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Getting it Write: On the Craft of Academic Writing

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Abstract

This essay explores the academic writing life through narrative and practical strategy. It attempts to get at larger questions of method in pastoral theology through the concrete subject matter of how I (and others) go about writing, illustrating in both content and procedure key methodological assumptions that guide work in pastoral theology, such as reflexivity, concern for the daily, demand to perform well the practice we study, and commitment to deeper transformation. I argue, among other things, that writers (in pastoral theology and beyond) manage the challenge and lure of writing through intentional crafting of everyday patterns in time and space. Ultimately, the material disciplines of writing open up into important vocational and spiritual questions and habits.

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When I have spoken occasionally on mothers and theology, ears perk up when someone ventures off the beaten path of work, family, and gender justice to ask how I divide household chores with my husband. People want to know not just what I say in theory but what I do in practice. Who does the laundry, cooking, and cleaning? How have I managed children and maintained a day job that includes writing books? My own testimony in *Also a Mother* (1994), brief as it is, elicits such questions. Despite my ambivalence about putting in print the pragmatics of my daily life, some people say that they wish I had said more. In person and off the written page, I often do.²

There is something about the written page, however, that intensifies and reifies our claims and is at once immensely gratifying. The challenge *and* the lure of crafting the written word is what I want to explore in this essay. For ears also perk up in class when conversation about the required paper drifts to the pragmatics of academic life, prompting curiosity about how I get my own writing done. Some of my most interesting interchanges with faculty peers also center on writing habits—how we stay up late or get up early, write daily or only in big blocks of time, love coffee shops or remote cabins, turn on music or demand silence, enjoy a view or face a blank wall, read a lot and write or read as we write. We harbor an uncanny awe, often without regard for quality, toward

² I end up saying quite a bit in a book written for a wider lay public, *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (2006).

those who produce prodigiously. We report triumphs like medals—a manuscript sent, page proofs received. And we lament when we cannot get writing done. Our writing hounds and haunts us. What is the compulsion? And what are the tricks of the trade?

Since publishing is essential to getting and keeping an academic job, you would think we would spend more time discussing writing methods. Practical questions about writing are actually economic concerns. They are not just a matter of art but also a matter of labor and craft. Maybe we do not talk about writing for the same reason we refrain from sharing what we do in class—it seems personal. But, as second-wave feminism made clear, the personal is political and, I would add, spiritual. How we write says much about what we believe and the power we savor or squander when we turn to crafting words.

So, when colleagues in New Directions hosted a conference on “method in pastoral theology,” inviting us to “reflect on your own work and what it reveals to you about your method,” my mind turned to the “craft of academic writing” itself. I was teaching a course by that title, its first iteration named Advanced Research in Religion, Psychology, and Culture. I have taught the class twice as a gift to myself as much as anything, a chance to pause and focus on the everyday and to allow students to do likewise, especially but not only doctoral students. The class cannot be taught without self-examination about one’s own practices. Not just *how* but *why* do I go about my writing work? *Why write*, as I asked students the first day? What is the shape of a writing life?

This essay takes up questions about the writing life through story and pragmatics, illustrating in its method (narrative and reflexive) and subject matter (practicalities) key

methodological assumptions and strategies that guide work in pastoral theology. Just noticing the role of self-examination and the priority of turning to everyday habits already displays front and center two basic methodological principles characteristic of pastoral theology: self-reflexivity and investment in practice. Writing comprises a huge *and yet curiously unexamined* part of an academician's life, at least among those in theological schools. Students in graduate programs are often left on their own to figure it out. I have written for nearly three decades since receiving my doctoral degree, but what have I learned?

First, on method in pastoral theology

Writing is probably not the first thought that comes to mind when academics hear the word “method.” Method usually entails discussing at some level of abstraction or generality the processes and designs behind our research and teaching—e.g., historical critical study of scripture, rhetorical analysis of sermons, qualitative investigation of communities, and so forth. Even in pastoral theology, where reflexivity and everyday life matter, scholars still talk about method in broad terms—how to relate theology and psychology, move from description to reflection to action, or examine religious experience.³ We often lay out our methods in ordered and numbered steps. We have, for example, Whitehead and Whitehead's *Method in Ministry* (1995) with its three-stage

³ In other publications, I have explored more abstract matters of method, particularly with regard to how to relate psychology and theology (2011), how to study lived theology (2012), and how to understand and value practical as distinct from theoretical knowledge (2013, 2014, 2016).

method and three-source model; Browning's (1991) four movements of fundamental practical theology, five dimensions of moral thinking, and four steps for taking action; and, more recently, Graham, Walton, and Ward's (2005) seven methods of theological reflection, which they at least acknowledge as "ideal types" or "heuristic devices" that are "more abstract than the realities" (pp. 11–12).

In other words, when scholars study method, we talk theoretically and idealistically. Method is a means for accomplishing something, and those who discuss it are not usually *doing* the something we wish to accomplish. We can, of course, distinguish levels of discussion, as practical theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat (2006) do in a book on qualitative research, differentiating *method* as "specific techniques" (e.g., interviews, sampling, coding) from higher-level *methodology*, which they describe as an "overall approach to a particular field" (e.g., logical positivism, hermeneutics) (pp. 74–75). But even when we separate discrete strategies from conceptual frameworks, the exposition still remains speculative, aimed at helping others understand the options before they delve in.

It is not surprising, then, that pastoral theologians who care about and hope to make a difference in the lives of those who suffer often find discussion of method off-putting. We want to help people get to doing, not just thinking about doing. In fact, method in pastoral theology often defies abstraction from action and life. One learns pastoral care, for example, by plunging in—by observing, mimicking, and doing it but never simply by talking about doing it. Even when our activity is research rather than care, we still begin as a general rule in grounded ways, with a plan that takes us close to persons and sufferings through case study, biography, autobiography, autoethnography,

journaling, psychoanalytic investigation, and social and contextual analysis. Many of us, in fact, repeatedly quote anthropologist Clifford Geertz's term *thick description* (1973/2000, p. 6, see also pp. 9–10), which he adopted from philosopher Gilbert Ryle to capture an important disciplinary orientation toward the proximate, the concrete, the complex, the personal, and the living.

Geertz is a methodological ally for pastoral theologians in an additional way, however. Even though he is well known for the phrase *thick description*, he himself was not keen on stepping back to cogitate about method. He shared an unease or, as the New Directions invitation put it, “feelings of resistance” toward methodological rumination because it disregards basic proclivities of modern anthropology. When he is most honest in his preface to the 2000 Edition of *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), he admits that it was his editor who suggested he begin his collection with an “extended analytical introduction” (p. v). Until then, all that connected his previously published essays was “the fact that I had written them” (p. v). So, he wrote, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” and the rest is history—what he calls the creation of “both a position and a slogan” (p. v) with which he had to live thereafter. But there is something slightly disingenuous, he recognizes, about imposing order after the fact. Although general propositions are crucial, they also represent “a sleight of hand” (p. vi), giving the appearance of greater coherence and foresight than actually exists. He is grateful his editor pushed for general statements, but he is clear these are “mere promissory notes,” which lack the lived material that gives the method its “suggestiveness and plausibility” (p. vi). It is ironic, therefore, that people remember him best for his distilled theories and less so for his empirical findings on this or that group of

people in Java or Bali. With *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he established himself, despite himself, as a theorist, not just an Indonesianist.

Like Geertz, pastoral theologians also discuss method despite ourselves, knowing full well the ambiguous nature of the practice. Writing in pastoral theology is often like anthropology—“exploratory, self-questioning, and shaped more by the occasions of its production than its post-hoc organization in chaptered books and thematic monographs” (Geertz 1973/2000, p. vi). A “backward order of things” is more methodologically honest: “first you write and then you figure out what you are writing about” (p. v).

Method as *craft knowledge*

I take up this essay in a similar spirit. What really paved the way for “writing on writing” was the New Directions suggestion that we get at our method not by looking back to “predecessors and/or teachers” but by attending to our own creative processes and the role of communal engagement. Indeed, the full title of the conference theme was “Creativity, Imagination, and Method in Pastoral Theology,” not just method. If method concerns how I go about my work, I thought, then the very practical work of putting pen to paper is a hidden but crucial part of this, an activity that is more complicated, nebulous, and anxiety-producing than steps and procedures. Method books almost always presume and then bypass this foundational and confounding step: How do we capture ideas, argument, and method *in words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages?*

By taking this tack, my essay is both about method and resists it at the same time. Method precludes or discourages creativity by its very aim of organization and control, whereas creativity defies qualities essential to method. Method contains but creativity

opens up to the spontaneous, the new, the unplanned and unthought. Writing about writing is a little ludicrous because the act of writing itself is something best done in peripheral vision rather than inspected directly. Like any bodily practice or skill, if you think about it too much, that thinking will get in your way. At the same time, writing requires considerable thought. It is a bizarre kind of craft.

Another methodological oddity in writing about writing will be familiar to those who teach a practice. I am not just talking about an activity (writing), I am doing it (writing), and this creates a spin affect, a myopia, a multiple mirroring that outruns anything I can control. Those who teach pastoral care must show care, those who teach teaching must do so well, and those who teach preaching should be able to deliver a sermon, thus making the practical-oriented classroom quite a loaded place (see Miller-McLemore, 2012, Chapter 8). In each case, we must perform the practice well as we theorize it, and others outside remain our judge *when* we fail and our beneficiary *if* we succeed. Here, I have chosen *when* and *if* deliberately to signal that failure is usually sure, success less so.

Fifty years ago when I took piano, I practiced by going measure by measure, not proceeding until I had each measure down (this may not have produced beautifully flowing music, but I did improve). Today, I go over words and back again to provoke from a substratum that one further thought I did not know I knew, like free association that asks the analysand to say more or child analyst Anna Freud's advice to Robert Coles to go back over his clinical notes one more time to see what he "might have missed" (Coles 1990, p. xiii), and he wrote three more books as a result. When the right words fill

the space, it is gratifying; when not, I wonder what I am doing and why I am doing it and consider bagging the whole affair.

Writing tends to be like this—loaded with promise, weighed down by anxiety. As with other art forms and crafts, this essay might even have been fun, except that writing on writing (and reading about it), just like books on the spiritual life, raise the very anxieties that they seek to allay (“I don’t do that”; “I can’t do this”). Too close an analysis drains creativity and overlooks the quirks particular to each person.

“Every writer approaches writing in a different way,” Nashville author and bookstore owner Ann Patchett (2013) cautions readers right before dispensing her own “veritable clearinghouse of practical advice” (p. 20). “While some of these ways may be more straightforward,” she observes, “very few can be dismissed as categorically wrong” (p. 21). She resists beginning every paragraph with “this is my experience.” But that is what she offers—her experience. Writing is, after all, a craft more than a method; it displays a knowledge in the doing that is honed through experience over time, that incorporates each person’s oddities, and that includes but surpasses its key steps, a place where thinking and feeling come together in a material result solid enough that one can pass it on to another.

My own use of the term *craft* partly comes from *The Craft of Research* (2008), a book that came across my desk years ago, recommended in a granting agency newsletter in hopes of improving applicant proposals, and I regularly assign it to senior ministry and doctoral students. Eager to demystify what “other guides treat as a mysterious creative process beyond analysis and explanation” (p. xii), English professors Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams do not pause to analyze their own word choice.

They simply presume that *craft* captures the whole of what they describe. The last sentence of their prologue finally names this bigger whole: Even though research is hard, “no small part” of the satisfaction of a “job done well,” they say, “comes from knowing that your work sustains the fabric of a community of people who share your interests, especially when you discover something that you believe can improve your readers’ lives by changing what and how they think” (p. 8). In their view, therefore, honing the craft of good academic writing has a larger public aim of changed thought (which then might help solve problems in the world).

Sociologist Richard Sennett (2008) defines the pursuit of craft precisely around the “desire to do a job well for its own sake,” which he describes as an “enduring, basic human impulse” (p. 9). Alongside manual laborers, he says practitioners of craft include parents, doctors, computer programmers, artists, and, I would add, writers. A craft requires a combination of skill, commitment, and judgment that connect hand and head, physical labor, and ethical values. Every good craftsman “conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding” (p. 9). Sennett reclaims the value of craft knowledge in opposition to his own teacher, Hannah Arendt, who joins other Western scholars, he says, in her fear of material invention. In her book *The Human Condition*, Arendt draws a sharp distinction between producing and thinking. She assumes, in Sennett’s (2008) words, that “people who make things usually don’t understand what they are doing” (p. 1) and therefore need the higher ideas and lofty speech of politics to secure a safe and better life. In Sennett’s words depicting Arendt’s position: “Any maker of material things is not a master of his own house; politics,

standing above the physical labor, has to provide the guidance” (p. 1). By contrast, he argues that we can learn more about ourselves and forge a more humane world only through gaining a fuller understanding of artistry and the things we make with our hands.

Writing as creation story: Patterns, time, and space

Pausing before his meticulous drawing of a gnarled yet majestic tree, artist Charles Brindley said he faces a huge challenge in the execution of every painting, a “problem” he cannot resolve, and he has to put the work aside and turn to something else. Standing beside several people on the tour of his exhibit at the Museum of Art on the grounds of Cheekwood Botanical Garden in Nashville, I welcomed his confession.⁴ I have reached similar impasses in writing (I picture Gandolf announcing to the Balrog—an ominous demon from J. R. R. Tolkien’s ancient world—“You shall not pass!” before Gandolf falls deep into the abyss in the Balrog’s grasp and utters to his companions, “Fly, you fools!”). Brindley made his remark in the context of a bigger claim that pervaded his reflections: Creating his beautifully vivid, detailed portraits of old trees is hard work.

From my own limited experience in art, I knew what he meant. I have tried, to little avail, to continue sketching and watercolors as a pastime, my mother’s declaration that I have talent like her mother echoing in my ears, only to discover that artwork takes

⁴ See Sara Estes, “Charles Brindley, Cheekwood celebrate trees through art,” *The Tennessean*, January 31, 2015,

<http://www.tennessean.com/story/life/arts/2015/01/31/charles-brindley-cheekwood-celebrate-trees-art/22424825/>, accessed 22 Sept 2015; See also

<http://www.cbrindley.com/>, accessed 22 Sept 2015.

the same kind of concentration, discipline, and persistence usurped by my day job. Visual arts differ slightly from performance arts on this score. My husband gets endless second chances when working away at his banjo or ukulele. Music making has fluidity and multiple avenues for collaboration, even among professionals who devote hours to composing and recording. But few listen or watch as Brindley creates, a rather lonely endeavor. Once done, his creation cannot be easily undone or redone; it resides instead in static, permanent artifacts out there in the world for all to see. A creative act that feels quite private and interior suddenly becomes incredibly public. Concert, jazz, and rock bands at least look like they are having more fun making music than authors and artists in libraries and art studios where, even if one collaborates, one faces some serious solitary moments where creation either comes together or fails miserably once and for all.

“When is a painting done?” someone asked Brindley. “When further efforts don’t make it better, only different,” he responded. For me, this begged the question. How do you *know* if a painting is better or just different? I have sometimes returned to a draft only to make it worse. My nightmare as book editor is when a contributor does not revise but rewrites, and I have to start over in editing. When would the piece be better left alone? This accomplished artist admitted to the 25 or so of us milling around the gallery gazing at his work that he often stands before his partially completed art in tears. In tears. This admission came after I asked my only question of the tour, “What was the particular challenge of this painting?” Was a tree limb off, I wondered, or did the blues or browns not work well once laid down? “*All* of it” was all he said.

Killing butterflies

So, principle number one, and I say *principle* here because it applies to nearly all writers, and there are few principles that do: Writing is hard (“fly, you fools”). This reminds me of a statement made years ago by M. Scott Peck (1978), the psychiatrist who got so much popular press for so long simply by beginning *The Road Less Traveled* with a reality check from Buddha’s Four Noble Truths: “Life is difficult,” a “great truth, one of the greatest truths,” that once accepted makes life easier because the difficulty “no longer matters” so much (p. 15).

Contrary to Peck, I do not think accepting hardship is so simple in writing, where the awareness does not produce long-lasting solace. One of my doctoral students remarked the other day that most of the time he writes “mad, angry.” Popular author and educator Parker Palmer (2010) quotes novelist Thomas Mann’s comment that writers are those “for whom writing is more difficult than other people” (p. 23). Patchett (2013) disappoints her followers who blithely claim everyone has “one great novel in them” (p. 24) if they only had time to write it down by underscoring the duress and disenchantment of writing itself. Although ideas are a dime a dozen, fine execution is rare. The challenge is getting the indescribably wonderful life stories down on paper without destroying them beyond recognition. Her vision for a novel is beautiful, like an “invisible friend, omnipresent, evolving, thrilling . . . an oversized butterfly whose wings were cut from the rose window in Notre Dame” (p. 24). But when she gets around to writing, and she reaches up to pluck the “butterfly from the air,” “I kill it.” She does not mean to kill it, “but it’s the only way I can get something that is so three-dimensional onto the flat page” (p. 25). The “relationship between what we know and what we can put on paper” (p. 24) is disappointing. Right when “we sit down to write that story, . . . things fall apart.”

Consequently, writing is not a “natural act,” to borrow Patchett’s phrase (p. 21). Rather, I would describe it as an act of discipline, failure, and faith.

Taking it bird by bird

Humorous and provocative writer Anne Lamott (1995) gives concrete guidance on one way to manage the hardness of writing besides just acknowledging it: Break it into smaller, manageable, bit-size portions that are easier to swallow. You have likely heard her tale from childhood when her older brother sat immobilized at the kitchen table before binder paper, pencils, and bird books. How would he ever complete a huge science project on birds that he had procrastinated so long that accomplishing it seemed impossible? His father, also a writer, put his arm around his son and simply advised, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird” (p. 19).

Whether learned from Lamott or out of some kind of internal measured approach, this principle has worked for me (most everywhere, of course, except this essay). I am not a detailed outliner, but I do create a rough sketch of parts and ideas within each part, and then I assign, roughly again, a page count for the section. I work section by section, whittling the whole down to its constituent parts. Headings from the outline become guideposts and reminders of what I have covered and where I am heading. This makes it sound simpler than it is; my parts never contain exactly what I set out to put in them; the writing is never straightforward. But when I have trouble laying out the parts or keeping the sections within a certain word length—and this seems to happen more rather than less as I continue to write—I meet my Balrog and flail my way through what seems like a bottomless pit until I can resurrect some greater direction to my argument.

As this essay reminded me, this kind of regimented writing works best when the project entails, for example, a comparison and contrast of scholarship. The practice has less bearing when I am trying to follow the development of my own thought to a richer end than an outline can contain. Some essays call for more free-flowing writing. For this essay, I have made heavy use of the legal pad I keep next to the computer to catch the overflow, thoughts that I do not know where to put and that I do not want to commit or constrict by typing them. On occasion, the best writing happens when I am fooling around, unguarded, reading a stray article or writing out what I do not plan to include, words to which I am unwed that I just need to get out of my head. Or, words come when I am so stuck that I have to scream my thoughts to my husband and find myself saying aloud the clearest statement yet of what I really want to say. But, even in this less-text-bound essay, I still have a rough outline in my head—an account of the discipline, failure, and faith of academic writing as craft that discloses along the way some of the habits and hints of getting the paper written.

People repeat Michelangelo's remark, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it," so frequently that it must capture something about how the creative process works. I am not sure which of its two assumptions is more daring—that there is something in the stone to begin with that only needs release or that we have the capacity and power to free it. These claims at least suggest the extent of trust required in oneself and in the nebulous, even the transcendent. In this essay, I have had to feel my way toward an outline that resisted conceptualization and emerged only as I persisted. But if this sculpture analogy does more to mystify the process than support it, making an unwelcome claim for divine intervention, set it aside.

Although one cannot make a “competent writer out of a bad writer” or a “great writer out of a good one,” science fiction author Stephen King (2000) argues, “It *is* possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer of a merely competent one” (p. 142, emphasis in original). Learning to write is no mystery. Like learning to listen, there are steps one can take. In fact, writing is very much like learning to listen.

Sometimes it is better to think of writing in terms of bricks and mortar. When I was working on a book whose contract due date had come and gone, I watched as our neighbors overhauled their home, adding bedroom and living space. If I can only keep up with the construction workers, I reasoned, and lay brick by brick, I can make the new deadline. Every so often when my mom hands me a stack of the weekly letters that I have written and mailed to my parents, a dying art that they practiced with their parents and that we have sustained despite easier cyberspace alternatives, I am reminded that if I wrote two single-spaced pages a week, I would have a book by year’s end. I also have a hunch that something in the very routine I’ve kept for over 40 years supports my academic writing, keeping me writing about the non-threatening and non-challenging so I can remember their connection to the bigger questions I take up. I am guessing that people blog or keep journals with similar results. I recently told a doctoral student, who could state in glorious global terms all her dissertation would accomplish but could not make a compelling argument for why it mattered to start writing about what she really cares about, to try what advice books call “free writing” (Brande 1934/1981; Cameron 1992; Elbow 1973) and see what emerges.

Forging patterns in time

Every day Lamott's (1995) father, also a writer, rose at 5:30 a.m. "no matter how late he had been up" (p. xii) and went to his desk to write until joining his family for breakfast, and then he returned to his desk for the rest of the morning. Although I have only incidental proof from listening to authors talk about their habits, it seems like successful writers have a pattern. King (2000) describes his typical day: "Mornings belong to what is new—the current composition. Afternoons are for naps and letters. Evenings are for reading" (p. 152). He likes to get 10 pages a day, 180,000 words in three months ("a goodish length for a book," p. 154), and he writes every day, even Christmas, the Fourth of July, and his birthday, because otherwise the characters in his novel begin to go "stale" (p. 153).

Before you take King as role model, I should stop and note his struggles with addiction. I prefer author Annie Dillard's (1989) more contemplative approach. "It takes years," she says, "to write a book—between two and ten" (p. 13). King is a self-described "workaholic dweeb (just a workaholic, I guess)" who feels at "loose ends" (2000, p. 153) when he is not working. Dillard places the writing schedule within the good life, which King himself actually displays when he describes his writing as not working but "all the playground" (p. 153). "A schedule defends from chaos and whim," Dillard says. "It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time" (p. 32). To excerpt even this small poetic slice from her reflection on writers who compose "on the hoof" (p. 33) and those who "write twenty hours a day" (p. 34) does a disservice to her beautiful prose. Go read the passage (pp. 31–34). On second thought, read the book.

If one is a full-time writer like Dillard or King and writing is one's day job, writing every day makes sense. I am, however, unnerved by this regularity when academics follow it—and several colleagues have told me they got their book done by getting up at 4 a.m. every day. For all the rest of us lightweights, daily writing in the midst of class preparation, advising, meetings, teaching, and the day-to-day casualties of the academic profession will not work. So what to do? One of my doctoral students gave me an unsavory name for my writing style, borrowed from the politically loaded eating disorders of many women and fewer men—binge writing. My student had a point: I prefer to write in big chunks of time. I do not like writing in short spurts every day; it takes too much mental energy and investment to enter into the work as a whole, and I hate leaving it so soon. Nor do I like getting up in the cold and dark or leaving my husband alone in bed. So, I am destined to look for several days in a row when I can amass a few pages each day. I clear space, even if it means taking time off in class or skipping a meeting, strategies I was more compelled and willing to practice years ago than now. With this essay, whether because of bad time management, increased unwillingness to overwork, or the realities of a heavy workload, the most I managed was one or maybe two days in a row here and there, and this drove me crazy. For binge writers, I do not recommend this. Look for chunks of time and more peace of mind.

I have modified my pattern further as email has become part of the everyday. I try not to look at it, even when my attention and acuity wanes and I tell myself I need a break. The temptation is heavy. To dodge detours on my trips to the Internet, I avoid leaving my browser open to email, and I try not to let my eyes wander to the number piling up. A colleague well versed in technology's impact told me recently that when one responds to

a text, twitter, or e-mail alert, it takes a half hour to refocus. I know a young scholar who puts such interruption to good use, however, checking Facebook every five minutes while writing to sooth the anxieties. But if I go to the browser looking for information and stumble onto e-mail, by the time I extract myself from a rabbit hole of requests and tasks, I cannot remember where I was. My truism, which my husband tires of my reiterating: Send an e-mail, get three back, so don't send them until you want more, which for me is often at the end of the day. When I need distraction, I do more of what I did on a larger scale as a parent of young children—take breaks to do dishes, water plants, wind the clock, and other mundane life-sustaining acts that are less debilitating and leave room for daydreaming. This may be a reason why I have never written at the office. Originally, I stayed home to write because home stood closer to the elementary and middle schools and allowed me to be around when my kids' day ended. But even now I prefer interruptions I can modulate over those that arise when I go down the hall at school. And who wants to dust or vacuum at the office anyway? So, I write at home.

Finding space and place

To state the obvious, in crafting a discipline, time and place matter. If there is a rule, it is to find a pattern that works and stick with it. Until you have a place, remarks King, “You’ll find your new resolution to write a lot harder to take seriously” (2000, p. 155). Until this summer, I shared an office with my husband for nearly 20 years, our chairs back to back. People often groan when I describe this arrangement. Apart from repeated (and unmet) requests that he not dally on the very mornings I rose to write, we made it work, but my blowups were predictable as he spent more and more time in what had been

mostly my space. The trajectory of my office follows my childbearing life and has come full circle. I had an upstairs bedroom all to myself until our first son was born, and I gladly turned over the red paisley wallpapered room and escaped downstairs. Now, years later and in another home, I am back upstairs, having claimed a bedroom our first son vacated. As bad as I felt leaving my husband's company, I can almost touch the mental space; shelves for books, two desktops for notes, and my thoughts themselves can expand.

“The materiality of the writer's life cannot be exaggerated,” insists Dillard (1989, p. 46). Hell, you don't need a room. Sometimes, to borrow Dillard again, “You need a warehouse.” Once she used the “mechanical aid of a twenty-foot conference table” (p. 46). When asked to speak about women and fiction, Virginia Woolf (1957) refused to address the subject as an esoteric topic comparing Jane Austen and George Eliot. She spoke instead about the practicalities and discriminations, the “room of one's own” that few women writers have had over the centuries. Lack of money and space have squandered centuries of the creativity and lifeblood of many women, people of color, and others without serious means. As psychotherapist-turned-writing-guru Joan Bolker maintains, even a physical room is not enough for those whose confidence has been battered by centuries of exclusion (Bolker 1994). Writing is all about the social, political, and ideological occupation of space and its reverberations. National *Atlantic* correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates's (2015) best-selling declaration of his right to live and write what he sees without fear of racist reprisal in a White supremacist society is a powerful testament of this.

I think Brindley underscored the difficulty of his work during our tour because he wanted to dispel any misperceptions that artists just have fun creating artwork or that his

work flows easily because he is artistic or talented. He ranked paintings by level. “This is a 300-level painting,” he would say, meaning it took him at least 300 hours, a good portion of a year. He has worked on a few drawings for years. He takes them out, does something on them, and puts them away. He finished some for the exhibit, the deadline that for so many of us forces creativity with its own very special energy.⁵

Why write? Defiance, passion, compulsion, vocation, and community

Brindley began drawing when he was 17. The exhibit I visited just over 40 years later was called “Trees of Myth and Legend.” This 59-year-old artist—for he told us his age, and at least for me, we were not just on an artistic tour, we were on a vocational tour—was coincidentally my own age. Until the show, all drawings were of actual trees. He does not like to draw from photos; he goes to the tree, most of them local. I couldn’t help but notice the reverence behind his words and work. Birds captured in mid-flight and on limb joined branches lifted to the sky, hinting at the hallowed in the mundane. The desire to pack up his chair and tools and go sit under sun and cloud, he told us, grew out of gazing at the countryside from the back seat as a young boy on regular Sunday rides with his mother, aunt, and grandmother. For the exhibition, he had taken all that body remembrance, hand-eye-nature coordination, and outdoor love, and drawn for the first time a tree from memory, a magnificent tree reimagined from many, many trees and connected to trees people everywhere mark as sacred. Not a project for the neophyte.

⁵ Due dates remind us of our finitude, as graduate professor Langdon Gilkey liked to say in class, illustrating what neoorthodox theologian Paul Tillich (1951, p. 193) meant when he talked about basic existential parameters of our being in time.

Seventeen seems like an early age to know what you are going to do with the rest of your life. Yesterday afternoon, I heard an interview on public radio with award-winning children's author Kevin Henkes (2015), who realized in high school that he could put his love of writing and drawing together and create children's books. His first book was accepted by Greenwillow Books between his freshman and sophomore years in college when he went to New York with a list of his top 10 publishers and the presumption that he could land a contract. He had confidence at age 19, he said, that "I don't know if I have at 54." Patchett's (2013) assurance emerged even earlier. "I was always going to be a writer," the first sentence of her essay on writing leads off. "I've known this for as long as I've known anything" (p. 19). Nor did she back down when her more realistic father encouraged dental school (p. 15) or when a teacher in college told her that her "skat[ing] along the surface, being clever" (p. 32) would not make for great literature. She considers her childhood certainty the "greatest gift of my life" (p. 19).

Discerning a writing story: Defiance, passion, and compulsion

I wish that we all could be so directed and sure. Perhaps because the job of seminary professor was so far outside my realm and range of expectation, and professor is not commensurate with writer anyway, I had little certainty. Writing was not something I set out to do. Any claim for a writing life has emerged after the fact, in retrospect as I stitch together random episodes. Rooming with a close friend at an academic conference many years ago, I listened when she said, "I've always wanted to be a writer," and thought, "Hey, I want to write books too." Whereas her undergraduate degree in creative writing supported that hope, mine was in psychology. But I remember the odd gratification I felt

in high school when I established (or tried to) in my first official footnoted research paper how the 1906 San Francisco fire was a cause for good. I still have mimeograph sheets from an unusually helpful class diagramming the pyramid structure of opening and closing paragraphs (wide to narrow; narrow to wide) and all the squares for paragraphs between. Years later, a reference letter, submitted to a university portfolio service, fell into my hands by mistake as I finished my PhD. I read the stark words of a professor telling prospective employers he did not expect me to write much. I had, it is true, sat almost entirely silent (and *silenced*) in his year-long seminar on philosophical ethics dominated by White men, and my 100-page paper that paved the way for my dissertation was unremarkable. But what did he *really* know about me? I set out to defy his prediction.

Defiance has always been a good motivator. If my mom dared to remind me to practice piano, I would refuse on principle even if or precisely when I was just about to sit down on my own. I would, I insisted, practice in my own good time and *not* when she reminded me (yes, I must have been a difficult child). To be able to write, we must be driven by a compulsion or passion or conviction, an insight and vision so compelling that it haunts our comments in class, our reading of this or that book, our daydreaming in the shower. When master bark canoe maker Henri Vaillancourt built his first canoe in 1965 at age 15, he had not so much as paddled or ridden in a canoe. According to creative non-fiction writer John McPhee's equally "beautifully crafted" account (1975, book cover), Vaillancourt became interested in Indian life "in a passionate way," and this passion to know what it felt like to ride across lakes and streams simply "became a preoccupation" (McPhee 1975, p. 4). When Dillard (1989) was working on a book, a nature book of all things, she "let all the houseplants die." They hung "completely dead in their pots in the

bay window.” Not only had she not watered them, she “had not moved them” (p. 37). She did not even notice them until the book was finished.

Most writers are willing to disrupt their lives for an idea’s sake. I did not have time to write this essay. I could have shared one I’d already written for something else. But the idea would not let me go. It is probably better not to live with someone trying to finish a writing project. Book acknowledgments are loaded with gratitude for those who do, perhaps as a form of apology.

The compulsion to write—and for me, it is a kind of compulsion, even preoccupation as much as occupation—is about more than cash flow, which is fortunate since the dollar per hour for academic publication is ridiculously minuscule. Beyond job security and recognition, many of us write because some part of ourselves comes alive, and, for many in pastoral theology, our very lives and those of others depend on it. There is something in the sheer pleasure and power of it—those moments when words appear that seem so right, something not yet known or thought, words that capture a truth that evaded us until it appeared, hidden in what psychoanalysis would call the subconscious (personal *and* collective) or, for those convicted about life’s deeper meaning, received from a power beyond ourselves. *That moment*—and it flits by and away, returns on occasion, cannot be commanded—is when I love to write (in addition to the moment when I am finished). We hope when others read that sentence they will gasp “yes” and maybe even “thank God, someone put *that* into words,” as we have done as we have read. We (especially pastoral theologians) hope that something in life, however distant from the words themselves, might change for the better. Then, I actually want to stand up from

my desk and shout. Sometimes I do. Otherwise, it is more honest to say I hate writing, its anxieties, dead ends, snail's pace, impossibilities, and revisions that make the draft worse.

Trained psychoanalytically, I know I could analyze the preoedipal and neurotic needs behind the compulsion. All I will say for now is that my computer screen certainly serves as a “mirroring selfobject” metaphorically, if not literally. In Heinz Kohut's early (1966) understanding of narcissistic needs, he describes one pole of the self, the need “to be looked at and admired” (p. 249) that endures throughout life. He names mature adult creativity as one of several “transformations” of the “archaic” or immature all-consuming needs for admiration with which we are born. On the screen my thought appears. On the published page I anticipate others reading with resonance or disagreement. In other words, writing works to construct and consolidate self and community. When we lay down words, we never get it entirely right, but write we must, for our selves and the welfare of our worlds depend on it, or so we like to believe and hope. Kohut also identifies empathy, humor, wisdom, and the “capacity to acknowledge the finiteness” (p. 263) of our existence as other healthy transformations of immature childhood narcissism. Existentialist interpretations of the preoccupation with producing books also connect it to a fear and denial of death and a quest for immortality. In both psychoanalytic and existentialist perspectives, then, by writing we leave something of ourselves, a glimmer of reaching past our finite lives. Those of us who remain behind guard with special appreciation the works bequeathed to us that now comprise a legacy, and I think here especially of those remembering pastoral theologian Don Capps whose unexpected death came in close proximity to our New Directions conference. Don's love of writing was so apparent. So, it feels even more appropriate to write on writing while mourning his loss.

Talking back, making a case

I used to talk back. Or so my dad thought. He tolerated my opinions less than those of my brothers, who I think reminded him less of his own mother (and were perhaps better behaved). Most of the time, I couldn't help it. Words of protest, words of argument flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. Sometimes I retreated to my bedroom at the end of the hall past my brothers' rooms and wrote. I wrote down what made me mad, a tirade of words. Unbeknownst to me, I had begun a practice of writing to work out problems—not the only purpose, but I wrote to argue.

Coates's (2015) mother was his first teacher in speaking truth. She taught him to write, "by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation" (p. 29). When he got in trouble in school, he had to write about it, not an I-will-not-do-this sentence a thousand times, but a carefully reasoned examination of his motives, their effects, and how others perceived him. "The writing had to answer a series of questions: Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson?" These writings were his "earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness" (p. 29). His later writing is "an intensive version of what my mother had taught me all those years ago—the *craft of writing as the art of thinking*" (p. 51, emphasis added). To quote Dillard (1989), the "line of words" we write on the page "is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe[,] . . . an epistemological tool" (p. 3).

Disciples Divinity House, where I lived as a graduate student, sat adjacent to the University of Chicago in an old Gothic-style building with a large formal living room to the left of the massive wooden door entry. There, the House occasionally hosted speakers following a weekly community meal. One evening, one of my professors in religion and psychology, Don Browning, spoke about how he goes about his research. I have notes somewhere in one of my 16 file drawers at school. I do not need them to confirm a point that I heard and saw lived out. You begin research not with a thesis or claim but with a question—a maxim I probably have radically reduced from its original statement. But it does not need much embellishment. Academic papers are meant to solve problems.

I assign *The Craft of Research* because it hits hard on this point—how to transform a topic into a question and a question into a research problem “whose significance matches the effort that you put into solving it” (p. xi). I like how the authors put it in their first edition: “Questions are crucial, because the starting point of good research is always what *you do not know or understand but feel you must*” (1995, p. 39, emphasis in original). Following this mandate turns what might have been merely a presentation of information or an assertion of knowledge on a topic into an argument in response to a problem. I usually write out my question and thesis, each as close to one sentence as I can manage. These, I keep before me. When doing my dissertation, I put them on an index card on the wall.

The authors of *The Craft* make a distinction that is particularly helpful to those in pastoral theology between a practical problem (what should we *do*?) and a conceptual problem (how should we *think*?). They underscore the value of the latter and its aim—improving understanding—and caution against jumping too quickly to solving the

problems of the world. Beginning researchers often mistake a “problem in the world,” which may seem easier to grasp and “more interesting to study,” for the more abstract or theoretical problem one should focus on in research (Booth et al. 1995, p. 55). “No research paper,” for example, “can solve the problem of acid rain, but good research might give us knowledge that could help us solve it. Research problems involve only *what we don’t know or fully understand*” (p. 55, emphasis in original; see also Booth et al. 2008, pp. 52–62). Although “most research projects in the humanities . . . have no direct application to daily life” (Booth et al. 2008, p. 61), deepening understanding has an important role in influencing what people do.

I also appreciate the “Quick Tip” on titles. The title is often the first item people read. It should not merely name the topic; it should capture the argument. I’m not sure I agree with the suggestion in the third edition of *The Craft* that the title is the “last thing you should write” (Booth et al. 2008, p. 248). In the first edition, the authors actually say, “*probably* the last thing,” showing more ambivalence (1995, p. 212, emphasis added). I had a student in a senior seminar class who refused to title his paper until the end. I allow for individual preferences, but I honestly could not imagine how he could get his writing done. My title emerges early, and I tinker with it as I modify what I am saying, but it essentially becomes a beacon. Sitting atop my Word document and my legal pad outline, it serves as a regular reminder of my argument.

Academic writing as formational

Just like the counseling hour, I am running out of space right when I get to a matter worthy of greater coverage. Some people identify reading as a spiritual practice (e.g.,

Paulsell 2001), but I do not know many who describe everyday academic writing as such, even though spiritual writing in the Christian tradition has a long history and has received scholarly attention. Practical theologians, such as Heather Walton (2014, 2015) and Richard Lischer (2015), have written on “spiritual life writing” and “spiritual memoir,” respectively. But *all* writing—the practice of academic writing included—can have spiritually formative implications. If spirituality is the wise use of time and space in the formation of a vocation, I have actually been talking about spirituality all along. The material disciplines of writing often open up into spiritual practices. For now, I focus on two further formative elements: how the practice shapes the practitioner’s subjectivity or selfhood and the power of the extended community of writers and readers.

In my class, I include memoirs on writing among the books from which students choose to read and share with classmates. Initially, I assumed people would learn a few tricks of the trade. But when I listened to the student reports this spring, I could not help but notice a kind of spiritual gestalt that flowed across the likes of Dillard, Lamott, King, and Patchett. They each evidenced habits related to the ego and the securing and giving up of self (e.g., self-knowledge and awareness, self-criticism and confidence, recognition of limits and personal quirks, elation and demoralization). Their forward progress also depended on the qualities and contributions of trust, courage, risk, discipline, generosity, community, and healing.

Dealing with perfectionism offers an example. Dillard matter of factly names a quagmire in writing, without even warning readers that it is coming. On one page she states: “The reason to perfect a piece of prose as it progresses—to secure each sentence before building on it—is that original writing fashions a form.” That is, one idea grows

from the next as “cell to cell, bole to bough to twig to leaf,” and so each word matters since it is a “strand . . . out of which much, or all, will develop.” So, perfecting word-by-word “displays courage and fear” (1989, p. 15). But then, just as the wordsmiths among us start to feel smug, we turn the page, and Dillard says: “The reason not to perfect a work as it progresses is that, concomitantly, original work fashions a form the true shape of which it discovers only as it proceeds” (p. 16). One must move ahead to know how to clean up what one has left behind. A paragraph’s final detail awaits the direction of the whole. And so, a writer must learn to live peaceably within an unavoidable double bind.

One way to sustain the tension, as Palmer (2010) suggests, is by letting go of outcomes. A “willingness to work hard at the craft without worrying too much about outcomes . . . frees the ego from the ego’s grip” (p. 22), similar to losing your life to find it (as in Matthew 10:39). Dealing with perfectionism also includes admitting limitation and letting go of prized possessions. A colleague made my day at a mandatory faculty retreat while I was working on this essay by remarking that a key part of writing is “what we leave out,” which can equal as much as we leave in, and “we receive absolutely no credit for this.” Writer John McPhee (2015) begins his recent contribution to a series on the writing life in *The New Yorker* on “Omission” quite bluntly: “Writing is selection.” He later notes, “Just to start a piece of writing you have to choose one word and only one word from more than a million in the language” (p. 3). Everything he writes—and he writes beautifully—could benefit from green-lining, he says, a practice he learned while at *Time* magazine that mandated marking in green a designated number of lines to be axed. He gives his creative non-fiction students passages from Joseph Conrad, Philip Roth, and even Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to show that even the most

sterling writing can be pruned. Prune to make a more aesthetically pleasing plant; take out freight cars for a shorter train. Less is often more, but determining what to leave out is not easy.

Dillard (1989) hits the reader with the necessity of excising one's bad writing on her very first pages, as if this is a more important formative discipline than anything else she will say. Whereas painters build from the ground up, layering the "latest version" on top of the early effort, writers "work from left to right" (p. 5) and, hence, need to toss the beginning. Three people who reviewed my draft of *Let the Children Come* (2003) several years ago essentially told me the same thing I heard recently when I presented a book outline to a congenial group of scholars: They would skip Part One to get to Part Two. This is easy for others to say. It is harder to overcome the "delusions" that dampen our "resolve to throw away work" (Dillard 1989, p. 6). At the very same time, in another double bind, we must tame the internal self-critic or what Patchett (2013) describes as "editing myself off the page" (p. 26), walking the fine line between confidence and necessary censure. Honing our writing can also hone *us*.

Academic writing as communal

The material practices of writing can become spiritually formational in one final area. I used to think, schooled well by my graduate school experience, that I did my most important work alone. I end this essay with gratitude for friends and colleagues, including those in the New Directions group, who have overturned the deeply implanted script that one works best on one's own.

Writing has many solitary moments, but you are never alone. People link Coates's book (2015) to James Baldwin, thanks to an endorsement to that effect by Toni Morrison. But a host of names flow on his pages, so many they cannot all be named here—Malcolm X, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and so on. He is not namedropping from a longstanding and impressive corpus of African and African American literature. Rather, “It is important that I tell you their names” because “I have never achieved anything alone” (p. 50).

Books form their own kind of community around writers. Elementary school teachers and librarians unite in uttering a cliché most writers take to heart: Books are our friends. And most writers read with gusto. Being a good writer, King (2000) insists, requires “two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot” (p. 145). Not surprisingly, therefore, much early writing is about imitation. I invite ministry students to read sample senior projects (especially those awarded “honors”) and doctoral students to read journal articles to see how people make arguments. In an attempt to demystify academic culture and socialize freshmen into its “argument culture,” professor of English Gerald Graff (2003) describes a research paper as no more or less than entering a conversation as one might do at a party or with a parent (p. 24). Students write better, he argues, “when they have conversations to enter” and when they make their argument by writing someone else's argument into their papers (p. 158). He gives away the gist of his book in the first few pages: Listen to others, summarize them, and make your relevant argument (pp. 2–3). Later, he describes his recipe using a “she/he said, I say” template (p. 6; see also Graff and Birkenstein 2014).

Wayne Booth (2006) goes a little deeper and identifies conversation as the moral foundation of writing. Although “precise demonstration of truth” has importance, truth is “not as important as the communal pursuit of it.” He outlines Golden Rule-like parameters that turn us back to writers before us and forward to readers ahead. “Listen to others as you would have others listen to you. . . . Treat [their ideas] as you believe all human beings *ought* to treat one another’s ideas” (Booth 2006, as cited in Booth et al. 2008, p. xvii). And have empathy for your readers. Put yourself in their place; they are trying to figure out what you are doing as they read. In sum, “You should think of your project not as a solitary work but as a conversation with sources whose work you read and with those who will in turn read your work” (Booth et al. 2008, p. 7).

Writing is communal in other more important ways, however. Since writing is hard, it deserves steady encouragement and accompaniment, and this comes not just through literary but literal community, as Coates and others reveal. Forewords reflect the people and communities that undergird writing. Academic writers often say aloud for the first time in the classroom what we will later write. Our best creative efforts come because a colleague asks us to contribute to a colloquium or cover a specific area in an edited book or, even more important, because we live in communities in need that provoke our questions. Much of my own writing has occurred in response. But responsive writing is seldom one-directional. One grabs hold of an invitation and bends it to one’s talents, using another’s bidding to match a nagging concern of one’s own.

Academics could take yet one more step to make community more fundamental to writing. I recently finished a book with four people (Bass et al. 2016). Our writing a book together that includes individual contributions but constructs an argument as a whole that

is much more than anything any one of us could have done by ourselves is rare. How we went about it was also unusual:

How we went about writing this book was crucial and an experiment in Christian practical wisdom itself [the subject and title of the book]. The book may appear to readers as an edited collection. It is far from it. Although we did assume tasks according to each person's gifts, and you will see individual authors named on chapters for which they bore major responsibility, none of these chapters would have come about at all without alternative means of learning and intense engagement with one another in community. We pursued more than theoretical knowledge, immersing ourselves in the subject matter rather than studying it from the outside. And we did so in close collaboration Certainly, we read, analyzed, wrote, and debated. But . . . we also took field trips, watched and queried a master craftsman, shared the joys and sorrows in our lives, learned from our mistakes and limitations, spent big blocks of time together sharing work, hiked the woods surrounding the Benedictine community of Saint John's University in Minnesota, joined in its daily practice of prayer, and ate bountiful and simple meals. Thus *Christian Practical Wisdom* is not a collected work but rather a collective one, the outcome of a process that led to far more than any one of us might have imagined on our own and so, in its own way, tutored us in wisdom. (Bass et al. 2016, pp. 18–19)

In *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*, anthropologists Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion, and Tobias Rees (2008) suggest that current social problems cannot be addressed with conventional individual scholarship but require work

done within a common workspace similar to the design studio (from architecture, for instance) or the laboratory (from the sciences). My colleagues and I heard this petition but went beyond what these anthropologists imagined. In agreeing to meet, share work, eat, pray, and walk together, we entered into a formational and vocational pact. We conclude the book by inviting greater innovation in scholarship that seeks wider goods and bears responsibility for communities beyond itself.

Collaborative work underscores the import of what I have attempted in this essay—more conscientious reflection on the concrete routines surrounding a daily practice that we take for granted. How we write shows where and how our more abstract methods and methodologies and our ideological commitments hit the road. The chance to write about writing here has been a nice break from the heavy lifting of epistemology, the highly cerebral arena of how we know what we know in theology to which my writing has drifted lately. Writing lies at the heart of the academic life; it is of genuine vocational importance and, hence, deserves more attention than we are usually prone to give it.

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