

## Cho Tu ZAW

### Why I Write, What I Write, and How I Write

The most difficult question for a writer is “why I write.” I never have an answer for this question, so I chose this panel to answer it for myself.

Last year, I watched a Hollywood movie called *August Rush*, in which the main character, a little boy who is a genius musician, is asked by a girl, a talented pianist: “Do you like music?” “More than food,” he answers. I’ll never forget that scene.

More than food – yes! It’s the same for all artists: creating, playing, writing, everything – all our works are our staple food. Sometimes we need our writing more than food. If you ask me why, I don’t know, but I write. I did, I do, and I will go on doing so. Because writing, for me, is more than food.

My writing started at a very early time in my life, when I was nine. I remember that my first writing was gossip about my family; I wrote about my father, my mother, my aunt, my grandmother, my sister, everyone. I wrote about how I liked and didn’t like them and portrayed them as they were. Why didn’t my dad let me play outside at night? Why didn’t my mum give me more money to spend at school? Why didn’t my aunt and my granny buy more toys for me? There were so many reasons and so many questions in my writing! Everyone read it and laughed, and they were never angry because of it. In fact, all of them appreciated my writing. They appreciated me for it, as well, and that made me more confident. I got into the habit of writing everything I saw and felt.

But the world is not always so simple. “He is guilty because of his writing; he tried to raise the people against the government and to destroy the stability of the nation.” In 1989, the judge announced his statement just like that. I was guilty because of my writing. Why was I guilty? I just wrote what I saw, what I felt, like I did in my childhood. Still, at that time, I was declared guilty because of my writing.

Since my first writings about my family, I have written about everything. Sometimes about the tree in my garden, sometimes the birds singing on the branches of the tree in front of my home, sometimes the people living around it, like the paintings of a portrait artist. Or perhaps not really like the paintings of a skillful portrait artist, more like the cave paintings of stone-age men. In the prehistoric age, men started to express their emotions and experience by painting on the walls of their caves. That was the first literature of mankind. Then picture became alphabets, and painting changed to words, but the expression of emotion and experience never changed.

But it doesn’t stop there; in the next step, I change my writing to create another world, a different world that can’t be seen. Maybe one that only I can see. I create many people who are not real, many events that are not real. Sometimes they are presented as real, sometimes not. In that way, in my writing, what I see doesn’t matter; what I feel is the most important thing. Vision is the important thing for

journalism and for nonfiction, and feeling is the important thing for poems, novels, short stories, and other creative writings.

My professional writing began at the university, when I was seventeen. In a popular magazine, I wrote a love story; at that age, I was always fond of writing love stories. Friendships were formed at the university for love of reading and writing. All my friends wrote poems, short stories, and novels. Some of us sent our writing to the monthly magazines; some of us made chapbooks and sold them among our friends on campus. University life was rich with literature. I will never forget those days, the sweetest time of my life.

But then it was suddenly over, my adolescent life, the sweetest part of the life, my sixteenth, seventeenth year – all suddenly gone. All of us lost our youth, and we will never have that time again.

In 1988, when the student revolution arose against the dictatorship in Burma, we, the university students, left our studies, our love poems, our romances and took part in the revolution. All the poems, the shorts, the novels on the university campus changed, left romance behind to turn to revolution.

In 1989, I took the position of editor in a signboard magazine in Myeik, a small town in Tanintharyi Division in the southern part of Burma, and also wrote editorials and a poem. The military regime arrested me for that action and sentenced me to one year in prison. But I didn't give up in prison; I continued my writing, especially poems. In Burma, the authorities never allow any pens or paper into the prisons. So we secretly brought ballpoint refills into prison and used waste paper for writing. Then we tried to take our poems outside when we left prison for court. All of my writer friends became my collaborators. They published my poems when I was in prison. In that way, I published a book of underground poems in 1989, but I never got a chance to read that book. Because when I was released, all of my friends had fled to the border, some of them were dead, some lost, some still in prison. A few of them plead asylum in the United States and all over the world. When I arrived in Iowa, some of these friends came to meet me; for just a few hours' meeting, they drove over 10 hours. It's crazy to think about driving so long to meet for just a few moments, but this may have been our only chance to see each other after twenty years.

Some people think of me as just an activist, a politician and not a real writer, not a real poet. That doesn't bother me; all are parts of my life. In the beginning, as I said, I was a writer; writing was my food. So, after prison, I planned to go back to my writing. There are many politicians, many activists, many former student leaders in Burma; almost all are in prison.

Seventeen years after 1988, they were released a few months, and they tried to demonstrate for the freedom of Aung San Suu Kyi, the freedom of the people. They were arrested again, this time for over sixty years in prison. Recently, the government announced amnesty for over six thousand prisoners, but almost all are criminals, just a few political prisoners. And the former student leaders are still in prison. They are real heroes, real activists, real politicians. Not like me. I am just a

writer. After my time in prison, I never participated in any political activities again. But I still write about the injustice and oppression in our country. With my film and my writing, I always try to describe the real things that happen in our country, how the people are suffering. Sometimes I write articles based on what I see. Sometimes I create novels and poems based on what I feel.

After university, I became a commercial film director and created more films and less literature. I lost my chance to write. Commercial film in Burma makes for a hell of living. I have written many screenplays and made many films in my life, all according to the audiences' desires. Almost all are love stories. I created many characters, many dramas, many fictions, all according to my country's film industry. I had to make movies every month. So much creation. I hated that life, but I couldn't escape it if I wanted to make a living.

I needed a place to hide from that commercial hell, and at last I found a place: writing, my first artistic love. So I write again and again; I write everything that is in my heart, everything, every word. I get to live my life again. I write everything I see, everything I feel about the people, about our country, so the authorities have censored my writing. They never allow my writing in monthly magazines and journals legally distributed in Burma.

So I do my writing on Facebook.

A few days ago, they made an announcement that people who write on Facebook against the government, the authorities or official organizations are punishable by five years in prison. My readers around the world sent me a warning: "Be careful; that is pointed at you."

But I don't care because I am a writer; I need to write no matter how they threaten me. I can never stop my writing again. Even if they arrest me, I will go on writing in prison. Because this is not only for the people's freedom but also the freedom of my heart, my soul, my everything. I love writing. I can't live without writing. It is more than food to me, so whatever I face, I will go on writing until my last breath.