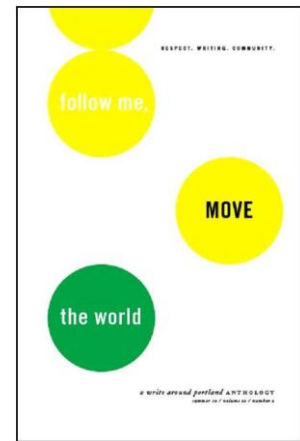


## Introduction by Ben Moorad to Write Around Portland's Summer 2010 anthology, *Follow Me, Move the World*

*Ben Moorad started Write Around Portland with Liza Halley in 1999. He now serves on its Board of Directors and works as a writer and nonprofit consultant.*



Ten years ago, Stuart Pope wrote a line that made me want to change my life. It was an Indian summer afternoon, and I was sitting in on a session of our workshop in the dining hall of a public housing building for seniors and adults with disabilities in the Hollywood District in northeast Portland. This was a group of people who cherished the community they'd built among themselves. They reveled in the support they gave each other, and they seemed a little protective of Stuart. He was the youngest among them, he only read when someone else in the group asked him to read, and he often seemed surprised anyone wanted to hear what he had to say.

After we wrote together and everyone else in the circle had read, the facilitator, a volunteer named Tanya, asked Stuart if he'd like to share what he'd written. He shrugged and bent over his notebook. He started to read a brief remembrance from earlier in his rehabilitation from a horrific accident that, I knew from his previous stories in our anthologies, had shattered the life he had known and irrevocably changed who he was. He read this new piece as he usually read, matter-of-factly, enunciating every syllable clearly, but moving quickly so he wouldn't take too much of anyone's time.

He began with a description of his long days in a hospital bed, as the pain meds swelled through his veins and receded, beaten back again by the constant pain. He wrote about the long trail of physical therapy sessions already behind him, the visits from family and family friends, and the insight he gained by watching "Kung Fu" through a Demerol fog. Then he tried to make sense of what that seemingly disconnected series of sensations meant and how they somehow had become the new life he was still trying to make out clearly. These were difficult and slippery things, and the words slowed when he thought of the long struggles ahead, the uncertainty of how he would heal, and who he would be in the end. Then his voice took on a rising power as he said, "And I learned to take the side of the ill."

He read that line with the sudden sureness of the hard-won. He'd put no pity in it and asked for none. This was the empathy he'd earned. He paused after that line and looked around at the rest of us.

For ten years now, that line has haunted me. It's modest, and in its modesty, I hear the heart of justice. He is articulating what he's worked free from the pain – a wisdom suffered for and worked toward.

This is his personal story he's telling and his lesson he's recalling, and it humbles me even as it inspires me to think I might gain some of the perspective it holds without having lived the life he's lived to gain it. I hope I do him no disservice when I say that most of the time when I remember that line, it floats in my mind on its own like an aphorism, telling me again how to be more human.

I don't know if this is anything close to what he intended when he wrote it or if anyone else has taken from it what I have. Maybe there was something in me right then that made me hungry to hear it that way. Who can know? But that in itself shows the power of our stories: they allow us to get from others' imaginative and experiencing minds what we each need to inform our own.

By the time I heard that story of Stuart's, Write Around Portland had been going strong for almost two years and I'd been changed in one way or another by the words of hundreds of our writers. In the years since, I've been changed by the words of thousands more. With each anthology and reading, the power of these stories is freshly revealed, for in each new workshop and on each new page, there is someone who has found a new expression of his or her humanity. Sometimes what we gain is as serious as that line of Stuart's, and other times it's delightfully silly. But whatever we find through this exchange of writing and reading, of telling and hearing, when we take it in, we learn a new way of seeing the world and gain a glimpse of another way of being human.

To learn what it is to be something other than our usual selves is an ethical act, and it's full of joy because it goes to the essence of the human. *And I learned to take the side of the ill.* That line makes demands on me I sometimes know I can't meet, but every time I hear it in my mind, I feel a steady joy, and its triumphant cadence again makes perfect sense. That joy in the work of being human is what Write Around Portland means to me.

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