Foreword
By Francine Prose

Years ago, I heard a novelist say that his most cherished fantasy was to sit at a small wooden desk in the middle of Yankee Stadium. On the desk he would have his typewriter, the tall black old-fashioned Royal to which he had a superstitious attachment, and which turned writing into a form of fairly strenuous physical exercise. He’d write a sentence; the crowd would watch. Another sentence, and he could sense the fans moving toward the edge of their seats. And then at last he would write a particularly brilliant and beautiful sentence, and the stadium would erupt in a mad frenzy of applause, cheers, and whistles.

As far as I know, my novelist friend never got his wish. But it’s often occurred to me that what he imagined was an exaggerated but essentially accurate description of Spalding’s working method.

Spalding wrote at a small wooden desk in front of an audience; the only thing missing was the typewriter. He constructed his monologues by telling and retelling his stories, and he revised them in public, from performance to performance. Stories would be added and dropped, shortened and lengthened, rearranged, emphasized and de-emphasized as, like most artists, he discovered what he was trying to do only in the process of trying to do it. In these early stages of a work, he was always—as he almost always was—multitasking. He seemed somehow capable of talking and listening at the same time. Even as he was narrating anecdotes and episodes from his own life, he managed to be exquisitely attentive to how the audience was responding and to what he was getting back from the crowd. What stories were working, what was and wasn’t making people laugh, the momentary lapses in attention and interest that a performer can feel opening up like black holes into which the entire evening can disappear.

Much of this would have been clear to fans who saw his work in various stages of completion. An early draft of Swimming to Cambodia—which might well be Spalding’s masterpiece—was four hours long, and was performed over two successive evenings. The final version, and the one that appeared in the film, was half that length—a pared-down, concentrated, and improved version, though there were elements in the longer draft that I loved, and remembered, and missed.

In any case, what Spalding’s friends knew was that, for him, the process of composing a monologue began long before he ever walked out on stage and sat behind his little wooden desk and took a sip from his glass of water. It began over dinner, or on the telephone, or during a chance encounter on the street, when—in response to a question about where he’d been or what he’d been doing—he’d pause, and then, completely deadpan, launch into the hilarious or horrifying account of all the bizarre things that had happened to him since the last time we’d seen him.

In his famous essay “The Storyteller,” the critic Walter Benjamin quotes a German proverb: “When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about.” And to those of us who knew and loved Spalding, it always seemed as if he were just going on, or returning from, a trip, even when the journey had taken him no farther than a walk through the neighborhood he so loved, downtown Manhattan. He adored the city, and adapted to the ways in which it changed
even as he fiercely held on to an image of how the city used to be in the rougher and more bohemian 1970s, when he had arrived in Manhattan; at that time, SoHo was still an artists’ community, a small village of painters and poets and actors, and had not yet turned into an upmarket mall. He felt a great tenderness for New York, and for the great variety and vitality of its residents. And his Dear New York City is an expression of that tenderness, a love letter to the city at its most wounded and vulnerable moment, to that “island off the coast of America where human nature was king and everyone exuded character and had big attitude.”

All Spalding had to do was walk out his front door and odd people gravitated to him, strange things happened, things that would not have happened to anyone else. And what his accounts of his childhood—including the stories in Sex and Death to the Age 14—suggest is that he was somehow born that way, born with the capacity to see and hear and experience a little more, a little more deeply and widely, than most everyone else.

Part of what made him such a magnet for the unusual, such a likely mark for the demented ravings of every sort of obsessive, crank, extremist, and lunatic was his absolute openness, his commitment to considering every possibility, to refrain from judging, from jumping to form the sorts of quick, facile, conventional opinions that most people—well, most reasonable people—might reasonably entertain.

Spalding liked to think of himself as a Buddhist. Once, I interviewed him for Tricycle, the Buddhist magazine; I imagine that anyone who actually knew anything about Buddhism would probably have quickly concluded that both of us were making it up as we went along, but that didn’t make our conversation any less searching or heartfelt. I think that part of what Buddhism meant to Spalding involved a series of brief maxims having to do with consciousness and conduct. Axioms like: First thought, best thought. No judgment. That sort of thing. And strangers opened up to him, told him things they would not normally have told a stranger because they intuited—and people have an unusual awareness, almost a sixth sense for this sort of thing—that he would listen and not judge them. He listened, he really listened, in a way that few people ever manage to do, and his reward was that people told him stories that he could recycle, and make part of his own story, his art.

That was partly why Interviewing the Audience was one of the works I loved most, and perhaps the one I saw most often, because it was always different, and always fascinating. Before each performance, Spalding would circulate among the people waiting to see the show, asking for volunteers to join him on stage and participate in what had to have been the most gentle, lowkey, reflective, and odd interview process imaginable. He had an uncanny eye for choosing people who had something exceptional and even startling to report, and he could (correctly, it seemed to me) discover the zeitgeist of an entire city or region of the country from the kinds of stories its citizens told, and their willingness to tell them. Meanwhile, for the audience, the experience of watching people open up and express what was in their hearts and minds always felt a little like playing with one of those astonishing children’s toys: those little sponges you put in water and watch as they swell into a flower or a tiny dinosaur.

Spalding had an enormous hunger for, and curiosity about, experience of every sort. He was game; he would try anything to see what it felt like and how it worked. He seemed to lack the sort of self-consciousness that keeps most people from doing things they fear might prove embarrassing or compromise their dignity. There was almost no invitation that he would turn
down, and if he did, he would be consumed with regret about what marvelous things would
have happened had he only been braver, and accepted. He always longed to be in at least two
places at once, to live as many concurrent lives as possible, and Swimming to Cambodia is
partly about that desire. Even when his health—his life—was at stake he remained open to
the siren song of possibility. When he developed a problem with his vision, he experimented
with therapies that most of us wouldn’t even consider, and Gray’s Anatomy records his
unlikely and hilarious pilgrim’s progress from sweat lodge to charlatan to the marginally
more trust-inspiring frontiers of traditional medicine.

The running joke of nearly every monologue is the way in which everything that happens to
him seems to reflect—in a humorous and slightly creepy way that cannot be explained even
by the laws of chance—and refer to everything else that has been happening to him;
everything is a reminder of his deepest worries, fears, and obsessions. It’s something that
many of us have discovered: Experience seems to follow a pattern, and incidents clump
together in ways that intensify and confirm our (often darkest) premonitions and
preoccupations. Fate and coincidence conspire to keep us in a fun house lined with mirrors
glittering with images drawn up from the deep well of our own psyche.

Spalding found in life, as so many artists do, what he was looking for—what he needed—for
his work. It wasn’t anything half so simple as life imitating art. It was far more mysterious,
something more like art guiding life, making things happen according to the needs of art.
When he had finished Morning, Noon and Night, his hymn to happiness and domestic
contentment, to the joy he had finally found in being with his Kathie, Marissa, Forrest, and
Theo, he worried that he would no longer be able to write any more monologues. He was
afraid that the elements he had needed—anxiety, conflict, doubt, trouble—for his work were
no longer present in his life. As he says in Life Interrupted, “My life is without crisis and
usually they’re based on crisis. . . . Things are going smoothly.” When he performed the
piece, he knocked on wood. He knew that to say something like that was to tempt fate. And it
proved to be all the temptation, all the provocation, fate needed. Because no sooner did he
say that than he had the catastrophic accident that would provide the “material” for a new
monologue, the one that would be his last.

I remember it very clearly. It was the summer of 2001. A bright June Sunday morning. We
were in our home in upstate New York, on the farm where our friendship with Spalding
began, where he lived with Howie and me and our two sons, in our little guesthouse, for two
summers in the early 1980s. Spalding had first driven up on a cold winter afternoon in 1982
because he was looking for a cottage to rent in the country. Often, during those months, we
would see him walking around the property and mumbling into the tape recorder on which he
experimented with practice drafts of the narratives that would go into his monologues. And
by the end of that summer, we had become close friends—as it would turn out—for life.

On that summer morning, in 2001, I checked my e-mail, and found a message from a mutual
friend, April Gornik, saying that Spalding and Kathie had been involved in a serious auto
accident in Ireland. Spalding was gravely injured; he was in the hospital. I immediately called
another friend, Robby Stein, who had the phone number of Spalding’s hospital room in
Ireland. I phoned, and Spalding answered.

There is a very particular, very specific kind of relief we feel when we have been deeply
worried about someone we love, and then we see the person, or hear the person’s voice, and
realize that the person is still alive and with us, still in the world. I realized that something awful had happened, but when I heard Spalding’s voice—familiar, laconic, with that unmistakable New England accent he never lost—what I felt was joy, pure joy. I’d been in terror, and the terror instantly melted away.

I remember it very clearly. I was sitting outside, on the patio, on the vintage pink couch that is in fact something like a cross between a sofa and a porch swing. I rocked myself, for comfort, as I talked to Spalding, and then I no longer needed the comfort of rocking, because comfort was streaming through the phone line, across the ocean, from a hospital room in Ireland to the sunny patio in upstate New York.

It was instantly obvious that whatever had happened to Spalding hadn’t in the least affected his sense of humor. He was, it seemed, in good spirits, despite everything. He told me about the collision with the veterinarian rushing to make a house call, and about the vials of medicine lying all over the road, and a series of hilarious horror stories, one after another, about the dirtiness of the hospital and the oddities of the staff and of his fellow patients. It felt just as it always had, listening to the stories coming together, being the guinea-pig audience, present at the inception of something just starting to take shape. I asked him if he was writing all of this down. He said he was taking notes. And then we had a long conversation about how ironic and amazing it was: how he’d been worried that he would never find another subject for a monologue, afraid that he was too happy, too content to go on writing. And now this had happened to him, providing him with subject matter, with new stories he could turn into art. Yes, he said, he knew. How amazing. How ironic. Before we hung up, he told me a few more stories about his stay in Ireland—the dark premonitions he’d had before the crash—and again it felt just as it always had when Spalding was telling stories that, I knew, would reappear in his monologues, changed and edited and transformed into art.

We said our good-byes. I told him to get better quickly. I said we’d come visit as soon as he got back to New York. It was the last normal, happy conversation we ever had.

A series of operations followed the accident. One on his hip, another on his brain. Spalding was clearly weak, shaken, disturbed about the prospects for a full recovery. And yet throughout much of his final illness, even when his depression became so severe that he was barely able to hold a simple conversation, he was, miraculously, able to perform, and in fact he seemed better when he was touring, on stage, working.

Life Interrupted began as a sort of introduction to the performances he gave of Interviewing the Audience at festivals in Seattle and Chicago in the late summer of 2001. When Swimming to Cambodia was revived at the Performing Garage, where Spalding’s career as a monologuist had begun, the new material again functioned as a prologue to the older piece. He tried it out everywhere he toured in 2002, and then at P.S. 122, where he performed on Sunday and Monday nights from mid-October 2003 until December 16, not long before his death. He did the new monologue in progress and read The Anniversary, which seemed like a sort of companion piece because it shared some of the same themes and concerns.

From the very beginning, the tone of Life Interrupted is laid-back, relaxed, offhand, yet somehow confident and authoritative; that is to say, pure Spalding. “Whimsical” is the word he used to describe Ireland, but it could just as easily refer to himself. And yet right from the
very beginning, or almost the very beginning, there’s that disturbing note that seems just as characteristic, just as typical.

If there was one thing Spalding knew about, and talked about, and captured perhaps better than anyone else in contemporary literature or theater, it was that moment in which you’re at peace, at rest, or even enjoying yourself, having fun . . . and suddenly there’s that disturbing, bass-note thrum, that chill as if someone’s opened a door and let a cold draft into the room, that dark thread you can follow if you want (and Spalding always wanted to) all the way to the brick wall, to the fact of your own mortality. It happens often in literature as well as life, in stories that range from Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” to Joyce’s “The Dead.” There’s a knock on the door, or no knock at all, or someone makes an ill-advised remark, and suddenly Death is present, uninvited, at the party.

One of the things about Spalding that gave his work its freshness, its unique combination of innocence and sophistication was what you might call his chronic Peter Panism: his resolute, even stubborn refusal to let himself be deadened and consoled and bought in those ways that are commonly referred to as “growing up.” Perhaps that was part of the reason why he was always, as they say, good with children. The first summer he came to live with us, I was pregnant with our younger son. It was not the easiest summer for our older son, Bruno, who was then four. For though we tried to prepare him for his brother’s birth, to make him realize that our love for him would not be diminished by the addition of a new family member, he sensed that great changes were on the way, changes that would not necessarily be to his liking.

That summer, Bruno and Spalding developed a friendship based, like so much in Spalding’s life, on ritual. You might say it was the early-morning equivalent of Spalding’s sacred early-evening cocktail hour. I don’t know if Spalding actually liked Cheerios. But he kept them on hand, and every morning, Bruno would walk across the yard and have breakfast—Cheerios with milk and banana—with Spalding. I don’t think they talked much; Spalding treated children with the same reserved, almost solemn politeness with which he treated adults, and listened in the same way he listened to grown-ups. Kids loved it, and that summer, Bruno’s friendship with Spalding was one of the things that helped him remain hopeful, calm, and secure. Spalding’s affinity for children was so profound and so obvious that though he claimed that he just wanted to be “a sweet mellow uncle figure for someone else’s kids,” we always thought he should have a family of his own, and so the passion with which he fell in love with his own children came as less of a shock to us than it seemed to be for him.

He preserved, and insisted on preserving, a child’s sense of wonder—and what came along with it was a child’s astonished, outraged response to the cruelty, the unfairness, the sheer awfulness of death. In several of the monologues he described being a small boy and listening to the rhythmic conversation, almost a sort of lullaby, with which his mother (whose madness and suicide had such a powerful effect on him and played such an essential role in so much of his work) put his brother to sleep. “I just lay there listening and staring up at the only light in the room, the fluorescent decals of the moon and stars on the ceiling. I lay there and Rocky started in and said, ‘Mom, when I die, will it be forever?’ And Mom answered him with this beautiful calm tone of voice so simple and slow. She just said, ‘Yes, dear.’ Then Rocky said it again and again, and each time she asked her he would add another ‘forever,’ and each time Mom would give this steady slow affirmative response.” Near the end of *Morning, Noon and Night* there is a long and heartbreakingly beautiful meditation, one
I still cannot read without tears, inspired by the question of how to explain the fact of death to the metaphysically minded Forrest and eventually to baby Theo:

So, what do I tell my boys when they come to me with their questions on death? Forrest already had. He started asking me about death before he was four and I told him that everyone who is born must one day die. Then I told him that the funny thing about that . . . or odd thing, because death is rarely funny, is that everyone knows they’re going to die but no one really believes it. This is a big and important fact, I told him. This is, in fact, what I consider the reality of the world. He seemed to take this in. I don’t know what Forrest did with it, but he listened and he took it in.

And apparently, Forrest did. Because *Life Interrupted* begins, more or less, where *Morning, Noon and Night* left off. In the middle of Spalding’s sixtieth birthday party, Forrest asks his father if he remembers how much fun birthdays used to be before he found out that he was going to die.

Indeed, even before Spalding leaves for Ireland, death is everywhere. Their host, whose manor they will be staying in, has died two weeks before. The manor itself recalls the hotel in Kubrick’s *The Shining*. They’re in the town of Mort, not far from a monastery where Spalding sees the grave diggers taking a break from their labors. The radio station features local obituaries; at the end of a hike Spalding takes, a sick calf appears, like a macabre premonition. And then comes the crash, the noise and violence, the blood, the ambulance, the hospital.

Even in the midst of it, Spalding is still monitoring, observing, paying attention to the world and to the people around him. Even in the small country hospital, he continues to be a magnet for the unusual, the eccentric, and the extreme; the person bringing tea and toast to the ward is not your standard-issue nurse or hospital volunteer but, rather, a cross-dresser with long green fingernails. And in the depth of his own pain and worry and chaos, he’s hearing other people’s stories, listening to his roommate’s account of how he lost a leg in a train accident.

In these early pages, all the old themes begin to resurface, and it’s impossible not to think about how, in time, Spalding would have been able to orchestrate them, to raise and lower the volume and the pitch of each of these subsidiary melodies. The body—its needs and desires, its limits and its imperatives—was always a subject to which Spalding returned, and to which the events of his life kept bringing him back. Physicality was immensely important to him; the monologues are filled with sheer activity—skiing, swimming, dancing, bike riding—and, as Spalding mentions his reluctance to watch Wimbledon on TV (“What do I want to watch a bunch of people playing tennis for when I can’t play it anymore? It’s hard for me to watch those beautiful bodies moving so fast”), *Life Interrupted* begins to confront the physical problems that so heavily contributed to the overwhelming sense of grief and loss that ended Spalding’s life. When a friend suggests that Spalding consider going out to Santa Fe to see a healer whose regimen involves burying all one’s money and surviving on Campbell’s celery soup, we hear echoes of *Gray’s Anatomy*, and perhaps hints of the direction in which the monologue might have gone in the future—if there had been a future.

As Spalding became more well known, he compensated for his inability to be an invisible, unnoticed observer with a new sort of attentiveness: an ironic awareness of his own recognition factor, who recognized him and who didn’t, what fans and strangers thought of
him and his work. So, here, he and the house staff discuss his movie roles, and his mention on *The Simpsons* is at once a bright spot and a painful contrast to the darker reality of his situation. In fact, it’s all here—politics (the quick reference to George Bush and the litigiousness of American society), religion (the nonpracticing Catholic nurse), the unanswerable interrogations and courage of one’s children. Coincidence—fate’s calling card, its sly trick—is very much in evidence; an unlikely percentage of the people Spalding encounters turn out to be named Murphy. And, as always, there is the subject of death: the death of Andy Warhol, of Spalding’s neighbor Carlos, of Thumper, the pet rabbit. But ultimately—in its present form, and again you can’t help imagining how much deeper and fuller, richer and more layered it would have been in its final version—the monologue ends with a nod to survival, and to the ways to survive. Wear your seat belt. Get a credit card that will pay for your speedy exit from a place of danger to a place of what—at least at first—seems like relative safety.

If you had to reduce all of Spalding’s work to its essence, its core, if you wanted to locate the subject to which, no matter what else he talked about, he kept returning, I suppose you could say that his work was a profoundly metaphysical inquiry into how we manage to live despite the knowledge that we are someday going to die. How are we to love the world and the people we care about most even when we know that someday we will lose it all and our loved ones will have to continue without us?

*The Anniversary* is a fitting companion piece to *Life Interrupted*, partly because it does consider so many of the same questions, but also because the fragment we have here contains something as close to pure affirmation as anything we find in Spalding’s work.

Like *Life Interrupted*, it begins with one of those moments—well, several of those moments—when, in the midst of ordinary life, you suddenly watch a glint of the light that seems to be shining directly off the Grim Reaper’s scythe. The piece begins with an echo of Elizabeth’s Gray’s eerie verbal lullaby, with the early-morning anxiety about disappearing “forever and ever, and ever, and forever.” But if, as Spalding said, there was nothing funny about death, he always managed to find something comical about it. And here it’s Theo’s desire to play the Mummy, to transform his death-obsessed father into a pretend corpse whose brain is about to be devoured by flesh-eating beetles.

*The Anniversary* charts a day, a typical day—that is to say, a day during which the forces of damage and disaster are locked in their usual daily battle with the life force, with the power of pleasure and joy. There are reasons for grief and suffering everywhere: in the terrible fate that has befallen Spalding’s friend Freya, who, after a series of strokes, hovers in a “horrific bardo state. Somewhere in between living and dying . . . some limbo state where time does not exist.” And in the sorrow of the relatives who camp out by the hospital bedside of Spalding’s neighbor Carlos, who lies ill and probably dying of pneumonia. And yet the life force keeps insisting on itself. Though the doctors have given her husband a one percent chance of survival, Carlos’s wife, Marie, remains certain that he is going to pull through. As they leave the hospital, Spalding is moved to pray for what only a miracle will accomplish: “I visualized a warm ball of energy at the base of my spine. It looked like a little sun. Then I let it rise up my spine and burst out the top of my head. It burst out like a volcano of multicolored confetti, and it sprayed up and out and settled on Carlos like a colorful electric snow.”
And now *The Anniversary* moves into what (in its present form) is its joyous final section: the merry-go-round ride he takes with Theo.

*We were the only ones on the merry-go-round and it was going very fast. Theo was on an outside horse, and I on the horse just in from him. I looked over at Theo going up and down to the music and I saw that he was very, very happy. He was purely, utterly, very happy. There was no room for anything else but the happiness that filled him.*

*I don’t remember who did it first, but . . . no, it was me . . . or was it I? Anyway, I let out with a yell that was sort of half performed and half spontaneously real. In other words, I was quite aware of it coming out of me and how it sounded. And I do know that it was my yell that triggered Theo, and he just lifted his head back and let out with this yelping, joyful cry. It was like out of a movie, only better. His cry just grabbed the whole day by the feet, by the short hairs, and gathered it up. It was pure celebration. It was unadulterated happiness.*

Every life is as valuable and important as every other life, just as every absence leaves a unique hole in the fabric of the world that cannot be mended or filled. And yet it’s a simple fact that there are people we miss more than others, whose absence grieves us more than we would have thought possible. And Spalding is one of those.

As I write this, it’s been almost a year since his death. What I missed at the beginning, I realize now, had to do with the past, with the friendship we’d shared, and which had come to an untimely and tragic end. But now I have come to understand that what I mourn most has to do with the present and the future, with learning to live in the world without Spalding in it. There was no one like Spalding. No one’s mind, no one’s sensibility functioned in quite interesting, always seeing things in ways that would never have occurred to anyone else. Often I find myself wanting to hear what he would say about something: a film, a play, an *item* I read in the newspaper. And now that our country has fallen on such difficult and frightening times, it seems to me that we need him more than ever. What all of us wouldn’t give to hear that calm, reflective, thoughtful voice commenting on the precipice on which our nation seems to be standing.

If there is a consolation, it’s what he left behind: the children whom he so loved and, of course, his work. Reading the unfinished pieces in this volume, reading back through his published monologues, watching the films of his stage performances, we hear his voice again and feel the happiness we felt when he sat on stage behind his wooden desk, took a sip from his water glass, transformed the raw material of his life into art, and the crowd applauded each brilliant, beautiful sentence.