

[Living in Michigan, Writing New York](#) [1]

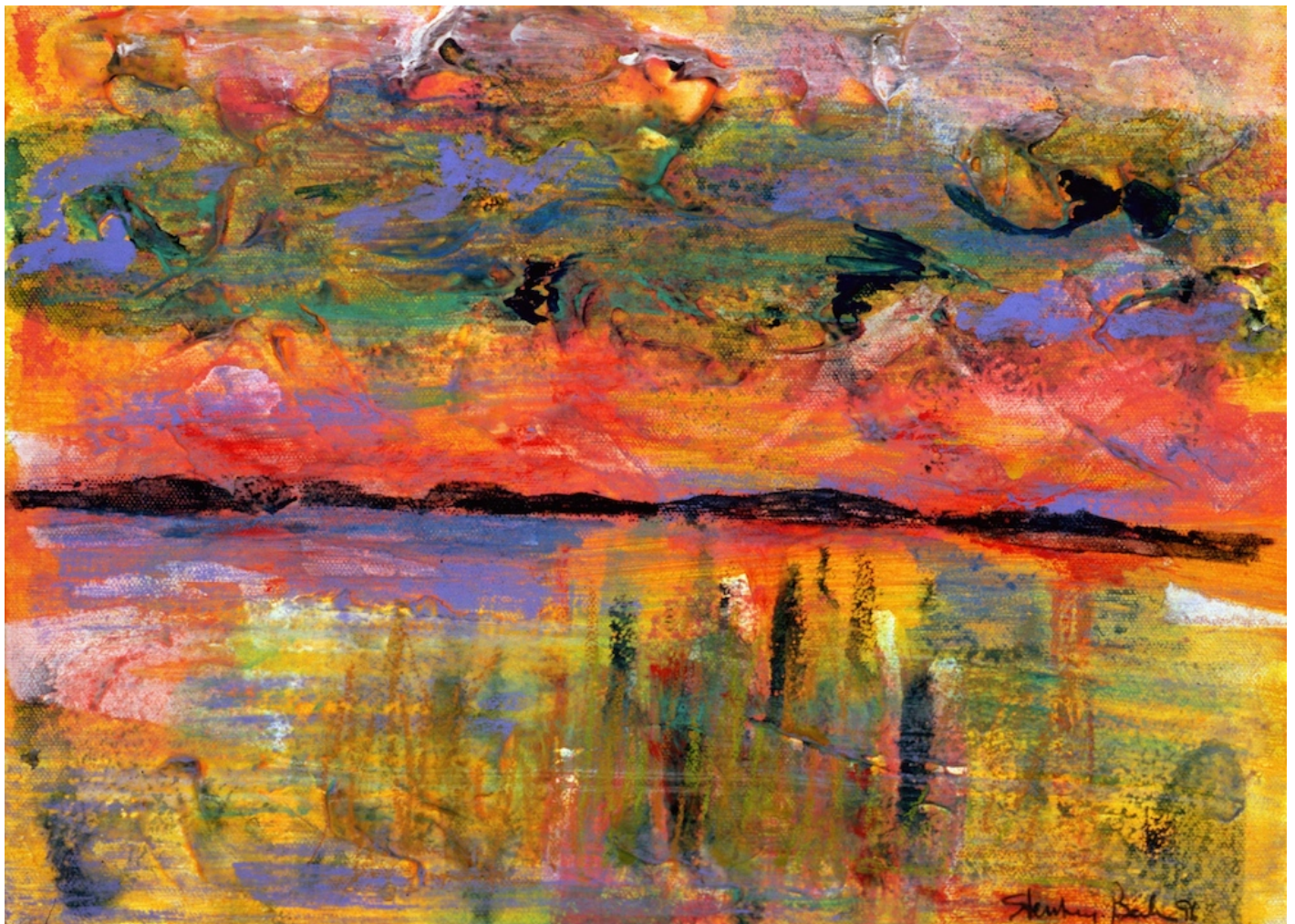
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Essay by Michael Steinberg

Maybe You Really Can't Go Home Again (to Write)



For the first time in over thirty years, my wife Carole and I are not in New York City for the holidays. Instead, we're at our getaway cottage in the Michigan north woods. It's after dawn on New Year's Day 1995, Carole is in her loft working on a painting, and I'm standing at the picture window, nursing a cup of coffee, looking across the bay to Charlevoix, thinking about the project I've been struggling with for almost a year now—a collection of essays and memoirs about growing up in New York.

One of the reasons we didn't go—or so I told myself—was that I wanted a block of uninterrupted time to work on that

collection. But for the entire time we were planning the trip north, I found myself feeling restless and disappointed that we were breaking our New York ritual for the first time.

On the day we left Lansing, I decided that if I wasn't going to New York this Christmas, I'd bring Manhattan to northern Michigan. So I packed all my New York books and my CDs of New York music, and took them with me.

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For the first day and a half, I alternately wrote and moped around, daydreaming about previous holiday sojourns to the city. I recalled Christmas eves spent attending midnight Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, visiting old friends in Armonk and Farmingdale, and cruising my old neighborhood in Rockaway Beach, looking for familiar landmarks.

As McCoy Tyner's "New York Reunion" or Bobby Short's *Songs of New York* played softly in the background, I reminisced about our familiar holiday compulsions: OD'ing on Off-Broadway plays, standing in line at 8 a.m. in sub-zero cold to get tickets to the Matisse or Miro exhibition at MOMA, and hiking the three long blocks against the cutting East River wind to the Brasserie for a 2 a.m. cup of hot, steaming cappuccino and a pêches melba.

For the thirty-plus years we've lived in Michigan, I've continued to feel like a displaced New Yorker. And I'm sure it has as much to do with disposition as geography.

As a teenager in the 1950s, I had a vision of myself as an aspiring writer. That's because I was drawn to the various myths—and realities—of New York as a literary mecca. In the post-war period, Greenwich Village was the hangout for jazz musicians, artists, and writers. Kerouac and Ginsberg allegedly gathered at Chumley's on Bedford Street—or at the fabled White Horse Tavern on Hudson and 11th, where legend also had it that Dylan Thomas took his last drink before checking out. And in the late '50s and early '60s, NYU, Columbia, and the New School were the places to be for would-be intellectuals and artists.

I let those dreams go when I moved to Lansing in 1964. I got my Ph.D. in English and entered into an uneasy alliance with my adopted home. Now, in later mid-life, I ask myself why I left New York in the first place.

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By the third day of our north woods retreat, though, Carole and I had established a routine. Early morning, we'd brew a pot of coffee, and I'd write at the dining room table while she worked on her paintings up in the loft. Then we'd make breakfast and either walk or cross-country ski in the woods.

Mid-afternoon, we'd cook up a hearty soup or stew, or maybe bake some bread, before taking a catnap. In the late afternoon, we'd build a fire and read until dinner. Carole read her art books and did some sketching; I slowly made my way through a stack of memoirs by writers who were part of the New York literati in the '50s and '60s. Later in the evening, we'd sit by the fire and listen to old jazz and '50s love songs.

On the fourth day, I experienced the sensation and surprise that Bernard Malamud described in his novel *Dubin's Lives*: "If it is winter in the book, spring surprises me when I look up."

One morning, toward the end of the week, I momentarily broke my writing trance and yelled up to Carole: "Hey, working here isn't half-bad. Maybe I'm finally starting to make my peace with living in the Midwest."

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I left New York City because I was convinced I couldn't live and write there, that there were simply too many seductions and distractions: theater, the jazz clubs, museums, the elegant restaurants, all the movies and sporting events I hungered to see. And as these diversions became too expensive—especially on a graduate student's income—it made little sense to live there.

Then there was the competition. So many accomplished writers lived and worked in New York; how would I ever

succeed there? Whatever the reasons, I knew at 25 that it was time to leave.

"My understanding is that very, very few people live in the place they would choose," Diane Wakoski said at a talk I recall her giving in a Lansing bookstore in the early 1990s. "So, a huge portion of your life is spent either chafing against it, or using your imagination to transform it, or else learning to accept it."

When I made that choice, it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be heading back home as soon as I finished my Ph.D. But 32 years later, I am still here, writing about the mythical and real-life New York I grew up in. In the process, I've discovered a paradox: The more displaced I've felt in Michigan, the more urgent it's become for me to write about my New York roots.

Ex-New Yorker Leslie Brody writes in her essay "Jewish Geography" that "[l]eaving New York was the only way I could preserve its poetry."

And writer Kathleen Norris says that fellow Midwesterner Willa Cather experienced her best writing years in Greenwich Village from 1912 to 1927, when the most celebrated of her Nebraska novels were published. "To do fictional justice to Nebraska," Norris writes in her introduction to the anthology *Leaving New York*, "apparently she found it necessary to remain in New York."

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As I stand here by the window, I watch the deer drift by to nibble on the corn scraps that we put there yesterday. And I see ice flows begin to form on the bay, signaling that it's going to be a long, cold winter.

I turn back toward the computer now beckoning me with its blinking cursor. I look at the screen, and for a moment, I'm once again surprised by what's there. My latest New York essay is still a long way from completion, and yet I'm feeling strangely content to be exactly where I am.

As I continue to wrestle with this shifting paradox, I'm beginning to realize that there's an internal process at work here. In writing about New York from my cottage in northern Michigan, I'm all the while transforming the landscape of place into the inscape of memory.

Publishing Information

- *Dubin's Lives* by Bernard Malamud (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).
- "Jewish Geography" by Leslie Brody and introduction by Kathleen Norris in *Leaving New York: Writers Look Back*, edited by Kathleen Norris (Hungry Mind, 1995).

Art Information

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Michael Steinberg is the founding editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* and has written and co-authored six books and a stage play. *Still Pitching* won the 2003 *ForeWord Magazine* Memoir of the Year. An anthology, *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (with Robert Root), is in its sixth edition. He's the nonfiction writer-in-residence in the Solstice/Pine Manor College MFA program.

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