

PART TWO

THE
DEEP WRITING
PROCESS

Opportunity is missed by most people
because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.

THOMAS EDISON

The cycle of our breathing sustains our lives. We complete this cycle over 25,000 times per day. This consistency of breath—inhale, pause, exhale, pause—is our body’s engine. The consistency of our writing practice will sustain the heart of our writing lives. We must show up and put pen to paper over and over and over again, whether we feel inspired or not.

In part 2, we’ll address the craft of writing. When you don’t pay attention to how scenes are sculpted, how point of view works, or how to best punctuate your sentences, the result is sloppy writing. Your inattention to detail is disrespectful to your readers and your art. Here, we’ll discuss the key components of a story, poem, or memoir that are essential to creating a solid, accessible piece of writing. Now is the time to take your beautiful and brilliant stream of consciousness journal entries and accept them for what they are: stream of

consciousness journal entries. Continue further inward now. Recognize, with humility, that there is still a lot of work to be done. A lot of shaping, revising, fine-tuning. But you've got the heart to work with now. Without that, you'd be fine-tuning nothing.

Part 2 will also help you find ways to embrace the work itself. The trial and error. The false starts. The interminable discovery phase. The relentless precision of the revision. A serious writer knows that writing takes, well, writing. A serious writer knows that it is through the working and reworking of the material that it begins to breathe. A serious writer knows that she is not infallible. That the words that drip from her pen are not perfect the first (or second, or third) time out.

The hardest piece for many writers is actually the “butt in chair” part of the process. For these writers, it is far more enjoyable to talk about the things they are *going* to write, or

Body Break

You may find yourself agitated during the working stage. Or, you may find yourself needing some inspiration and energy. Try this:

1. If you need to calm your mind, lie on the floor on your right side and breathe deeply. This will naturally cause gravity to slightly close off the right nostril, which will result in an increase of oxygen in the left nostril. This will help cool your mind.
2. If you need to stimulate your body or writing process, lie on the floor on your left side and breathe deeply. This will naturally cause gravity to slightly close off the left nostril, which will result in an increase of oxygen in the right nostril. This will help warm your body and increase your energy flow.

plan for the life that will be theirs *after* they write. But of course, in order to reach the point where you hold a book of your own in your hands, you must do more than talk about writing and dream about the National Book Award. You must sit down, pick up the pen or open the laptop, and begin stringing words together.

This section will help you find the threads to hang your words on.

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SELF-AWARENESS

In the world to come, I shall not be asked, "Why were you not Moses?"

I shall be asked, "Why were you not Zusya?"

RABBI ZUSYA

SELF-AWARENESS IS THE PRIMARY foundational principle of deep writing. Self-awareness is important because when you see yourself and your world from a place of nonjudgment and honesty, you can clearly see the areas you need to work on in your writing. If you don't have a realistic picture (or refuse to look at one) of your strengths and weaknesses, you'll likely flounder longer than you need to. *Every* writer has strengths and weaknesses. No writer is perfect at all the components of writing. Acknowledge and honor the strengths and weaknesses of your own writing self and you'll be well on the way to deepening your craft.

It's human nature to play to our strengths. If we're really good with dialogue, we will likely use a lot of it. If we're not so good with plotting, we will find ourselves drawn to writing character-based pieces. This is natural. But in order to grow, we have to move into places of discomfort. We have to learn

to swim just as easily in the oceans of plotting as we do in the rivers of dialogue. One of your tasks is to honestly assess which part of the writing process you most resonate with and which part you'd rather gnaw off your fingers than work with.

Let's look at the basic writing process. The key word is *process*. Writing requires steps. Any English 101 textbook will outline these basics. Terminology varies slightly from book to book, but we can essentially break it all down into two main parts: prewriting and revising.

Prewriting is also called brainstorming, freewriting, discovering, questioning, bubbling, and any number of "ing" words. This is the place of discovery. This is where we are truly free, unencumbered, and outside of our ego's control. We can write in a stream-of-consciousness style. We don't have to worry about pesky things like grammar and syntax. We don't have to use paragraphs. In this place, everything we write has the possibility of being the step that leads us to the next level. Prewriting also includes the first draft of your piece. Here, the world is rosy, perfect, and full of wonder. This is where we rant, make false starts, figure out who our characters are, and surprise ourselves.

Prewriting is a receptive place. It involves listening, stepping back, opening up. Everything is lovely. We are energized about our ideas. We have passion for our characters and a drive to discover the story. There's a "rush" in this stage. A fire. We can't wait to start writing and we wish we could spend all our days in this space of awe and amazement. For every writer who loves this stage, there is a writer who feels like he's being skinned alive with all this meandering.

Know this: The writer who remains in the prewriting stage may end up with drawers full of journals that have helped her personal growth tremendously, but she won't have a publishable novel or poem. She'll have a foundation, but not a pol-

ished piece. The writer who thinks her work is perfect just as it is, just as she wrote it the very first time, is not a writer.

The second part of the writing process is the revisioning stage, which encompasses several steps. This is the time when we get to engage our left brains. We take a step back, read our drafts with a critical eye, and begin shaping and sculpting them using the tools of our craft so that the heart we uncovered in the prewriting phase can become something the reader can connect with.

This energy is active, full of *doing*, and sometimes it is ruthless in its cutting and paring away. It's work. Here, we take that fire we had popping and sizzling all over the place in the prewriting stage and douse it with water. Only the strongest burns with the richest fuel sources keep going. We may grow to hate our work because it didn't turn out like we wanted it. We may get bored with it. The nuts-and-bolts nature of this stage is precision work. It is also very exciting and stimulating, and yes, there's still discovery to be had. But it is work. Likely, the writers who loved the prewriting phase are now digging their heels in with resistance to this part of the process.

Here, we do as many drafts as it takes to get the work to a place where it actually works. A common question at writers' conferences is, "How many drafts did you go through?" There is no single correct answer for this, as each project dictates its own needs. It takes as many drafts as it takes. The only guarantee is that it takes more than one draft. Always. Write this down somewhere and post it prominently over your workspace. *The first draft is only the beginning.*

The revisioning stage is when we step back and see our work with fresh eyes. We begin again, with a strong foundation underneath us. We have solid footing, so things begin to take shape. We get to really use all the tools of our craft we've been learning about. The more we read with the eyes of a

writer, the better we'll be at helping our own work at this step. Here's where knowing all the ramifications of point-of-view choices will come in handy. Here's where you decide whether to use interpolated or modulated dialogue. Here's where you create the pacing and the tension and where you create your concrete images. This is also the step where you edit and proofread. You tighten the sentences until they sing. You fine-tune your word choices. You remove needless words.

Know this: If a writer only does this part, he will still not have a publishable work. He may have a series of grammatically correct sentences, but the heart will be missing. The writer who spends his days agonizing over the opening sentence when he only has three sentences will spend his days in opening sentences.

Ultimately, the goal is to write from a place of union. We want to bring these active and receptive components together. It's not an either/or relationship. It is a both/and one. If you love freewriting and journaling, that's wonderful. But know that the area you need to work on is the drafting and polishing process. You need to be just as excited about the craft issues and the sentence level choices. If you love working a sentence until it is as good as it can be, that's also great. Make sure you spend some time in the uncharted waters of freewriting. Swim in both oceans. The work will be richer for it.

Here are some questions you might consider as you ponder the notion of self-awareness. What drives you to write? In other words, why on earth do you want to do this instead of watching the game and eating a bag of potato chips? As I sit here in my office looking out at the tops of piñon pines, I can't think of a good reason that would either compel you to pick up the book or compel me to write it. I can't imagine why anyone would pay me to do such a thing. My mind/ego starts to get a handle on things pretty strongly at this point

and I start tearing myself apart. Does my agent have any idea how bad I am at committing and finding time for my own work? Does she know how many ways I procrastinate, how much effort I spend to avoid this thing that I say I love? Do I actually love it, or do I do it because I have no other choice? Wouldn't it be great to plop down on the couch and turn on the TV and veg the night away? On more than one occasion I've wished I could do that. On more than one occasion I've wished I could shut off this drive in me—but fortunately this doesn't last very long, because, if I think it through, I end up with these deeper questions:

What would I do then?

What would I do without this voice calling inside me?

Who would I be without it?

How much does writing define who you are? Or, maybe a better question—how much does *not* writing define who you are?

I always look at my new crop of creative writing students each year and think—wow, how brave they are. They have answered the call to write—what perhaps they don't know—but they know there's some drive inside them that they need to pay attention to. And they are fighting the voices of practicality to show up. They are battling their own hopes. They haven't figured out yet that they didn't show up to *do* something. They showed up to *listen* to something deeper inside them than they thought possible. This is a tricky place. The mind/ego raises nasty questions: How are you going to make a living? What do you have to say that matters? The world won't care. No one gets published anymore. You're wasting your time when you could be doing (fill in the blank). These

demons have to be battled before deep writing can occur. You can look at them one by one, just like you write one word before the other. Then, they don't have nearly so much power.

Writing is so much more than picking up a pen—but of course, that is what it ultimately is. We first must address what is in the way of the path between our hearts and our paper. Writing and the benefits of writing are available to anyone, whether publication is a goal or not. Writing, in addition to a form of communication, is also reflection and thinking. When we write, we give ourselves pause before we react. We can problem solve, both personally and globally.

Really take a moment to consider why you write. One way to think about this question is to flip it around. Try to identify what *is* there by identifying what is missing. If you examine honestly the reason why you don't write (or procrastinate or avoid the act of writing), you will find clues to why it is so important for you to do so. Go ahead. Just try. It's in your process journal. No one ever has to see it.

Touchstones

1. Are you your writing? Who (or what) are you? Who does the writing? Begin with a clean slate. Just for a moment (and you can tell your ego it's just an exercise), give in to the notion that you are empty. You are a hollow chamber for breath. Sit with that image. You're clean. Clear. No baggage from the past. No desires for the future. You're pure and perfect. Start here. Freewrite for fifteen minutes.
2. Write a descriptive piece showing your life if you were not writing. Be very specific—what is there? What isn't there? Try to avoid vague “feeling” words like “sad, empty, lonely.” Instead, show how those feelings (or whatever feelings relate to you) are manifested in your scene.

3. What do you believe is the inherent value in poetry? In novels? In literature? What do you believe is important about it? How does literature make you feel? Journal about it for fifteen minutes.