



WHY WE SHOULD ALL WRITE BADLY: A STORY OF WRITING, PAIN, AND MENDING

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My inner critic worries:

My writing is my treasure. What happens when you read it? Do you say, “What is this ugly *thing*? Why does the crazy girl value *this*?” Do you read and wonder why I took the time? Why I cared?

My writing is a love letter written to you, a stranger I can’t see or hear or know. Will you understand my letter? Will your heart stir, feeling the vibration of my silent voice?

My writing is me. It stands, naked before the world, waiting for judgment. How can I send it out if it isn’t perfect? How can I let go? How can I begin?

I’ll begin with Holly. Holly’s hair, makeup, and clothes are meticulous; nothing is out of place. Sometimes her bearing reminds me of Audrey Hepburn, poised and graceful. We met in a coffee shop in California to talk about her writer’s block. Our partners worked at the same hardware store, and they put us together after a conversation about my experience as a writing tutor at Evergreen and her looming academic probation from University of California at Santa Cruz. Holly had established a pattern of dropping out of classes in the middle of the quarter after accruing an intimidating backlog of unfinished essays. She was on the cusp of dropping another required class. She told me about her writer’s block and was surprised when I told her I could relate.

Perhaps I should begin again, a little earlier, so you know a bit about my history with writing and pain.

When did it start? When did writing become painful? The first instance I remember was in grade school when vocabulary assignments epitomized excruciating boredom. I was given a list of words and told to copy their definitions from a dictionary. Then I had to write sentences using each in context. My arm became heavy. Time stood still. The teacher wouldn’t let me into the advanced reading group because my grades in vocabulary were too poor.

But that wasn't my only experience with writing. I also loved writing because I loved books. In the fourth grade I decided what I would become: a writer (as well as an artist and architect). I kept a notepad and pen under my pillow. At night, after I could tell my older sister was asleep on the top bunk, I liked to write in my little book. I snuck through our house, tiptoeing to the entry of our bright yellow kitchen. The first drawer on the left held flashlights. I would steal one and run as quietly as I could back to our dark bedroom. Back on the bottom bunk and safely hidden under blankets, I turned on the flashlight and wrote in my notepad.

A few years ago I talked with my sister about my late night escapades. She laughed with me and said, "Oh, that's what you were doing. We used to wonder why you had little pen marks on your body when you woke up in the morning."

Academia is a world of words: writing, talking, reading. It is a world I love. Despite my love for (and success in) this world of words, my personal writing process can be very rocky.

I started my BA at Evergreen in 1997, and as an undergrad I suffered severely from writer's block. My memories of those times reawaken a sourness inside my body, a painful tension associated with writing. Writing involved lamenting, avoiding the essay, empty staring, talking to myself, shaking with anxiety, and crying. Sometimes I vomited the mornings assignments were due. I skipped class to continue writing. I couldn't let go of essays that weren't "done."

But other times I vibrated with words. I laughed, sang, and cooed my essay. It was my play, my love, my voice, my heart. And creating this essay for *Inkwell* isn't about rubbing salt in long festering wounds—it is about mending.

You see, despite my struggles, I was successful. I worked hard to hide my pain from my teachers, and I received praise. I spent five years, fall 1998 to summer 2003, working as a tutor at the Evergreen Writing Center, and I loved it. I left to pursue my PhD, longing to become a teacher and an academic.

Back to Holly.

We met, and I listened, shared some of my tricks, and tried to boost her confidence. But Holly's pain was deep, and mending can be difficult. We talked about the essay she was working on. She was interested in the topic; and she had ideas about what to say, but her constant refrain was concern about whether or not she would do the subject enough of a service. When she tried to write, fear froze her to the core. The beauty of the subject made her feel that her words were unworthy. She imagined lovely essays but felt her work didn't fulfill those visions.

Holly and I became close friends.

I taught her to knit. We shared our stories, and I felt honored to know the complex individual underneath her composed exterior. When Holly dropped out of college, I made sure she knew that I supported her decision and would not judge her for her choice.

While working on this essay, the one you are holding in your hands, I found Holly's name written in the margin of my copy of Peter Elbow's *Everyone Can Write* next to the following quote:

The audience of self derives from the internalization of external audiences. So when people find it painful to write for themselves alone because of the harshness of their inner critic, it is the experience of writing for *ally* or *caring* readers that helps them gradually learn to internalize a more supportive reader.¹

I wrote her name there, years ago, when I read the text for a graduate course on writing pedagogy. Her internal critic was so loud and dominating that she couldn't do anything without facing layers upon layers of fear, self-consciousness, and guilt.

And these are things I relate with.

Let me explain the guilt a little more. There was a piano in Holly's small apartment that I never saw her play. All of our friends struggled financially, but Holly kept paying the monthly fee to rent the little piano. I talked with her partner about it once. He complained, "It fills half our living room and she never plays it, but if I suggest we get rid of it, she blows up." Holly sincerely wanted to play the piano. She wanted it so badly that she sacrificed money and comfort to have the piano, but she was so afraid of not being good enough that she rarely touched the keys. Occasionally she would mention to me that she was thinking about getting lessons, but she never brought herself to do so.

Graduate school is difficult, and my husband and I have sacrificed in order for me to live in this world of words. But I haven't earned my place completely. Not yet. Sometimes, when I sit to write my dissertation, it's hard not to carry those years of sacrifice on my shoulders, a guilty weight. It tells me that my words should be gold and gems, falling from my typing fingers, glittering on the screen, shining beacons. The guilt challenges me: *You've had years to work, to learn; you should be done now.* But that's not how it works. My dissertation won't strike, like lightning, and that's ok, but sometimes it's hard to remember.

How do we mend the pain? How do we find solace, relief? When will this be easy? Should we untangle ourselves from our writing? What would be left if we did?

I like to think my history with writing and pain has made me a better teacher. I am sincerely sympathetic with my students and constantly open to new ways to approach writing. Really, my primary strategy for avoiding writing anxiety became varying my process. Essay composition looks like a jumble of activities, something like this:

Think. Free write. Make lists. Be messy. Start on the computer. Talk it out while writing. Print and work with a pen when stuck. Revise sentences. Read out loud. Make more lists. Write questions and then answer them. Find quotations and write about them. Write the paragraph inside out.

1. Peter Elbow, *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2000), 42.

Reorganize. Edit. Call someone and tell them about the paper. Revise the introduction. Repeat as necessary. Always remember: *I can do this. I have done it before. I don't need to worry.*

The feeling never completely goes away. No matter how much I write, no matter how much success I achieve, I feel it inside, the sourness in the pit of my stomach. But over time my struggles have become assets, and through tutoring and teaching I have learned more about writing than in any formal class. When I offer students my strategies, stories, experiences, and enthusiasm, they regularly reciprocate by sharing their accomplishments, growth, discoveries, and hopes. By sharing tales of my writing challenges, I help others dismiss their preconceptions about “normal” behavior and feelings when writing— and I remember how to dismiss my self-doubt.

So, don't let a vision of sparkling perfection intimidate you into silence. The best writing is an exploration. It's an opportunity to go spelunking through our brains, and those dark muddy tunnels aren't always pretty. The deeper we go, the messier it can be.

As Don Finkel, a former Evergreen faculty, explained to me when I was 18, one approach is to write a complete draft entirely for exploration. We can then turn around and write a second version of the essay for communication. Writing badly doesn't mean thinking badly—sometimes it's what we need in order to think freely, experimentally. I like to imagine Don Finkel's two drafts as two paths. The first we wander freely. The second we build for others to follow. Discovery can happen on both paths.

Turn off the inner critic and internalize the following:

I am your ally. I want to know what you have to say. Don't worry if it's perfect. Don't judge yourself. It's okay to follow the messy path first. You'll have time to wash off the dirt and trim the edges later. Don't weed all your sprouts before you know what's in your garden. I want to hear your voice squeak a bit.

Let this internal voice be your coconspirator, your collaborator in the writing process. Fight together against the challenges of communication, against the fear, against the pain. Later you can invite your critical thoughts, but not until their time.

First let's mend. Find your child self. You are safe under the covers. Sometimes we all need a chance to write badly.

WORKS CITED

Elbow, Peter. *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2000.