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The Art of Writing and the Time It Takes

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Ever since I have been teaching the art of writing and the art of artmaking, students both here and in the United States, have repeatedly voiced their problem with time or rather the lack of it. The question of time it takes to write, the question of time in art, is one of the most difficult ones to answer. We need a certain amount of time to carry out our projects, to do what we set out to do, and so it seems reasonable that we should undertake projects for which we would most likely have the time during our lifetime. If we have an hour a day available for writing, we must be very clear about it. If we have a job and must take care of children and cats and dogs, then we should be clear about that. The need for time as the need for sleep varies from person to person. As the American poet and psychoanalyst Nick Piombino says, "There is more than one kind of poetry—as there are many ways of living a life."

It is also worth asking oneself the question, Can one do more than one does? Can one make art and earn a living and raise a family as many artists have done? I would also like to emphasize and maybe focus on the question of time spent on not actively working, that is, not writing anything down, but thinking, or reading, or walking, maybe even not-thinking, not-reading, or not-walking. How intrinsic this not working to working is, should not be overlooked. We must consider the time it takes not to work as well as to work. With only the greatest difficulties can we raise children, hold down a job to earn a living, care for a household, and be an artist all at the same time. These are very practical considerations that I strongly recommend against disregarding.

So we don't only need time for writing, but we need just as much, often even more time for non-writing or pre-writing, as well as post-writing. This can be accomplished voluntarily or not, actively or not, but almost always takes its own time. "What are you doing?" "I'm non-writing." Or "I'm pre-writing." On the subject of inactivity being an important part of activity Piombino tells us:

Imagine how frustrating it would be if we always forgot that a sense of being full is quite dependent on the experience of being emptied—and that a sense of doing something is equally dependent on the sense of doing nothing. Significance pales before insignificance—and because of this we're soon back again for more. The greatest frustration of all is to forget that we live on a pendulum in every way. To forget this (the forgetting can never be absolute) amplifies the sensation of anxiety, which feels like the earth is slipping away. All

becomes hurry because closure is impossible. There is no place to stop.

I'll address the art of stopping in a moment. But first let's look at Piombino's implication here that the prelude to an action is the preparation for the action. "Significance pales before insignificance." The way I see it, you have to get your body and spirit into a position to do what you need to do. In the case of writing, this means, you must prepare your state of mind and your environment. It's not too different from cooking. You need a kitchen, some fire, an idea, a purpose, the food to be cooked, and a certain amount of time. Once you prepared all this you can begin the process of cooking. But the preparation cannot and should not be overlooked.

Piombino quotes from a letter from Claude Debussy to Raoul Bardac, in which Debussy says that:

Time spent carefully creating the atmosphere in which a work of art must move is never wasted. As I see it, one must never be in a hurry to write things down. One must allow the complex play of ideas free rein: how it works is a mystery and we too often interfere with it by being impatient—which comes from being too materialistic, even cowardly, although we don't like to admit it.

The word "impatient" jumps at me here. Let's look at one particular approach to taking the time to "creating an atmosphere in which a work of art must move." Perhaps not Debussy's approach, but definitely an approach I warmly recommend and myself practice, is Buddhist meditation. I am thinking in particular of "observation meditation," as discussed by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book, *Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*. On the subject of awareness through observation meditation he says that:

Every method is as wonderful as every other, as easy and as difficult as every other one. We can, however say that the preliminary instructions place greater importance on "stopping," and the later ones place more importance on "observing," although, of course, stopping and observing cannot exist separately from one another. If there is stopping, observing is already present, more or less; and if there is observing, there is a natural stopping.

What is this stopping Nhat Hanh is talking about? What are we observing? And how do we proceed?

We can begin by becoming aware of our breath, by following our breathing. Breathing in and breathing out, we know we are breathing in and out, and we can smile to affirm that we are ourselves, that we are in control of ourselves. Through awareness of breathing, we can be awake in the present moment. By being attentive, we have already established "stopping," i.e., concentration of mind. Breathing with full awareness helps our mind to stop the wandering and confused, never-ending thoughts.

With " . . . stop the wandering and confused, never-ending thoughts," Nhat Hanh is referring to the irritation that lies in the way of the peaceful and harmonious state of mind that we need in order to create the "necessary atmosphere" Debussy is talking about. So in order to deal with the feeling of irritation which is hindering the creative process, Nhat Hanh recommends that we use our full awareness to observe our feelings. "If we are irritated," he says, "we must know `This irritation is in me. I am this irritation,' and we breathe in and out in this awareness." Later he continues, and here is an important point:

In Buddhist practice, observation meditation is based on non-duality. Therefore we do not view irritation as an external enemy coming to invade us. We see that we *are* that very irritation in the present moment. Thanks to this approach, we no longer need to make an effort to oppose, expel, or destroy irritation. When we practice observation meditation, we do not set up barriers between good and bad in ourselves and transform ourselves into a battlefield. This is the main thing Buddhism seeks to avoid. We must treat irritation with compassion and nonviolence.

I think that once we have made peace with our irritation, we become calm and focused and can proceed with our work. You can substitute "irritation" with "fear," "anxiety," and other unpleasant feelings. So the point is to accept and embrace these feelings rather than fighting them and trying to avoid them. The art of writing is in no way different or apart, of course, from the art of living. Before we can write, we have to find some kind of personal, inner harmony allowing the central force of creativity to emerge.

We don't have to rush home to a meditation cushion, we can practice conscious breathing and smiling anywhere. "We can begin by becoming aware of our breath, by following our breathing. Breathing in and breathing out, we know we are breathing in and out, and we can smile to affirm that we are ourselves, that we are in control of ourselves."

I maintain that writing is a thoroughly positive act. To take an instrument into one's hand and apply it to paper where one's thoughts are translated and written down in specific

"codes" requires positive energy. The act in itself requires some form of a positive outlook. We are not always aware of our positiveness. That's why it is good to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness will allow us to discover a condition we already are in. It may be that we find ourselves in a condition in which it might be better not to write. That would be the non-writing time. On the other hand we may search out an emotional condition that is favorable to making art. A condition we already are in. One we can come upon by practicing mindfulness. I love the example of taking pleasure in a "non-toothache." In his book *Peace Is Every Step*, Nhat Hanh maintains that "the foundation for happiness is mindfulness. And that the basic condition for being happy is our consciousness of being happy. If we are not aware that we are happy, we are not really happy." He points out that "when we have a toothache, we know that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. But when we do not have a toothache, we are still not happy. A non-toothache can be very pleasant. There are so many things that are enjoyable, but when we don't practice mindfulness, we don't appreciate them. When we practice mindfulness, we come to cherish these things and we learn how to protect them."

So it seems reasonable for us to consider that before anything else can be done, we must find the positive force within ourselves that will allow us to pick up the pen and apply it to paper. To press the pen to the paper and move it around in specific ways. Or, for that matter, pressing the keys of a keyboard in a certain sequence, an action that requires the definite realization of the potential happiness within ourselves. Only then can we combine the paper with our perception of the paper, the pen with our perception of the pen, and our happiness giving us the power to apply the pen to the paper with our perception of our happiness. You might say, but what about artists who use their anger, or other negative energy to create with. To that I would say that such artists must enjoy this energy brought about by negative feelings and at close look you will see that this anger has been transformed into precisely happiness. These people have transformed their anger into positive energy by accepting their anger as an intrinsic part of themselves and by even taking advantage of the adrenalin rush it has given them to apply the energy constructively. They, in fact, got past their anger by embracing it as part of themselves. It's worth pointing out repeatedly that compartmentalizing parts of ourselves leads down the wrong path. All elements are part of a whole, the one we want to see by lowering ourselves to the basics of breathing.

There is a wonderful look into the oneness of all elements in Nhat Hanh's chapter "Interbeing" (a word he made up):

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not there, the sheet of paper cannot be

there either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. . . .

. . . If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow. And so we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all these things this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point at one thing that is not here--time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. . . . This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

. . . The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up of only "non-paper" elements. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

Acknowledging universal coexistence of all elements. We need our force, our happiness, and we need our time.

The question of time. Money can sometimes buy time: Lord Byron, Count Tolstoy, Gertrude Stein. But as I said before, we all have our own individual unique need and allotment of time and must dispose of it in our unique and individual way. Given enough time, we can define our world. By defining our world we are creating it, as we saw in the example of the non-toothache giving pleasure if we let it, if we pay attention to it. There is no question of why we write? Or what our reward for creating art may be? We write in order to write what needs to be written, often using a language that is commonly understood as well as newly defined and reinvented. We define our world and convey our ideas and our beliefs to others around us. We each speak our own, personal language. This unique definition of the world, this unique view of things is what we write, paint, compose, and choreograph. On the subject of why we write, we would do well to look at Jackson Mac Low's talk he wrote for the Schule für Dichtung in Wien in 1992, entitled "Why Bother Writing?" :

. . . such reasons as self-expression, the communication of political or other messages, the investigation and questioning of language and the ways it reinforces "ideology," and the encouragement of readers' active participation in producing meaning are readily affirmed by writers and other artists as legitimate motivations for making artworks.

A much less readily avowed reason is—self-aggrandizement: many people write poems or make other artworks because they think doing so will help them become, in a word, big shots. Like many would-be politicians, physicists, and stockbrokers, numerous poets (and other artists) adopt their profession mainly to make names for themselves. They care far less about making something excellent than about acquiring honors—or as the olden poet puts it, fame—and along with fame, money, power, and love.

. . . One writes precisely in order to *make* poems or stories or novels or essays or plays or performance pieces or whatever other kinds of written works a person finds it within herself to make!

Not *mainly* to express one's self and its feelings, wishes, perceptions, or thoughts, or even to make the world a better place to live in . . . and certainly not mainly to make oneself a big shot—but *to help the works come into the world*.

Although the last sentence readily brings to mind the phrase *ars gratia artis*, I think Mac Low's statement is a much more complex one as it deals with the moral and ethical aspects of artistic motivation. He says that the poem is its own end, its own purpose and that we should not write it with ideas to exploit the work for other another end than its own existence. We don't want to "profit" from the work. We may profit from it in the course of events, but that should not be our motivation. Such motivation is clearly exploitative.

I said that motivation and reasons for artmaking is not our subject here—the time it takes is. Still, I had to digress into motivation because it would be a waste of time to overlook the purpose of one's action. Just as it would be a waste of one's time to write without any purpose at all. To write aimlessly. By writing aimlessly I do not mean automatic writing, which is considered a healthy exercise by many writers. By writing aimlessly I mean scribbling without an idea, a point, a form, without a purpose in mind. It's as if one were to walk about without a goal, as if one were to float and drift about by putting one foot not in front of the other, but just anywhere. One would soon fall down. The same way, we write using words—or sounds—and they must be in a specific order, they must have some structure or the work won't stand up. The artwork will fall down if it has no legs to stand on. So do not waste your precious time.

Rushing through life and hurrying to our end, not stopping and observing, are all

wastes of time. Nowhere in Ecclesiastes, Chapter three, on the vanity of all endeavor does it say that "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven: a time to waste time."

There are our natural tendencies to consider also. Some of us tend to naturally write in the morning, others late at night. We must carefully listen to these individual tendencies, and even so, these tendencies have a tendency to change during one's lifetime. We must listen to our own personal nature at all times.

" . . . Look deeply and you will see." [T.N.H.]

It goes without saying that what's inside, what we see deep inside, is the truth, and that this truth is the best bit of news we can have. The Italian playwright and poet Ugo Betti said it so well:

Everyone has inside himself . . . what shall I call it? A piece of good news!
Everyone is . . . a very great, very important character!

This clearly is another way of saying that we are happy, we're just not aware of it.

I seem to be insisting that joy be a prerequisite to good writing. I insist because I am convinced that everyone can find this piece of good news, by taking the time to practice mindfulness. There is, as Piombino says, more than one way to write, and there is more than one way to practice mindfulness. But the simplest way is to understand that there is nothing to chase after. We can go back to ourselves and enjoy our breathing, our smiling, and our clear path.

Ugo Betti's play, *The Burnt Flower-bed (L'aiuola bruciata)*, 195?

Nick Piombino's essays "Writing and Persevering" and "Writing and Spontaneity," *The Boundary of Blur*, Roof Books, New York, 1992

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