



CULTIVATING VOICE

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There is only one way to tell that a seed is alive, and that is to grow it.

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A seed shows no sign that it is alive. Even under a microscope and through dissection there is no evidence that it will become anything living, anything beyond the small, still entity sitting in my hand. But somehow, someone somewhere knew that if they planted it, and fed it, it would grow.

I suppose then that the seed is just a bundle of hidden potential energy. Like an idea. The idea for this article began with a metaphor. And not even an original metaphor: Ideas starting out as seeds and growing with time and energy? We've heard it all before. And yet, there is potential.

Trust me. Being clichéd or predictable is one of my worst fears about writing, and speaking, and even thinking. I find myself constantly asking: *"How do I say something that has never been said?"* In seminar I would sometimes refuse to speak my mind because I thought, *What I want to say is too obvious: that's why no one else has said it.* I didn't consider that I might have something meaningful or important or unique to share, or that I could express myself in a way that would reach people.

Sometimes I feel there is nothing left. I have a brilliant, incredible, earth-shattering idea—and then I find whole books already written on it. I find a beautiful, colorful seed—and a thousand others that look just the same. I plant mine—while seven billion other people are planting theirs. So how can mine be special? My idea doesn't feel unique, and so, like the seed, it doesn't seem alive.

Then why am I pursuing it? I suppose because after years of rejecting ideas, I just can't anymore. I want to say something. I *need* to say something. And I have something to say. It is small and still and maybe doesn't seem vibrant or alive. But that's the risk of writing, and speaking, and even having ideas. Maybe my idea has already been written, thought, felt, said, tried, and the wonder of it may seem to have died. But there is only one way to know that the seed is alive.

Some days, when I actually remember this, I decide to try. On those days, like today, I scramble with excitement to collect the things I need: water, soil, sun, seed, pen, paper, hands, music, shovel, and I just go. I dig my hole. I drop the seed in dirt. I cover it in darkness. And then I pour my love

into it. Pour my words, my brain, my heart, my soul into the soil. I expose the surface to light. Feed, water. Day after day I work on it. Some days are better than others. Some days I think it will never grow.

Through this process, in all my tending and loving, I become seed *and* gardener; page, words, idea *and* writer. I become maybe too close, too connected, too invested in what I am growing. I am simultaneously in the dark trying to grow, and on the outside watering, writing, waiting.

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I find it symbolic that we don't plant a seed in the light. We put it in the darkness to sit in isolation, in time, in mind, in the damp soil alone, to struggle to grow. This is fitting for my own process. I go through intense darkness with my writing. I almost always hit a point where I am not sure anything with breath or life will emerge. I check every day to see if a bud has broken through the thick dirt that covers it; I look up eager in the dark, searching for the light.

But day by day, I remain in the darkness, in the struggle, in the wait. It is the only way I know.

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This isn't what you want to hear, I realize, about writing or life. Though I suppose all of this may be different for you—no darkness, no long days waiting for a breakthrough. Maybe you just plant and reap, plant and reap. Maybe. But that isn't my process. I am constantly dropped in dirt, covered in darkness, and struggling to reach the light.

Struggling, trying every day! How else could I expect something complex or beautiful to emerge? I have to take care of the seed. Hold it through the darkness. Tend to it. Encourage it. Love it again and again. If I do this, eventually it will crack open, and life will start spilling out. Sometimes this is happening before I can even see, while the seed is still hidden under the soil, shaking scared in the dark.

Either way, it *will* crack.

It will start to grow roots, limbs in all sorts of directions. It may be chaotic. I might not totally understand, even though it is coming from me.

Still, I have to trust the process. Keep tending. Keep writing. Keep envisioning what this now-living entity could become; where the internal logic lies; where the connections are; what needs arise. More light? More water? Does it need new soil? Pay attention. Wait.

Something is starting to take shape, and the shape has meaning as though the seed always knew what it was going to become, and how, and why, even if I didn't. Sometimes it's not until that moment when life and beauty and color burst forth that I remember, or truly understand. Sometimes, I never do. And sometimes...

Walking down the street, on a rainy day, someone sees what I have grown, and in recognition, in comfort, in empathy, in appreciation, they smile.

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So I took the chance. I planted a seed. If I didn't, then it would have stayed lifeless for sure. If I had worried too much about growing something everyone has already seen, I would never have discovered that the grown seed is a whole different tree when it is grown by me. And I wouldn't be sitting here in awe, crying at the beauty of my own truth out in the world for you to see as you walk the cracked sidewalk or flip through the pages of a book.

Common flower or rare blossom, here it is, here I am: blooming and alive.