



DOING THE HARD THING: Writing Myself into the World

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For the longest time, I found myself writing what someone else thinks—or what I thought a person of authority might want me to think. For the longest time, writing was easy for me.

A 1,000-word seminar paper on what I thought the book meant?

No problem, give me half an hour and I'll explain exactly what you want me to think it meant.

Were my beliefs reflected in what I was writing?

Probably not.

You need me to evaluate my entire body of work over ten weeks in less than a page?

Sure, here's the best I can make myself look in that space without explicitly lying.

Did this process of “self-reflection” actually make me reflect critically on a significant body of work that I didn't pour my heart and soul into because I was only writing what I knew you wanted me to write?

No.

This writing was easy, but I wasn't sure if it was meaningful.

I find myself deeply suspicious of things that are easy.

Why?

Well, let me list a few things I, and maybe you, think are easy:

- Binge-watching Netflix
- Sleeping
- Going on Facebook
- Drinking so much that my face falls off
- Sleeping more
- Not sleeping to binge-watch Netflix
- Sleeping through class (because sleeping is easier)
- Not reading the news
- Talking about the weather
- Writing a seminar paper on a book I couldn't care less about

Here's a list of things that I think are hard:

- Telling somebody how I actually feel, rather than “fine” or “good”
- Working out
- Dancing
- Having an honest conversation about race, class, and gender
- Asking somebody how they feel, and actually wanting to know
- Listening
- Getting out of bed in the morning
- Following my dreams
- Writing something that matters

To do the easy thing is to avoid, to not acknowledge, to not attempt to fully understand why things are the way they are, to look curiosity in the face and refuse it. The easy thing is what allows us to cop out—to not engage with the world around us.

To do the hard thing is to consciously put your self into the world, to be aware of your relationship to the world, and to write as yourself even if it is uncertain how the world will receive you. Your value becomes ascribed to the action you are performing; by acting, the action itself becomes you. If your writing is judged to be wrong or subpar, then maybe you are wrong or subpar. Action becomes a permanent attribute: “The problem is we think we exist. We think our words are permanent and solid and stamp us forever.”¹

¹ Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*, (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1986), 34.

But if you aren't engaging with the world, aren't putting yourself into your actions, where does your identity come from? If what you do is not you, then what is the point of you doing it? Writing, as opposed to thinking, places self within a fixed medium; while words are fluid in thought, to put them on the page is to give them permanence, even if temporary. By writing your thoughts on the page they become what you think, and having written them, they influence what you think next. To write is to be in conversation with self, the fluid construct that is one's understanding of the world. Writing, or suffering, is simultaneously directional input and feedback loop. You can never definitively describe yourself; you can only reach for who you are. Writing the hard thing, or writing your self, is to grasp at yourself. Writing the hard thing is suffering: "The tight grip of our grasping at self."² To write yourself is the hardest thing, it is essentially impossible: writing enters paradox, writer enters suffering.

Recently, a writing mentor suggested I had an imaginary relationship with writing. I didn't know what that meant, but it made me choose to look more closely at what I am doing when I'm writing. What does it mean for me to be in an imaginary relationship with writing? What if it wasn't just my relationship with writing that was imaginary, but also my relationship with the world?

I understood that things were happening in the world, but I had removed myself from them—I was an observer. Perception was a replacement for action.

I was performing writing, but *I* was not actually writing—I was doing it, but it wasn't me. I saw the act of writing as having limitless potential: the potential for writing as activism, as self-healing, as healing others, as cross-cultural understanding, as translation, as art, as pleasure, as ritual, as occupation, as aesthetic, as speculation, as reflection. However, I wasn't engaging these potentials themselves, I was engaging with the idea of potential. I was doing the easy thing—allowing writing to exist without me—instead of doing the hard thing—constructing writing in terms of my self.

Writing was easy for me when I didn't think of myself as the writer, didn't think of my writing as me. I was writing what someone else thinks, or writing as if someone else was thinking for me. By identifying my writing as myself, my process incorporates the hard thing: an active acknowledgement of my relationship to the world. I create my identity in each piece of writing, each piece of suffering, and, as identity is "conditioned, selfless, and constantly changing," I destroy my identity by suggesting its permanence.³ The piece I write isn't me, but by putting myself into it, I write myself into the world.

² Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, "[Buddha's Four Noble Truths](#)," Lion's Roar, May 1, 2002.

³ Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, "[The Myth of Permanence](#)," Lion's Roar, November 1, 2009.



