Thirteen weeks at Mount Hope, writing lessons from the cemetery

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I. THE HEDGE

My first job was at Mount Hope Cemetery in Topeka, Kansas. I was 16 years old and had never had more than the odd jobs of mowing yards or babysitting. The summer of 1965, I was one of what the permanent grounds crew called “the boys,” hired on after school ended. All spring, the regular crew had watched a half-mile of hedge grow along 17th Street, and as “boys” our first job was to trim that overgrown hedge. “It’s been waitin’ for you,” the crew told us. Armed with heavy hedge clippers, non-electric, non-powered, we spent four solid days trimming that half mile: lift the clippers, squeeze them together, cut and chop until our arms were heavy, our shirts soaked with sweat, our hands blistered and swollen, our shoulders so tired and sore we could barely lift our forks at dinner. The hedge, long and tedious, woody, thorny and stubborn, was a test the full-timers gave us. Some boys quit, the regulars
told us. Some weren’t tough enough. I wasn’t tough; I was persistent, determined to survive. Finally, the hedge was trimmed, and we moved on to other work—mostly mowing. Full-time crew workers rode their machines, of course, while we boys walked, pushing those mowers ahead of us. Believe it or not, we felt lucky, because at least we weren’t trimming hedge. We had passed a test. Sometimes, that first step is the greatest.

When I was a beginning writer, the concentration and work necessary for sitting down every day was hard to muster. That blank page, after all, is the half-mile hedge, interminable. It must be filled with words, then trimmed over and over. Writing is hard, mentally and physically, and you have to attack it early and often, and with a sense that each day you are passing a test. You may not be strong; you may not be good at what you are doing, but you must be persistent. Persistence is the only virtue any good writer has in common with all other good writers.

Trimming a hedge is not elegant work. The hedge may come to look better, but has little potential of becoming a work of art, though it still needs time, care, attention, and patience. How else will we make art? The cemetery taught me the value of doing the work for the sake of the work, not for praise, not even for results. Just do the work. I did the work three summers in a row, as it turned out, three 13-week interludes that shaped me as a person and a writer.