kindness to other people: He was an emergency medical technician, a tissue donation coordinator, and he was working on the prerequisites to get into nursing school.

We all have different aptitudes, so we all impact our little corners of the world in different ways. Some of us excel professionally. Some excel athletically. Or financially, maternally, artistically, academically.

Eric excelled socially. He had that special sauce that I for one sure wish I could get a bottle of.

But Eric was never a stereotype and was certainly no saint. Like all of us, he was a complex, contradictory person, by turns charming, exasperating, friendly, impulsive, warm, intense, lively.

He could be remarkably generous. He could be moody.

He could be the perfect gentleman. He could indulge in wild excess.

Quiet gardener. Intense musician pounding his drums.

Sweet. Loud.

His impulsiveness is the characteristic probably most relevant to today. He was prone to taking things to extremes and would quickly form strong feelings about something and then hold fast to that regardless of what anyone else thought.

That impulsiveness could have terrible consequences, but it was also intrinsic to the way the guy ticked and a big part of what made him special. For example, the person who trained him to tend bar at Chili’s recalled Eric asking him once, "Why are you so nice to everyone?" The guy answered, "because I never want any enemies in life." Eric impulsively replied, "From this day forward, I don't care how busy I am behind this bar, or in life, I am going to be nice to everyone, because I don’t want to die knowing I have any enemies." And he clearly didn’t.

*[Other Eric stories]*

Eric felt things deeply if he felt them at all: joy, anger, love, indignation. His passions included

fun

fun

fun

playing games, playing drums, doing karate, brewing beer, laughing friends, and making things grow in his garden.

He tended to throw himself headlong into whatever he did. Music, for example. One of his bandmates wrote on Facebook that whenever his band played a gig, “During literally every show he would come running out from behind the drumset to cheer with the crowd or lead in a chant or perform some sort of antic. He had so much energy and love for the music he just couldn't contain it all behind the drumset in the back of the stage. He loved the excitement and energy and lived to have a good time.”

Eric’s life was shorter than most. But it was also fuller than most.

*\*\*\*\* [Ask if anybody has anything they want to say] \*\*\*\**

The loss of Eric is a powerful reminder that we never know how long we might have someone, that we can never assume that the people in our lives today will be there tomorrow.

It is also a powerful reminder that we never really know what’s ticking inside someone else: what worries, pressures, torments they may be going through.

So, what can we do about this sorry state of affairs? As corny as it sounds, we can make a point of giving love away to each person in our lives. Right now. Today.

The point is not that giving them love will make their problems go away. It won’t. After all, Eric got massive doses of love from his family, his friends, Traci. The point is that loving them is what we can do – sometimes all we can do.

And it’s the one thing we must never fail to do.

We all watched Eric grow up into a complex, contradictory young man, and we were all looking forward to watching him fulfill his immense potential. He chose a different route, and that was his choice. We can never make sense of it, never agree with it, never reconcile ourselves to it. We can only respect it.

His decision.

The natural question, of course, is, What could we have done to prevent it? But the question is nonsense. No one else can prevent your decision, and you can’t prevent someone else’s.

It’s pointless to beat ourselves up about “if only I had done this” or “I should have done more of that.”

Nonsense.

We can try to influence other people’s decisions, but there’s no way to predict – and certainly no way to control – which choices someone else will make tomorrow or what effect if any our influence will have.

We’re all just amateur people struggling to do our best. And the best we can do is to love the people in our lives and let them know we love them. Eric knew how much every single person here loved him. And that’s the best anyone can do.

We can only speculate about what fed into Eric’s decision. But it was his decision. This is not “God’s will”: God does not want this kind of thing any more than any of us do.

A person is much more than a body: We are each also a personality, a spirit, our relationships, and the ways we touch the lives of other people. Today we leave behind Eric’s body. But what remains of Eric – what we take away with us – are the memories of how he enriched our lives year after year after year.

There’s no comfort we can take in the way Eric left this world. But there is immense comfort in the way he inhabited this world. We are all better off because he lived. This land is a better place for his having walked it.

With his rakish smile, warm hugs, and genuine interest, he made anyone he encountered feel a little better, feel listened to, feel important. Thank God we had him as long as we did.

Let’s remember Eric not for the way he left our world, but for the way he brightened it.

# POLITICAL SOUNDBITES

DONALD TRUMP

You teach your children better. On November 8, teach Donald Trump better.

The American people deserve a president they can look up to, not a president who looks down on them

Donald Trump, Jobs Whisperer: He can't say how he would create jobs – you're just supposed to believe

BUSINESS EXPERIENCE AS PREPARATION FOR THE PRESIDENCY

Mr. Trump, may I introduce the United States Congress

Sorry, Donald, you don’t get the fire Congress

Business executives create as few jobs as they think they can get by with, and overseas if that will be cheaper. That mindset may fly in the board room, but not in the Oval Office.

CONGRESSIONAL REPUBLICANS

Lockstep footdragging

Democrats are trying to govern. Republicans are trying to rule.

While Pres. Obama has been working to restore the economy, Republican leaders have been on strike

Republican leaders don’t get to slash the tires and then complain that the car isn’t moving fast enough

REPUBLICAN IDEOLOGY

Irresponsible Republican leaders want you to pay a tax and the superrich to pay a tip

Republicans say it’s “class warfare” to make the superrich pay their fair share. They should stop insulting our troops by trivializing war.

Democrats stand for the most good for the most Americans. Republicans stand for the most good for the most-WEALTHY Americans.

MISCELLANEOUS

Land mines and cluster bombs are how yesterday’s wars kill tomorrow’s children

# VIDEO SCRIPTS

**SATISFY THE CAT—a.k.a. User-Centered Design**

*BACKGROUND: I created this video to inspire companies to design their websites for their end-users, not for themselves. The script is not written to stand alone; you really have to watch the video, at* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dln9xDsmCoY*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dln9xDsmCoY)

When I design a website, I don’t work directly for the people who are supposed to actually use it.

In other words, as a user experience designer, I’m in the business of selling cat food.

The cats are not my clients. They don't hire me. They don't know I exist.

But the cats are the ones I ultimately have to satisfy. In the web world, satisfying the cat is called user-centered design. In the cat food world, it's called staying in business.

The cats are Larry in Bakersfield and Melinda in Tulsa. The cat food is the site and every ingredient in it.

The party who actually buys my cat food is the cat's owner: my client, the executives, the stakeholders--whoever is in the position to give me projects, approve my work, and set it out for the cat.

Oh yeah, and there's one other player: the factory -- that's the developers.

As a maker of cat food, there are three big mistakes I have to avoid.

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The first big mistake is to put the owner first.

Now, I need to tread carefully here. I certainly need to satisfy the owner too. After all, if the owner is not happy, everything grinds to a halt.

But if all I do is give the owner or the factory what they want --with little or no regard for the cat--then chances are the cat’s not going to eat the food. And if the cat doesn't eat the food, how long is the owner going to remain satisfied? How well have I really served the owner?

What the owner wants and likes and thinks is very important -- but only once we’re sure we've satisfied the cat.

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The second big mistake for a Web designer -- I mean a cat food maker -- is to imagine that the cats are like me. I love strawberries and chocolate. Cats don’t. They love mice. I don’t.

I’m not a cat, and neither is the owner or the factory. So our own tastes-- and opinions and agendas --come in a distant second to the cat’s. To be a good cat food maker, I have to absorb as much research as possible about what cats need and want and like. What I like is irrelevant.

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The third big mistake is to imagine that the owner or I can compel the cat to do what we want. Cats don’t obey. They have zero interest in what we want them to do.

The only way we'll ever get the cat to do anything we want is by understanding the cat's own motivations and skillfully playing on them by providing what the cat itself wants and needs.

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In the end, if the cat won’t eat the food, then nothing else really matters. Sooner or later the owner is going to have to either go buy different cat food or lose the cat. The stakes really are that high.

So as a designer of websites, I have to make jolly well sure I satisfy the cat first, remember that I am not a cat, and find ways to play on the cat’s own motivations.

Only then does everyone win.

**HOW TO HAUL HEAVY STUFF UPHILL**

*BACKGROUND: I created this video to demonstrate how to solve a tricky problem, for a handyman magazine’s website. The script is tightly tied to the visuals in the video, at* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWVSft4dG_w>

Suppose you need to get a bunch of dirt or bricks or other heavy stuff up a steep hill. There's no way to get equipment up there, and you really do not want to be staggering around up there carrying that stuff on your shoulders. How you do it?

Here's a way to do it that requires only two plastic cement mixing tubs, a really long rope, and a couple of guys -- who are not me.

First, put the two tubs together to form a suitcase. Call either short side of the suitcase the back. Drill half-inch holes through both lips at the same time so they line up: two in the back lip, three in each side lip, and none in the front lip.

Now for the rope. Say you need to haul the dirt up 100 feet. Get a quarter-inch rope about 240 feet long -- double the hauling distance, plus plenty of slop. Lay the rope out in a long U shape, then start threading it through the two rear holes and the two holes on each side. Keep each side identical. You want to wind up with two equal lengths of rope extending out from the front of the suitcase.

To minimize tangles, tie the ends of the rope together.

Now we get down to business. Open the suitcase from the front and dump in your dirt or rocks or whatever. Then just start pulling the rope. The suitcase will close itself and slide smoothly up the hill.

One last tip: Hauling will be a little easier if the last stitch of rope coming out the front of the suitcase is pointing toward the ground. That way when you pull, you will be lifting the front slightly up.

# RADIO COMMENTARY

*BACKGROUND: This ran on NPR’s “All Things Considered.” Listen to it at* [*http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4199821*](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4199821)

**Free Christ from Christmas**

Every year I boycott the local store that trots out its Christmas doodads first. It starts earlier every year. This year it was October 4th.

As a Christian, I believe Jesus was God's way of walking the earth. If that's anywhere close to true, then he is really the wrong person to trivialize. So I object to having him prostituted by marketers. Hence the boycott.

But I'm not fighting the commercialization of Christmas. That fight was lost ages ago.

What I'm after is more radical: disentangling Jesus entirely from this blight on his good name. I'm out to change the bumper sticker from “Keep Christ in Christmas” to “Free Christ from Christmas.”

Heresy? Well, compare Christmas with Martin Luther King's birthday. On his birthday, nobody ever pays any attention to his birth. Instead, it’s “I Have a Dream” and his impact on society.

In other words, we mark Dr. King’s birth by focusing on what he said and did as an adult.

Christmas, by contrast, has no time for what the adult Jesus said and did. Christmas keeps him safely shut up as a baby in the manger -- where he can't make his usual noise about people repenting and living a godly life.

So does his birth matter at all? Well, it matters to his followers today as one way of backing up his claim to be the son of God. But that's not the way Jesus himself backed up his claim. He pointed not to his birth, but to his resurrection. So I'll trade a month of Christmases for one meaningful Easter.

When Jesus denounced hypocrisy, he was not talking about saying one thing and doing something else. He was talking about using God and the things of God as a means to some other end -- like, oh, say, making a buck. This is why he drove the money changers out of the temple.

We do him no honor by carting him out once a year to stand him on his head.

I’m not proposing that we cancel Christmas. I know: The economy would collapse without it. Fine. Keep the holiday. Keep the gift-giving and the jingle bells. Let's just subtract the remaining Jesus element from it -- and move that over into Easter. Call December 25 Solstice. Call it Retail Day. Call it Holiday Number Nine. I don’t care. Just leave Christ out of it.

He was not born to be the patron saint of fourth-quarter earnings.

# SONG LYRICS

**CLEAR SKIES BELOW**

*BACKGROUND: Based on a friend’s blog. About the joy of a long-overdue vacation. Listen to it at* [*http://song.space/5rg5tk*](http://song.space/5rg5tk)

I might land soon, or I might just keep on flyin’

I'm makin’ it up as I go

Loopin’, wheelin’, coastin’ on a tailwind

Right now, right now’s all I wanna know.

*Chorus:*

No more holdin’ back

From now on, I go where I wanna go

How high can I fly?

Sunshine straight ahead, clear skies below

Like blowin’ up a balloon, this grin keeps growin’

Any more and I just might explode

Whoopin’, laughin’, singin’ like a sailor

Breathe in, breathe out, that’s my whole workload

*(Chorus)*

*Bridge:*

This mornin’, I called in sick then pitched the phone

Can’t die having only worked and never flown.

I might buzz Brugges or Berlin or maybe Jamaica

Bombay, Bangkok, or the Alamo

All depends on how I feel I’m feelin’

This sky, that sky, take ’em all in a row.

*(Chorus)*

**Far From Tomorrow**

*BACKGROUND: I wrote this song for my wedding. Listen to it at* [*http://song.space/5rg5tk*](http://song.space/5rg5tk)

Far from tomorrow, when love's an old friend

When we lose count of years we've spent

All I will want is more years with you

Still side-by-side the whole ride through

’Cause I have chosen for once and for all

You as my partner to travel along with, come rises, come falls.

Cold blows the winter, cold blows the north wind

We'll snuggle in for hours on end

Soft as a snowfall, warm as a tear

Our love will grow from year to year

From day to day, heart to heart, eye to eye

No happily-ever-afters, but shoulders to share if we cry.

Far from tomorrow, who knows what follows

Who knows what sorrows yet may show

From what we do know, this much is clear

That you and I belong right here

For I believe to the core of my bones

Far from tomorrow, love, wherever we are together is home.

**The Song Goes On**

*BACKGROUND: This song is meant to be the final encore of a live concert, ideally with the singer sitting on the edge of the stage. The verse is quiet and conversational. The chorus builds to a rousing crescendo. I have not yet had it recorded.*

It’s late, the show is nearly over

We need to clear the stage and go

You’ve made our day. Thank you so much.

We’re sad to go but glad to know

*Chorus*

That the song goes on

When the singer’s gone

Like angels carved in stone

Just sing along un - til it becomes your own.

My mama taught me right from wrong

To tell the truth, to help, to share

Her picture’s all I have to hold now

But her fingerprints are everywhere

*Chorus*

‘cause the song goes on

When the singer’s gone

Like angels carved in stone

Just sing along un - til it becomes your own.

*Tag*

‘til it becomes your own.

**Get Back Up**

*BACKGROUND: Inspired by Joe Biden’s “first principle of life”* (Promises to Keep, *xxii-xxiii). The music is Caribbean. It has not yet been recorded.*

Tommy swaggered off the bus in the big city

Went looking for a place to shine

But every place he went, it was the same same story:

“Take a number, stand in line.”

So he found a dry spot under an overpass, cardboard for a bed

“Hey, that’s my spot!” screamed a crazy man. Through tears, Tommy said:

*(Chorus)*

“If you knock me down, I gonna get-a back up

Dust off my pants an’ give my knee a good rub

Just like wood floats, if you knock me down, I gonna get-a back up.”

Tommy juggled telling jokes for a few tips,

But a street urchin took his take

Redeemed a lotta bottles and he shined shoes

Fished at night in the lake

Asked a beautiful girl for a date, but she slowly backed away

Met a runaway girl in the shelter, together they would say:

*(Chorus)*

*(Bridge)*

“Don’t talk to me of fate

Fate’s just hindsight

The choices that you make

Chances that you take.”

He was picking through the trash on a street corner

When the mayor’s car stopped at the light

Got a sudden thought, so he said, “Mayor,

Your town is a shameful sight.

Pay us poor boys to pick up trash from your sidewalks and your streets

You get clean streets, we get a buck or two, buy a bite to eat.”

*[2 or 4 bars percussion]*

Well, the next thing you know, Tommy’s posing for a picture

With the smiling mayor shaking his hand

Running trash collection for the whole city

The right man to shape a plan. (like If you knock…)

*(Chorus)*