In *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy points out that “There is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a literature of alienation.” As Percy explains, “In the representing of alienation the category is reversed and becomes something entirely different.” Arguing that literature of this type actually serves to defeat feelings of alienation by forming human connections, Percy describes a “triple alliance” of reader, alienated character in a novel, and novelist that is created via the language by which the “unspeakable” experience of alienation is rendered speakable. The reader’s response takes the form of consoling recognition: “Yes! That is how it is!” And the result, says Percy, is an “aesthetic reversal of alienation” (83).

Trained as a physician before becoming a novelist, Percy also came to view the novelist as a diagnostician of the modern malaise and to view literature as a kind of medicine for the human soul. Although Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Ford does not have a medical background and while his works lack the religious implications for which Percy’s fiction is so well known, Ford does, like Percy, view the very act of telling a story as consoling and optimistic; and his project as a fiction writer might be viewed as a search for the healing words that offer a kind of secular redemption from human loneliness and alienation. “If loneliness is the disease, then the story is the cure,” he says, using the type of literary/medical metaphor more commonly associated with Percy (Guagliardo 143).

Over the years, the author’s remarks repeatedly have made clear his devotion to language. “When you talk to Ford,” reports Michael Schumacher in a revealing 1991 profile in *Writer’s Digest* that focuses on the creative process, “you are likely to hear plenty of discussion about language and writing good sentences … Ford has dedicated his writing life to the composition of individual sentences, and everything—theme, meaning, usefulness—rises from those sentences. It’s a point Ford can’t seem to emphasize enough.” Ford, whose works most often originate not in complex plot outlines but in a single sentence, tells Schumacher: “The sentence is where one important, individual experience of literature takes place” (Guagliardo 93).

At times Ford’s works have originated in a name or even in a single word. This was true of the short story “Great Falls.” “The name was just magic in my ears,” says Ford. “I like the way it has a long a and a short a. I like the way it makes a kind of lilt in your mind’s ear—Great Falls, Great Falls. I like the idea of things going downhill.” According to Ford, “Those kinds of language-determined things are much overlooked in the ways people talk about literature—the affection a writer has for any one isolated piece of language, a word or a phrase. Whenever I see Great Falls on the page,” he says, “it has a little brio about it and I immediately want to start writing something
after it” (Guagliardo 87). Following the publication of Independence Day (1995), the first novel to win both the Pulitzer Prize and PEN/Faulkner Award, Ford disclosed that his preoccupation with the word independence led to the creation of that work. The author, whose writings and interviews are often sprinkled with references to American popular culture, pointed out that the word became implanted in his mind after listening to Bruce Springsteen’s song, also titled “Independence Day.” As Ford explained, “The word kept coming up in one context or another … and there’s this great line of Henry Miller’s, one of the most interesting things I’ve heard anyone say: ‘Never think of the surface except as a volume.’ So when I see a word that I’m interested in, what that means to me is that the word has a kind of density to it, and if I can dedicate some language to it I can invent something. So I decided to write a novel in which I would use this word a lot, and maybe even write a novel in which it would be a primary concern” (Guagliardo 122).

In a 1983 essay for Esquire magazine, Ford credited his fellow Mississippian, William Faulkner, with first revealing to him the consoling power of language: “Faulkner—partly because I was a kid in Mississippi, and so was he, and he was writing in Mississippi when I was growing up—treated me with and to language which was about things that made the world more orderly to me.” Faulkner’s gift, Ford explained, extended beyond language that gave meaning and order to the world: “There are all kinds of things in Faulkner the meaning of which you don’t know, but you kind of luxuriate in the language, in an almost osmotic way. Feel what it’s about … and when I didn’t understand things, console myself into believing that it was all right just to feel the words, speak the words to myself, let the words live in my mind.” It was, specifically, Faulkner’s novel Absalom, Absalom! which revealed to Ford, as he puts it, “the singular value of written words and their benefit to lived life.” Faulkner’s novel, says Ford, is a testament to the “efficacy of telling” and to language’s powers of consolation against whatever ails the human spirit (“The Three Kings” 581).

Ford’s devotion to language is inextricably linked to another of his chief concerns, what he refers to as “the fabric of affection that holds people close enough together to survive.” His fictional characters struggle to connect with others in an effort to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation. While acknowledging that language often fails to reverse feelings of alienation, Ford nevertheless believes that words have the potential “to narrow that space Emerson calls the infinite remoteness that separates people,” for, as he says, “[y]ou get to participate in other lives through the agency of language” (Guagliardo 120).

Ford’s belief in the affirmative power of language, its power to order experience, to console and to heal, and to bridge the gap between self and other, is shown in a novel such as Independence Day by his attempt to reinvent, or at least broaden, the conventional meaning of the word independence. He has pointed out that the line “Just say goodbye it’s Independence Day,” from the Springsteen song about a son leaving home, led him to contemplate the fact that the word is most often used to signify isolation and the severing of human ties. Realizing that “independence in the most conventional sense means leavetaking, putting distance between yourself and other people, getting out of their orbit,” Ford explains that he began to wonder if he could give the word another meaning, a more affirming quality. Ford allows that in his novel he intended the word to suggest “a freedom to make contact with others, rather than the freedom to sever oneself from others,” acknowledging that while “anyone can sever ties” he views himself as a writer of works that are “more affirming” (Guagliardo 123). Again and again, Ford’s art, constructed of language, testifies to his profound belief in the power of narrative to forge human connections.

Although Ford believes in the “efficacy of telling,” at the same time he recognizes that language is often ineffective. Ford’s Frank Bascombe, the protagonist and narrator of both The Sportswriter and its sequel, Independence Day, is a character who, like his creator, understands the importance of language in reaching others as well as its limitations. Throughout Independence Day, for example, Frank tries desperately to forge a connection with his troubled teenage son, Paul, in order to help the boy find his way in the world. He frets about “not owning the right language” (17) to communicate with a boy who has erected a variety of protective barriers against human contact. Paul, for example, has a habit of constantly wearing headphones, of emitting periodic barking noises, and he spends a great deal of time “thinking he’s thinking.” In Independence Day there is a great deal of emphasis upon the role that language plays in helping one to achieve or avoid connections with others. As he tries to connect with Paul, Frank expresses his faith in the affirmative power of language: “My trust,” he says, “has always been that words can make most things better and there’s nothing that can’t be improved on. But words are required” (353).

The importance that Frank attributes to words is shown, in both The Sportswriter and Independence
Day, by his tendency to assign names or to label various experiences or states of mind. Terms such as “dreaminess,” “factualism,” “realism,” and what Frank refers to in Independence Day as his “Existence Period philosophy” are reminiscent of Percy’s Binx Bolling in The Moviegoer using terms such as “the everydayness” and “the malaise” to describe his feelings of alienation, as well as his use of Kierkegaardian terms such as “rotation” and “repetition” to describe his strategies for defeating those feelings.

Frank Bascombe’s passive, stoical life in the Existence Period, a philosophy which implies, among other things, a midlife willingness “to let matters go as they go and see what happens” (10-11), often results in “physical isolation and emotional disengagement” (390). Frank often finds himself using language to distance himself from others. As a successful real estate agent, he even takes pleasure in what he call his skillful use of “strategizing pseudo-communication” (76). With his son Paul, however, Frank’s inability to find the right language is quite painful, leaving him as “lonely as a shipwreck.” At times, he says, even their “oldest-timiest, most reliable, jokey way of conducting father-son business” fails, and their “words get carried off in the breeze, with no one to care if [they] speak the intricate language of love or don’t” (265-66). It is impossible, of course, for Frank to view his son with the same Existence Period disinterest with which he views his clients.

The final scene of Independence Day is perhaps the most moving passage in Ford’s fiction, and the author’s own testament to the “efficacy of telling.” The novel’s closing calls to mind a scene toward the conclusion of Percy’s The Moviegoer, in which Binx, when asked what he plans to do with his life, replies: “There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons” (233). At the end of Ford’s novel, Frank Bascombe is awakened from a sound sleep in the middle of the night by a ringing telephone. Most likely it is Paul on the line, but the caller is less important than the fact that Frank responds with healing words. After saying hello from the darkness, Frank silently listens to the muffled sounds on the other end of the line; he hears a breath, a sigh, and a sound that he takes to be “a receiver touching what must’ve been a face.” Feeling sure that he knows the caller, Frank finally speaks: “I’m glad you called,” he says, pressing the receiver to his ear and opening his eyes in the darkness, “I just got here. Now’s not a bad time at all. This is a full-time job. Let me hear your thinking. I’ll try to add a part to the puzzle. It can be simpler than you think.” Soon the connection is gone, and Frank drifts off to sleep in the darkness. Dreaming that he is in a crowd of people watching a 4th of July parade, Frank feels “the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” (451) as he finds himself immersed in the great current of human experience and excited by the infinite possibilities that it offers. By the end of the novel it is clear that Frank is abandoning his Existence Period philosophy.

In “First Things First: One More Writer’s Beginnings,” one of several memoirs written for Harper’s magazine, Ford describes writing as “an existential errand” involving “dark and lonely work,” and he explains that the main goal of writers is “to discover and bring to precious language the most important things they [are] capable of, and to reveal this to others with the hope that it will commit an effect on them—please them, teach them, console them. Reach them” (75-76). Ford’s fictional characters strive but seldom succeed in forging meaningful connections with others. Language often fails them in their quests for human contact, so they lapse into solipsism as they desperately try to come to terms with their own loneliness. Richard Ford, who likes to quote Emerson’s line about the “infinite remoteness” that separates us all, dramatizes again and again in his work the importance of communication and affection in redeeming the loneliness inherent in the human condition; but Ford’s characters, such as Frank Bascombe, must first locate themselves, face up to their own isolation before achieving that sense of connectedness for which they are searching. If they succeed in locating themselves, then they sometimes find consolation, even redemption, in the very act of telling their stories to others. As Ford has said, “If loneliness is the disease, the story is the cure.”

Works Cited