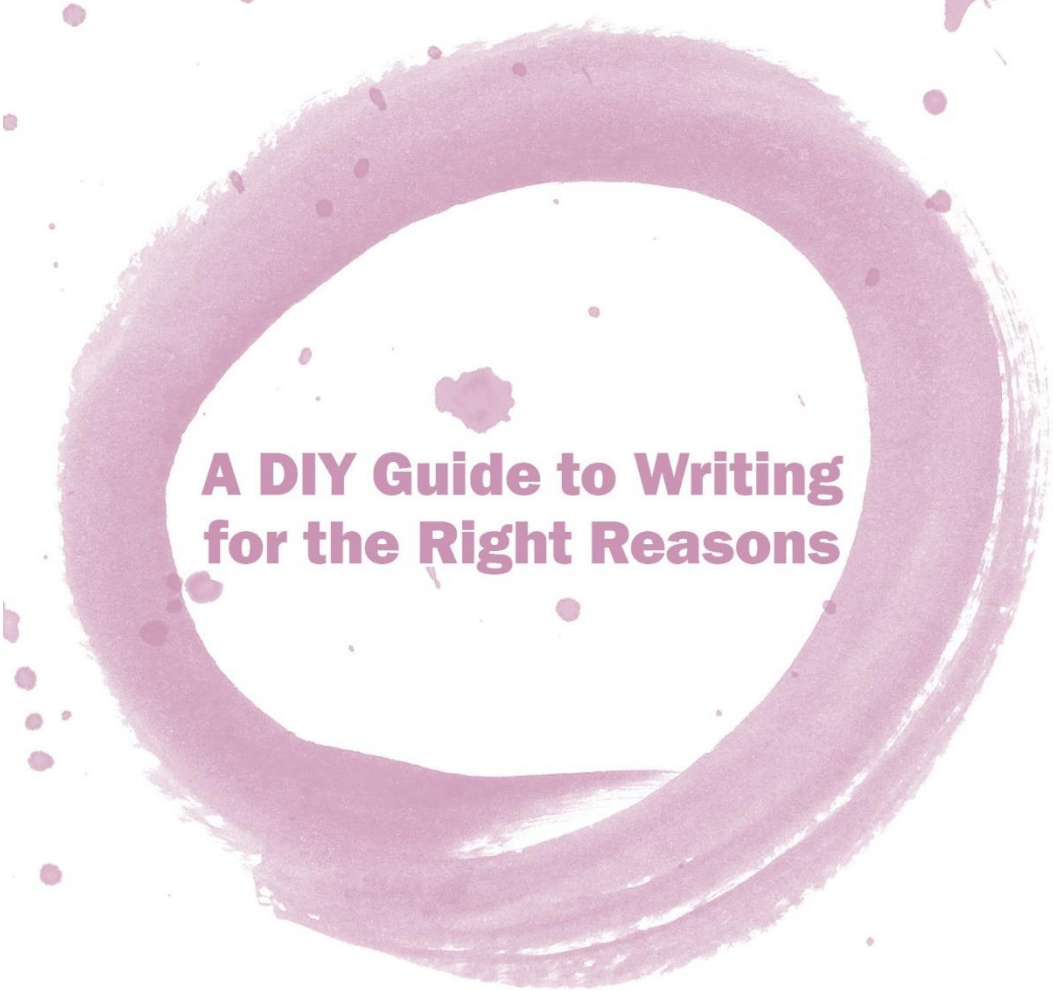
WRITE MINDFULNESS



A DIY Guide to Writing for the Right Reasons

TJ Beitelman

TJ BEITELMAN

Write Mindfulness: A DIY Guide to Writing for the Right Reasons

TJ Beitelman is a writer, teacher, and editor. He is the author of three full-length poetry collections: *In Order to Form a More Perfect Union* (2012); *Americana* (2015); and *This Is the Story of His Life* (2018). In 2008, his poetry chapbooks *Pilgrims: A Love Story* and *Thirteen Curses (and Other Love Poems)* won the Black River Chapbook Competition and the Dream Horse Press Poetry Chapbook Competition, respectively. His books of prose include a novel, *John the Revelator* (2013); a story collection, *Communion* (2016); and two books of nonfiction: *Self-Helpless: A Misfit's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness* (2012); and, with Sam Tenenbaum, *The Unmasked Tenor: The Life and Times of a Singing Wrestler* (2015). His individual poems, stories, and essays have appeared widely in literary magazines and garnered artist's fellowships from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and Create Birmingham (formerly the Cultural Alliance of Greater Birmingham). He lives in central Alabama with his wife and son.

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TJ Beitelman is available for lectures, workshops, and readings.
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https://tjbman.me/consulting or DM via Twitter (@writemindfultjb)

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ALSO BY TJ BEITELMAN

Pilgrims: A Love Story
Thirteen Curses (and Other Love Poems)
In Order to Form a More Perfect Union
Self-Helpless: A Misfit Pilgrim's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness
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The Unmasked Tenor: The Life and Times of a Singing Wrestler (with Sam Tenenbaum)
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This is a work of contemplative nonfiction intended to provide insights and creative inspiration for people seeking same. The author is possessed of little (nothing, that is) you, yourself, do not possess on your own. Results, therefore, may vary. Consult your physician and/or appropriate spiritual advisors prior to taking to heart any of the exhortations and admonishments herein.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the various sources cited and enumerated herein. Regarding this, we defer to the sentiments expressed by the immortal Carl Spackler, poet, prophet, and extraordinary looper, regarding his one fateful encounter with the Dalai Lama Himself: “So we finish 18, and he’s gonna stiff me. And I say, ‘Hey, Lama! How ‘bout a little something, you know, for the effort, ya know? And he says, ‘Oh, uh, there won’t be any money. But when you die, on your deathbed, you will receive total Consciousness.’” So you got that going for you. Which is nice. (Please don’t sue us.)

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For J— and for S—. My right reasons.

*

"I thought I was grounded. I thought from my kinda blue-collar outlook on life that I would call myself a grounded person. I was not. I was like a balloon flying around in the air. And as soon as our first child was born, boom—my feet came right down to the ground."

— John Prine

"I'd rather get a hotdog or a doughnut than write a song."

— Ibid.

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Part I

Opening Salvo: Writing for the Right Reasons

I. Please Allow Me to Introduce Myself

My life is full of broken halos.

—Keith Richards

But First: Who Are You?

This book is for anyone who wants to come into closer, more regular contact with the Creative Spirit. (Yes, I capitalize the C and the S.) It is particularly for people who feel frustrated, lost, and lonely in their pursuit of a creative life that's sustainable and meaningful. As Picasso is purported to have said: all children are born artists; the problem is to remain an artist once we grow up.

Given my own background—as a student and then as a teacher of the literary arts—I'm aware of a telling irony. It's not uncommon for those of us who have tried to remain artists as we "grow up" to feel disillusioned by that very pursuit. The impulse to remain creative isn't the problem. The problem is how and why we try to do so. This book is for those of us who are looking for a better "how" and a better "why" to be creative people.

Who (I Think) I Am

I'll start with who I'm not: I'm not a guru. I'm not a Zen master. I'm not even a particularly successful writer, nor am I "mindful" all the time. I have lots of shortcomings, I've made lots of mistakes, and I don't have all the answers. In short, my writing life and my life-life have often involved struggles. But those struggles have been instructive, and I think writing about them can help me and other people struggle less. They can help us on a path of recovery—recovering the better version of ourselves that is always somewhere within us.

So this is who I am:

I am TJ. I am a writer and a teacher and an editor (among other things). I have a couple of graduate degrees, one in Creative Writing and one in English. Which is to say: I was one of those people who just kept going to school, collecting professionally untenable credentials (along with an irresponsible amount of student loan debt), with little or no sign of getting off the carousel. Ironically, I wasn't always a great student, and I didn't love school. For the most part, I did what I needed to do to get by and enjoyed the extended adolescence of perpetual "scholarship." Not every parent's worst nightmare but not any parent's dream.

And yet, contrary to what my own parents may have expected throughout their son's lost/over-educated decade of the 1990s, I have been gainfully employed for two decades and counting using the rarefied set of skills and experiences this background has afforded me.

Where I Work and What I Do

For most of those two decades and counting, I have worked in a musty cinderblock building, mere spitting distance from a stretch of interstate that locals used to call "Malfunction Junction." It's recently been upgraded, but for years it was a serpentine half-mile of eight-lane

highway so dangerous that the governor, in hopes of saving a life or two, lowered its speed limit to an embargo-era crawl of 50 MPH. Even now, eighteen-wheelers trundle by on the overpass just outside my classroom, and I can all but feel the concrete stanchions wiggle with the weight of it all.

Still, there is no denying that this exact spot is crucial to the entire state. Here, east meets west and north meets south. To get most anywhere worth getting to in these parts, you've got to navigate your way through this one seminal spot.

I say all that to say this: Working *where* I do—at a dangerous, wobbly, but ultimately vital crossroads—shares some symbolic kinship with *what* I do.

(Drum roll, please.)

I teach creative writing at a magnet school for the arts.

The School You Wish You Attended?

I believe the best kinds of teaching and learning are themselves creative acts, regardless of the subject or setting. They can be, anyway. And, as such, some of the most vital kinds of teaching and learning can (probably *should*) be more erratic and mysterious than we like to let on. Mainstream, conventional schools—at least those in the United States—are pretty good at some kinds of teaching and learning. I believe that they tend to not be so good at these messier, more vital kinds of teaching and learning. And that's not just a problem for students in schools today. Conventional schools haven't been very good at teaching us to access what I've already called the Creative Spirit for a long time, and the repercussions of that deficiency extend across many generations.

Enter my great good fortune as a teacher. I'm going to take some time to tell you about it in a little more detail because this is really a manifesto about the relationship between teaching, learning, and creativity. Most essentially, it's about how we teach *ourselves* to be creative people and how our environment helps (or hinders) us in that pursuit.

So here goes: the school itself opened its doors in 1972. In the ensuing half-century, it has been a consistent source of pride for a Deep South state where such things—consistency, pride—have too often been anomalies in public education. Though admission is competitive, the school is public and tuition-free for state residents. It serves students in grades seven through twelve, and its scope is statewide, so students who don't live within commuting distance—some of them as young as twelve or thirteen—live in dormitories on campus. It's also not unusual for students to undertake round-trip daily commutes of nearly a hundred miles to engage in up to three hours each day of rigorous, intensive study in one of six specialties: Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre Arts, or Visual Art. (There is also a Math & Science specialty that was added to the program in the late 1990s.) That's *in addition* to the school's full day of academic core courses, most of which are taught at accelerated prep school levels. The regular school day starts before 8:00 a.m. and runs to at least 4:40 p.m. Performing arts students often stay much later than that for rehearsals. Our graduates end up at some of the most prestigious colleges, universities, and conservatories in the nation—Yale, Princeton, the University of Chicago; Julliard, RISD, Cooper Union; etc—and our tiny graduating classes of 60 to 70 students routinely garner total merit-based scholarship offers of $8–$10 million.

All of that hints at what makes my teaching experience unique. Boiled down to essentials, what more could any teacher ask for? As a rule, these talented students are excited to attend the school, and they (often their families too) are willing to make great sacrifices so that they can have such an exceptional learning experience. One student's father turned down a substantial promotion at work because it would've meant pulling his daughter from the school and moving to Texas. Another student moved in with her grandparents instead of following along with the rest of her immediate family when her mother's career called them off to a different part of the state. "We knew we had to figure out how I would stay," she told us. "It's so integral to my life. This school just becomes your world."

I mean. Wow, right? Must be a pretty special place. And it is.

Is it perfect? Certainly not. This is where the aforementioned intersection of "dangerous, wobbly, but ultimately vital" comes in. First of all, the intensity of the experience is very different from that of most educational environments, even those of a lot of colleges and universities. I spend three hours a day, five days a week, *for up to six years*, with the same students. Exhaustion—physical, intellectual, and interpersonal—is a constant. For everybody: students, parents, faculty, and administrators alike. Students either grind away for years on end at high RPMs, or they become adept at keeping their heads just above water, doing *just enough* of what's asked of them to stay in good academic standing.

The latter can be frustrating, for sure. All of our Creative Writing students, for example, have great potential—innate facility with language, powers of observation and maturity of thought that belie their years—and to see someone demure in the face of that potential can be a bit of a downer. It's no greater downer, however, than the more common problem on the flipside. Many of our students, the high-RPM grinders, develop an almost pathological need to stay busy. I worry how that undermines a young writer's need to ponder, cogitate, ruminate. Of her *own* volition (not in the context of a class). Writing doesn't just require meditative reflection—it *is* a meditative reflection. If someone doesn't know how to pause, check out of the workaday world, and resist the pervasive thrum of activity, I'm not convinced that he knows how to write—not to his full potential, anyway.

There's also a more practical too-much-too-soon factor. Writing students who have been immersed in an intensive workshop experience—"It becomes your world"—before ever setting foot on a university campus invariably encounter a dilemma. They have often developed a creative process that relies heavily on workshops (i.e., immediate, near-constant feedback from others)—a pretty big problem in itself—only to find lower-level undergraduate creative writing classes "beneath" them. That sentiment is rooted in ego and arrogance (also a problem), but the change in environment can be jarring. It has led quite a few of them to allow their writing lives to wither on the vine.

So, no, the work I do is not without pitfalls, practical and ideological, and I'm not without my own questions about the aims or the ultimate value of our project. Namely, are we supposed to be grooming our students to take a prominent place among the next generation's writers of note? And, if so, how are we doing on that score? From a sheer numbers perspective, not *great* (but getting better). While a handful of our graduates are still writing and publishing their work, the vast majority are not published writers. My sense is that a large percentage of them (perhaps a large *majority* of them) aren't even actively writing anymore.

In fairness, writing is a longitudinal pursuit—to wit, for a long time, the folks at the Yale Series of Younger Poets considered anyone forty and under as "younger." Most of our graduates fit that description. And our program has made some evolutionary leaps in the last thirty years, both in terms of curriculum and in number of graduates, so we have reason to believe it's only a matter of time before a representative sample of ASFA creative writing alums take their respective places in the contemporary literary firmament.

Regardless of time's ultimate verdict on that front, I do think we're successful in doing something a lot more important than populating the contemporary literary firmament, and maybe even more lasting.

Tapping into the Power of Environments

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Outliers*, among other bestsellers, was asked a while back why he thinks some people live up to their potential and others don't. For him, it boiled down to what he called "the redemptive power of environments." He went on to say:

> *My point is it's almost impossible to know where the person ends and their environment begins, and the longer someone is in a particular environment the blurrier that line gets. More specifically, you can't make definitive judgments about the personal characteristics of people who come from structured environments. What does it mean to say that a Marine is brave? It might mean that a Marine is an inherently brave person. It may also be that the culture of the Marine Corps is so powerful, and the training so intensive, and the supporting pressure of other Marines so empowering, that even a coward would behave bravely in that context.*

If nothing else, I can say this with confidence: my colleagues and I help our students create a definitive structured environment. And through immersing themselves in that environment, our students develop a particular identity. Perhaps it's a particularly *peculiar* identity, but so be it. For better or for worse, our students feel like they have been a part of something unique. If that helps them transcend the ordinary from here on out, to think in new and provocative ways about a range of subjects and experiences, then, yes, that's something redemptive. And helping other people to do that is a life's work I can, in good conscience, embrace.

Tapping into an Even Higher Power

But there's another crucial kind of work we're engaged in at the school where I teach. It's harder than the work of creating a definitive structured environment. We're far from proficient at it, but I think that's because failure is an integral part of this kind of work. This work, in fact, has everything to do with an individual creative person's relationship to the very ideas of proficiency and failure in the first place.

One day, not long after I started teaching at the school, I made a rudimentary sign to put up in my classroom. I don't remember the circumstances, exactly, nor the exact timeframe—was it in my first year? My second? Can't be sure. What I remember is confronting a consistent, low-level hum of passive resistance in a lot of my students. It wasn't so much resistance to me or what I was teaching (I don't think) or even a resistance to writing in general. It was more a

resistance to embracing themselves as exceptional people whose creative potential was only limited by their willingness to:

(A) truly devote themselves to discovering a lasting, individual creative *process,* as messy and indeterminate as that might be (as opposed to the one-off, late-night alchemy of writing, by hook or by white-knuckled crook, individual works their peers might admire in a workshop);

(B) cultivate real, enduring faith in their creative impulses and instincts, yet...

(C) to resist the idea that they had mastered anything at all and, thereby...

(D) to remain open to new possibilities, new ideas, new forms, even new versions of themselves, not only as artists but as human beings.

Yes, these were people who had been told, at a very young age, that they were really, really good at something. Everyone agreed: they had all the talent in the world. They could produce good poems, stories, essays. And yet, somehow, with too many of them, I had this nagging feeling that some important part of the process was missing.

So I made a sign. My sign was simple. Three letters, one word, on a mustard-colored piece of ordinary 8 ½ x 11. It faded over the years. When it fell off the wall—it fell a lot; stuff doesn't stay stuck to musty cinderblock—I taped it back up.

My sign said: "Try."

As is often the case, the more experience you have, the more you realize you don't know nearly as much as you thought you did when you started out. In the last two decades of teaching, I've had a lot of theories and systems when it comes to teaching and learning and being creative, and most of them have had short shelf-lives. But that one-word sign gets truer every year. Not just for the teachers and students at my school but for all the creative people I know and love.

Try.

That's it. It's a shorthand, of course. It stands for a lot of things. It isn't always *easy* to try. Most of the time, it's pretty difficult. But it's the very essence of the Creative Spirit. Which is to say: It's the essence of something larger than just writing or capital-A "Art" or even making something cool for other people to enjoy. When we "Try," with everything we have inside us, we (re)discover the better version of ourselves.

And *that's* what this book is about.

II. Why Write? (Or: Notes to My Self in a Parallel Universe)

> *We're trying to show people we're alive and that's about it. I wish that was enough.*
>
> —Mike Watt, the Minutemen

I am writing this in the year when I turn fifty. For thirty of those fifty years, I have self-identified as an artist. Writing has been my chief artistic vocation. I have studied it, practiced it, taught it. Here and there, my writing has won me some praise from strangers, garnered me a smattering of awards and fellowships, earned me a little money.

And yet for most of that time, my life has been a mess: bad life choices, unaddressed mental health issues, self-destructive behavior. It was a hand-to-mouth life, in so many ways, and it never adequately sustained me.

I'm in a better place now, but writing is not what turned my life around. I met my wife. I found a good therapist. I plugged into two spiritual traditions that I find complementary—the Catholicism of my ancestors (and of Thomas Merton) augmented with the engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh and his Plum Village disciples. Then my wife gave birth to our son. Roughly in that order, this sequence of events—the new, definitively structured environment it has afforded me—has been my portal to a better, more balanced, more mindful life. I'm still a work in progress. I always will be. But my progress is real, and I'm thankful for it.

Still the impulse to write and the value of teaching it persist for me. Because my life has changed so much in recent years, I increasingly question why that is. In fact, I sometimes (also increasingly) wonder why human beings bother writing at all. It's time-consuming and difficult to write well, and it's even more time-consuming and difficult to get your writing read. And—to reiterate—writing (or having written) hasn't saved my life.

To answer those questions for myself and maybe for others, it helps me to ponder why (I think) human beings (probably) started writing in the first place.

Ten Things (I Think) I Know About the History of Writing

1. *Humans developed writing at different times, in different places, independent of one another.* Ancient Sumer, China, Mesoamerica. Maybe elsewhere. That suggests there is something very useful (and essentially *human*) about writing, something that transcends the culture of any one group of people.

2. *Writing is not as old as other forms of human creativity.* From what I can gather, music probably came long before writing, followed by visual art. Movement and pantomime, as a means of ritual, perhaps with narrative elements, might pre-date it all. All of these other art forms are older than writing is. They're also more physical, more directly connected with the body, and that seems significant too. The Creative Spirit first and most naturally expressed itself physically. Creativity is then, in my opinion, a fundamental means of bringing the world of form and bodies into integrative harmony with what might be called "formlessness" or "Spirit" or "God" or "eternity." It is a way to touch the essential

transcendent mysteries connecting us to that which is larger than ourselves. The older forms of creativity do that in very direct, immediate, and tangible ways.

3. *The first impulse to write things down was probably not like that at all: it was probably just a mnemonic device.* The impulse behind the grocery list is likely closer kin to this first impulse to write something—closer, say, than the one driving us to write poems or novels, and certainly closer than it was to the impulse that first drove humans to make "art."

4. *The first things we wrote down were probably not imaginative or abstract or even qualitative.* They were likely more utilitarian than that: receipts, inventories, ledgers, contracts, almanacs. They were not texts so much as they were artifacts.

5. *Writing was probably not invented to be read, then, not in the way we conceive of reading today.* It was a means of noting and documenting: property, relationships, commerce between interested parties. Again: less text than artifact.

6. *The vast majority of all homo sapiens sapiens who have ever walked the planet have been illiterate.* Even as late as the 1960s, less than half the world's population could read. That percentage is higher today, but it's far from 100%, particularly if functional illiteracy (when someone can read and write only in a very basic way) is factored in. And, of course, there are many thousands of years' worth of us who lived before writing and reading even existed.

7. *When writing was invented, the concept of an anonymous audience of readers didn't exist.* Authorship, therefore, didn't exist either. Writing's fundamental utility had nothing to do with authorship or readership.

8. *Then this utilitarian tool changed: it got more accessible, more efficient.* Major advances in the technology of writing (namely paper and ink) increased literacy and expanded the possibilities of what a text could do. Even if the impulse remained one of documentation, writing could notice and document more (and more complex) things. Namely, writing could become a tool for defining, documenting, and disseminating culture. This is (probably) when the Creative Spirit entered the literary picture. Which is to say, very roughly speaking, people started writing about their gods. Again, the impulse was probably rooted in a desire to document. The stories almost certainly already existed in aural form. As such, they were received and handed down communally. But writing began trafficking in these mysteries—in matters for which there are often no words (a singular problem for writing as an art form, as opposed to the other art forms that are expressed through the body).

9. *The Ancient Israelite intellectuals happened to be very good (and therefore very influential) writers.* From the scribes who shaped the Torah to Paul and the disciples who wrote the New Testament, the authors of the Bible knew how to turn a phrase and tell a story. And yet, with the possible exception of Paul, they were still not authors. Likewise, their intended audience was not a multitude of single, silent readers of a printed text. These texts, in their

original form, were usually read aloud to a mostly illiterate church or temple community. No single author, then, and no single reader. Still, whether or not we believe that it's a unified story of the one true God, we can appreciate its flair for tragedy, comedy, history (with some poetry, pithy aphorisms, and trippy dream-visions thrown in for good measure). It's great literature, and its overall influence on literary art is almost unfathomable. Describing it that way makes it sound downright Shakespearean, a writer whose own influence on all of literature is just as impossible to fathom. But of course that gets it backwards.

10. *Shakespeare—perhaps the original and most enduring avatar of The Famous Author—was downright biblical. (But he was also up to something else.)* The values, personalities, and narrative patterns of the Bible pervaded Shakespeare's culture and world view. He was, after all, writing 1500 years after the last books of the New Testament were penned, and many more centuries after the oldest books of the Hebrew bible were codified. What's more, like the Biblical authors, he wrote for a communal audience, and it stands to reason he didn't intend for most of what he wrote to be read silently by a single reader. (Let us not dive into the conspiracy theories of who "really" wrote Shakespeare, but it's also safe to say the composition of these texts was, to varying degrees, collaborative—as, obviously, was the composition of the Bible.) Also like the Biblical authors, Shakespeare wrote tragedy, comedy, history (with some poetry, pithy aphorisms, and trippy dream-visions thrown in for good measure).

    Yes, he used other source material, other influences. But the oeuvre of Shakespeare ends up looking a lot like the Bible, in form and function (as well as in origin). That is to say, Shakespeare was channeling the Creative Spirit into language in order to disseminate culture (and values) in a very similar way, for similar purposes as the authors of the Bible—the significant difference being that he was disseminating the culture (and values) of Queen Elizabeth and King James, not (solely) Yahweh or even Moses or Jesus Christ. In so doing, Shakespeare—like a lot of artists that predated the Enlightenment (i.e., the discovery of the scientific method)—had one foot planted in the sacred and the other in the secular.

Why (I Think) That History Matters Today

It doesn't take too much of a stretch, then, to say that the Prime Movers of the Western canon of literary art (the Bible and Shakespeare) were situated in the ever-expanding borderland between a notion of "heaven" and earth. We might also call it mystery and "reality," or the numinous and the phenomenological, or even the Creative Spirit and the world of forms. Or perhaps, more simply, myth and history.

The question of entertainment is where Shakespeare's aims diverge from those of the Biblical authors. Shakespeare's enterprise was not just (or mainly) cultural; at its core, it was commercial. For the Globe Theater to be a going enterprise, providing livelihoods for dozens if not hundreds of people, Shakespeare's work had to be entertaining to as broad an audience as possible, not just those seeking high-minded ideals or cultural dissemination or a workable system of law and order. Hence the fart jokes, the sexual double entendre, the slapstick humor, even the blood and gore. Secular—if not profane—sells better than sacred. Always has.

Shakespeare had an allegiance to the throne, and perhaps even to some Higher Power than that. But he also had an allegiance to the shilling. In him, then, we see a very clear, very prominent, very enduring example of writing (art) as a commodity.

Since Shakespeare's time, that orientation towards art and creativity of all kinds has only increased. Now, too often, I believe the gap between "art" and entertainment, between the sacred and secular aims of any creative enterprise, has grown to a point where it sometimes seems unbridgeable. And that brings me to where I am today. With my original question: Why write? Why make any art at all?

Three New Questions

All of that riffing on the history of writing, truncated and half-baked as it may be, helps me start to answer those questions for myself because it splinters the essential question—why write?—into a few separate questions. Namely:

Am I writing to simply notice/document? (It's fine if I am. That's pretty much why writing was invented in the first place.)

Am I writing to bring Spirit into contact—harmony—with mind and body? (Also fine. That's probably its second oldest function. It's also its most high-minded one.)

But it also invites a third important question, one that needs to front the other two. That is, the question of audience:

Who am I writing to, for, or about? (This is where it gets dicey.)

Shakespeare and St. Paul wrote to, for, and about other people. St. Paul did so in order to collect souls and grow a church movement. Shakespeare wanted to collect money and grow a theater into a cultural and economic nexus. For both of them, the larger the audience, the better.

Most often, I have come to realize, I am writing to, for, and about *myself*. This realization has proven very important to my own mental and spiritual health. When I get mixed up—when I think I'm writing for others but, in fact, I'm writing for myself—I don't get what I need from my writing, and others find little or no value in it.

Because of the way I was trained as a writer, I came to believe that all of my writing—if it was worth anything—was meant to be read by other people. By a lot of other people. It was okay to occasionally (even better, secretly) write for myself, but that was a lesser form of writing, and anyone who professed to write solely or even primarily for themselves was not a serious writer. There was no place for them in the writing classes where I learned to be a writer.

For too long, then, what I wanted—more than anything, I'm ashamed to say—was not so much to be a writer as it was to be taken seriously as a writer by other people. That desire has led me to suffering, time and again.

I am now re-training myself. I have started by reversing my original belief. All of my writing—if it is worth anything—is meant for me. It is meant to help me know and heal myself. It is a constant process of recovery and reconciliation.

Mostly that takes the form of simply noticing and documenting what is happening around and within me. Less often, it connects me with even greater and deeper mysteries than that. It is okay to occasionally (perhaps even secretly) write such things with the hope that

others may one day read them, but that is not the essential, most serious form my writing must take. I am not Shakespeare or St. Paul. Far more often than not, I don't have an audience other than myself. I almost never need another kind of audience.

Writing, in its most serious and wholesome form, must be an adventure past mere ego, into the self, and toward something approaching selflessness. It must be a means of engaging the Creative Spirit.

Writing for the Wrong Reasons

I was once, in the bad old days, engaged in an intense conversation with someone I was hoping to impress. We were talking about writing. She was not a writer and she wanted to understand why I write.

"Why do you have to write for a bunch of strangers?" she asked. "What if you just wrote something for your son or daughter or someone you really loved and no one else got to read it? Would that be enough?"

At that point, I hadn't published a book yet, and I desperately wanted to publish a book—I'd been working towards that goal for well over a decade by then. Like many lightly published or unpublished writers, I had the vague notion that publishing a book would change my life. At the very least, I was sure it would change people's perception of me as a writer (for the better, of course), and that, in turn, would give me a stronger sense of identity: "I'm a writer. I've published a book. A book that people liked."

I can't remember my exact response to the woman's question, but I do remember it didn't impress her very much. Not too long after that conversation, I did go on to publish a book, and then I published another book. And another and another and…

Nothing really happened. There were some minor perks: I got a smattering of gratifying reviews in a few small on-line publications, and I met a handful of strangers who'd read my work and enjoyed it. I signed a few books, gave a few readings. It was better than a kick in the head, for sure, but there was no sea change in my sense of identity. I was still the same sad person with the same sad set of insecurities and doubts, the same laundry list of shortcomings and misdeeds. If anything, I'd added some insecurities and doubts to the baggage I was already lugging around: namely, is this the high-water mark, the best I can do? Is this what I've been working for? And tell me again: why do I insist on spitting into this headwind? I'd found my way back to the essential question—why write? And the even deeper essence of it: it's not just a question of why I write but who I think I'm writing to.

Though I didn't know it at the time, these were questions I'd been waiting a long time to be asked. Like all such questions, they immediately and steadily wormed their way further and further into my creative consciousness. Very shortly after the conversation with the dubious woman, I had an idea for a new writing project, and while I knew on some level that it had arisen from that conversation, I didn't know much else about it. Maybe it would be fiction, maybe it was to be nonfiction; maybe it was short, maybe it was long. Maybe I'd serialize it on my blog. Maybe I'd try to publish it in print. The only thing I knew for sure was the title: "Notes to a Son in a Parallel Universe."

Appropriately enough, I started making notes for the Notes. I romanticized this imaginary son. I really believed he needed me, my wisdom, my unique insights into the world at

large. In writing these notes for him, I was going to write him into existence, and in so doing I was going to write something universally accessible, something that resonated with, well, the world at large. Or at least the 100,000 people it takes to make the book a bestseller.

One curious thing, though, is that I'd tried to write similar things before. In fact, most of my books have significant portions in them that are facsimiles of this project. In one, there's an elegy to an unborn son and a story about an old man leading a young man on a picaresque journey toward enlightenment; in another, I had a character write a "book of revelation" to a boy he had reason to believe was his son. I liked that idea so much, I did it again in yet another unpublished novel manuscript. Clearly this was an archetypal project for me. Its roots ran—still run—deep.

But the most curious thing about this "new project" was that, despite its working title, I still wasn't writing to this "son," or even for him. I was writing about him, for strangers. I had made an object of him. He was a tool designed to attract the same brand of external validation I'd been chasing all along. That realization took a while to dawn on me.

Gertrude Stein rather famously said, "I write for myself and strangers." Like most writers, I could identify with that statement for a long time. It even seemed profound, a paradoxical riddle that hints at the limitations of a dualistic worldview. Self and Other are, on some level, one and the same. It sounded vaguely Buddhist to me.

But this thorny new question I was asking about my audience cast Stein's statement in a new light. The motivation behind writing for yourself and strangers isn't about breaking down dualism. It's mostly about ego, about creating a sense of self outside yourself. Without the messy business of directly interacting with other people. That's all the strangers are for in Stein's equation: external validation. At least that's how I now understand it, and this was the exact motivation that led me to believe—mistakenly—that publishing a book would change my life.

Writing for the Right Reasons

When asked why his band, the Minutemen, made music, bassist Mike Watt said, "We're trying to show people we're alive and that's about it. I wish that was enough."

I think that is enough. Now I do, anyway. I think it has to be, or nothing worth making would ever get made. I also think the question of whether or not it's enough has a lot to do with who you want to show that you're alive. Again: it took me a while—there was no *aha* moment of discovery—but over time I came to understand the crucial element of my archetypal project about sons. The "son" who'd been calling out to me, from the other side of something, who wanted my insights and wisdom, who wanted my reassurance and unconditional love, who wanted more than anything to know me, who I was, in fact, neglecting—all along, this "son" was me.

So, now, this is why I write:

Now I'm writing to teach myself.

Now I'm writing to keep waking myself up.

Now I'm writing to break myself open.

Now I'm writing to open my heart as wide as it will go.

Now I'm writing to show myself that I'm alive.

Is that enough? It has to be.

Part II

(Pre-) Pre-writing: On the Necessity of Securing Your Own Mask

This is a guide to writing and creativity, but it's also about balance. Equilibrium. And it's geared toward people who—like me—have a hard time maintaining that equilibrium. That's why I'm going to take some time to address best practices in regards to the care and feeding (quite literally) of the human animal and how that relates to the care and feeding of the Creative Spirit.

A few simple truths to start with:

Writing is, essentially, thinking. Thinking happens in the brain. The brain is in the body. The spirit swirls in, around, and through all of that. I have gotten myself into trouble when I forget or ignore the interconnectedness of it all.

It's crucial, then, to keep those interconnected systems—mind, body, spirit—working together in better harmony. I have found that writing for the right reasons is seeded there. What follows, then, are some thoughts for you to consider about self-care. For the most part, these thoughts are a synthesis of the ideas of others who know this material better than I do. Often, it's common sense. Occasionally, it might seem counterintuitive or even a little silly. Results may vary. The overarching point is that if you want to fashion a more sustainable and sustaining creative practice, it's important for you to understand (and actively pursue) what you need to maintain your physical, mental, and spiritual equilibrium before you ever set pen to paper or start tapping away at a keyboard.

I. Take Care of Your Body

I have heard Glen Hansard, singer/songwriter and busker-extraordinaire, make the observation that songs are like the silvery trail a snail leaves behind on its way to wherever it's going. The world sees the silver shimmer but forgets or never knew in the first place that the shiny stuff is just an excretion of where this mucousy little creature's been. It's a good metaphor. It applies to writing too. All kinds of creativity.

Speaking of metaphors:

Did you know that dolphins evolved from land mammals? Look it up; I'm pretty sure it's true. I don't have the knowledge, space, or really even the inclination to get into the evolutionary biology here. I'm mostly interested in the metaphorical implications: in this case, the ocean was something strange and foreign to a particular species, and the species adapted its physical form to this wholly different environment, one that now provides it shelter, abundant sustenance, a dearth of natural predators. In the process, the animal went from looking kind of like a deer to looking like a cross between a big fish and a little whale.

That is truly fucking amazing. (Excuse my French.)

The point is, bodies adapt to their surroundings. They shape themselves to fit. They do, that is, if they're ever going to thrive. That suggests, to be at your best, you have to pay attention to your environment. It's important to seek an environment in which you can thrive.

Shelter. Abundant sustenance. A dearth of natural predators. And, keep in mind, your ideal environment might not be the environment you started out in. When you do find the environment that suits you, you might not develop sonar in your teeth (though that would be cool), but there's no question you will evolve into your best, most creative, most resilient self. And the byproducts of that evolution will be more useful to you (and perhaps to others).

Now here are some practical, non-metaphorical things you can do to tend to your environment in a way that enables your physical form to thrive.

Sleep. Chronic sleep deprivation is glorified in our culture. If you did nothing more than make sure you got 8-10 hours of good sleep every night, you would be doing the single most effective thing you could do to improve all aspects of your life: your emotional and physical well-being, your academic and/or creative performance, your personal interactions. You name it. Here's a few things to consider when it comes to sleeping well, especially if you're not sleeping well already:

- Sleep in a dark place. Circadian rhythms are linked to cycles of light and darkness. Likewise, try to expose yourself to at least a few minutes of bright sunlight during the day.
- Sleep in a quiet place. Wear ear plugs, if necessary. If you need ambient noise to fall asleep, find something regular, rhythmic, and soft (i.e., an electric fan)—preferably something on a timer that will turn off at some point after you fall asleep. Try to avoid using music, especially music with words. You're trying to get your brain to shut down conscious activity. Don't give it more stimulation to process. You might not think you're thinking, but your brain doesn't know that.
- Develop a sleep routine. It cues your body that it's time to shut down. At the very least, go to bed at a similar time every night and wake up at a similar time each morning, even on weekends.
- Cut out bright light and electronic activity at least an hour prior to sleeping.
- Stop eating and drinking two hours prior to sleeping. Indigestion can be a big factor in insomnia, fitful sleep, and nightmares.
- Try not to sleep with pets. They often snore, fidget, and don't sleep through the night.

Breathe. Consciously work to make your breathing deeper, slower, and more regular. There's a raft of scientific evidence (not to mention thousands of years of spiritual wisdom) that indicates if you consciously manage the most basic physical system in your body—your breathing—you'll be better able to regulate your moods and you'll improve your overall well-being.

After all, your breath is one of the only systems in your body that is linked to both the somatic and the autonomic nervous system: you can breathe voluntarily *and* involuntarily. It's a direct connection between the body's ancient irrational genius and the mind's clever, precocious (sometimes stormy) dance.

Here's one simple breathing exercise that will help you breathe better:

- Breathe deeply through your nose to a count of four. (1-2-3-4.) Breathe so that your diaphragm, which is below your chest and above your gut, fully expands.
- Hold that breath to a count of seven.

- Breathe out through your mouth, slowly, to a count of eight.
- Repeat that cycle at least four (but no more than eight) times, twice a day and whenever you get stressed, scared, or sad.

This exercise takes the edge off anxious moments almost immediately, but if you do it faithfully—every day, twice a day, and whenever you feel stressed or angry—you'll be surprised how much more balanced and resilient you feel.

An even simpler exercise is to make sure you're always (*always*) breathing through your nose. The body is designed for nose-breathing (not mouth-breathing). Everything works better (mind, body, spirit) when you breathe exclusively through your nose. For more on this and other fascinating information about the "lost art" of breathing, read James Nestor's book *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*.

Drink water. A lot of it. Every day. It's hard to drink something you buy at a store or restaurant that doesn't have caffeine, alcohol, or sugar in it. I'll get to the mood-altering aspects of those three substances in a second, but the first two are also diuretics, which means they tax the kidneys and dehydrate you. (Excess sugar taxes the kidneys too.) Hydration is as basic and crucial to maintaining good health as are sleeping and breathing. The body breaks down very quickly without any one of the three. If you drink mostly Coke or coffee or Red Bull (or beer), you're not going to die from it immediately, but you are going to be over-caffeinated (or drunk) *and* you're probably going to be chronically dehydrated, both of which stress your body, depleting its energy stores and making it less resilient. Also, to appeal to your vanity: people who age well (i.e., they look younger than they are at 40, 50, 60…) often attribute it to drinking a lot of water. That and getting enough good sleep.

Walk. Walking is an essential human exercise, the simplest, most ancient work a bi-pedal body can do. All bodies need work, the simpler the better. A working body makes space for a resting mind. In fact, Buddhists do something called walking meditation, in which they focus on each breath and each step, bringing them into synch. Most faith traditions have some similar corollary, especially mystic traditions. From Canterbury to Mecca, and all points in between. And, of course, the list of writers who count walking as an essential part of their creative process is too long to enumerate here. Simply put, walking works magic.

Get outside. Humans as we know them have been around for about 100,000 years. We spent in excess of 90% of that time as nomadic hunter-gatherer types, and we spent a good portion of the remaining ≤10% of the time in agrarian societies. Urbanization is really pretty new to us as a species. Industrialization is even newer. As of this writing, London has only been around for the last 2000 years. Rome is 800 years older than that. New York City, one of the oldest cities in America, is only about 400 years old. Birmingham, Alabama, where I live, isn't even 200 years old. Sun, grass, trees, clouds, mud, streams, snow, stars, rain, wind—they speak to something ancient and timeless in us. Let yourself listen. Get out in it. Even if it's in a city park or your backyard.

Give. Preferably a little more than you think you can spare. I'm not talking about money, necessarily. The most precious thing you can give is your undivided attention (to a person, a

cause you believe in, a job you really care to do well, etc.)—the time, effort, and energy that requires. Another precious thing you can give is your joy. When you feel joyful, share it. Smile, laugh, play. Wish these things on other people. Invite them to smile, laugh, and play with you.

Detox, Part I. Be mindful of the garden-variety stimulants and depressants you're ingesting on a regular basis, especially if you have a hard time regulating your moods. Caffeine, alcohol, and sugar are the most pervasive of these.

Everybody reacts to them differently. And your body's reaction to them can change over time. This probably goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway: people can easily develop physical and emotional dependencies on all three of these substances, especially people who have a hard time regulating their moods. And creative types tend to have a hard time regulating their moods, at least from time to time. Caffeine, alcohol, and sugar can make it that much harder to sustain an equilibrium.

And yet, paradoxically enough, people use these substances (often unwittingly) to try to stabilize or enhance their moods. I have found that the long-term effect on my mood and overall mental state is almost always the opposite (i.e., crashes of various sorts), and the effect on my physical health is usually (and broadly) negative too. I'm not trying to be a killjoy. I drink coffee and alcohol and I eat sugar. And that's precisely how I know they can really mess me up if I'm not careful. It's probably the same for you (or for people you will encounter). If you're having Body-Mind-Spirit troubles, look for the culprits here first, and limit or eliminate your intake, at least for a while. These substances are only short-term fixes and they have a tendency to make things more difficult in the long-run.

Disconnect. Limit digital connectivity and TMI. When Nicola Tesla brought radio waves to the British Isles, a man tried to break into his house and kill him because he believed the waves were the cause of a series of mysterious ailments that befell his family soon after Tesla's arrival. He was probably crazy, this would-be assassin, or at least not in his right mind at the time. But that doesn't mean he was wrong. Our bodies are exquisite sensory devices. They interpret and feel things our puny brains can't access directly, consciously. The "off" button exists for a reason. Luckily, a lot of the information available to us is pretty worthless. At the very least it's redundant. We can live—and live better—if we're oblivious to most of it. Less is more.

Listen carefully. Be conscious about your music. Especially if you have trouble regulating your moods or if you're going through an emotional rough patch. I love music as much as the next guy, maybe more, but music can be a powerful stimulant and an equally powerful depressant. If you're sad all the time and all you listen to is sad music, there's a good chance you're cultivating your own sadness. You're certainly reinforcing it. Think of your music as the soundtrack of your mental state. A taste for syncopation and wide, dynamic swings (loud to quiet, quiet to loud) *might* be a clue to where you are emotionally. A taste for minor chords and maudlin lyrics *might* be a clue. A taste for growling distortion and blood-curdling screams might be a clue. I'm not saying you shouldn't listen to such music. Just be conscious of how it affects (and/or reflects) your mood. On a side note, try to develop a taste for at least some form of instrumental music, preferably something soothing and vibrant, with a regular rhythm to it. Just to cleanse your emotional palate, so to speak. In my experience, the so-called "World Music" is

a good choice for this. Big Band works for me too. As does Mozart and Gregorian chant. But that's just me. Explore and experiment for yourself.

Cultivate silence. Silence—true silence, meditative silence—is a mood stabilizer. If your mind buzzes in silence, try concentrating on the breathing exercise above. Or just focus on your breathing, without trying to regulate it. Just think "in" with the in-breath, "out" with the out-breath. When you realize your mind has started buzzing again, just go back to concentrating on your breath.

Read. Reading is a form of true silence. Especially for us bookish types. And it builds the creative capacities of your mind. It is also a crucial and underappreciated form of pre-writing for writers.

Detox, Part II. If a person, place, thing, or activity helps you cultivate creativity, optimism, and a feeling of sustainable well-being: seek them/it out. Persistently, faithfully, joyfully. And, to the extent that you can, share your well-being with other people. The world needs your creativity, optimism, and feelings of sustainable well-being.

On the other hand, if a person, place, thing, or activity makes it more difficult to cultivate creativity, optimism, and a feeling of sustainable well-being, recognize and trust that response in yourself and put some distance between you and this person, place, or thing.

*

There's not a single element on this list I haven't struggled to remember at one point or another in my life, often to the point of despair. In fact, I'm still a work-in-progress when it comes to just about all of it. Again, I'm no guru. I'm not even a very good example.

What I do know, from my own experience, is that when I feel frazzled, when I feel puny, when I feel scared or sad or when I feel like I'm not my best self, it's always been rededicating myself to something on this list (often just one thing on this list) that brings me back to life.

Pick the thing you can do. The simplest, easiest thing for you to do in that moment. And do it. Often you get a nice domino effect: you gain the strength and equilibrium to choose to do *another* thing on the list and then another, and all of a sudden, your world has cycled through to a better pattern of existence.

It doesn't last forever, unfortunately, this rejuvenation. It invariably runs its course. But the efficacy of the list does seem to endure. Like any true friend, it always welcomes you home, no matter where you've been or how long you've been away.

II. Take Care of Your Mind

Most of us hear voices in our heads. It's crucial to listen to the right ones.

Here's something Allen Ginsberg said about writing poems:

> *The parts that embarrass you the most are usually the most interesting poetically, are usually the most naked of all, the rawest, the goofiest, the strangest and most eccentric and at the same time, most representative, most universal…That was something I learned from Kerouac, which was that spontaneous writing could be embarrassing…The cure for that is to write things down which you will not publish and which you won't show people. To write secretly…so you can actually be free to say anything you want…It means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless—abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world. Abandoning the idea of being a prophet with honor and dignity, and abandoning the glory of poetry and just settling down in the muck of your own mind…You really have to make a resolution to write for yourself…, in the sense of not writing to impress yourself, but just writing what your self is saying.*

I think he's right, and I think what he says goes for most any creative enterprise. Not just poetry. Not just writing. That spirit, that attitude, I mean. The attitude of trying to be open to who you really are (muck and all). The attitude of trying the best you can to express who you really are with no fear and no expectation of gaining anything from it. That's listening to the right voices in your head.

On the flipside, there is such a thing as negative self-talk. Sometimes what your self is saying isn't helpful. And a lot of times, it says those unhelpful things over and over (and over) again, for years. In my case, that has created habits of mind that have limited my creativity and led to no small amount of suffering, for myself and others.

Here, then, are some helpful mantras I have used to reboot my self-talk:

Now is not then. There's a difference between loving history/tradition/ghosts (which many of us do) and being chained to the past (which none of us is, even if we think we are). Speaking as someone who's inclined toward nostalgia and who has a strong affinity for being haunted by the people and places I've loved and lost, I can say that telling myself "now is not then" has helped me be less sad. Less chained. This is useful when I don't *want* to be sad and chained (which, I must admit, is not 100% of the time—an important realization). It's also helped me be a little less anxious, which is something I do want 100% of the time, though that aspiration is elusive.

Speaking of the past (and the future), my favorite poet-monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, has said this about such ghosts:

> *We're caught by the ghosts of the past and the future because we don't know they're ghosts. We think the past is still right here with us and we dwell in it. But if we can smile to the ghost of the past, and acknowledge that the past was there, but that now it is gone, then we can have the smile of enlightenment. When we*

smile like that, it shows we have love for ourselves. We know the past and the future are not our enemies. We know how to live in this moment we are in right now. We need to live our daily moments deeply, as they occur. When we live and know that we are living, this is freedom.

It's okay. It's fine. Really. It is. Usually right now, at this very instant, there is no problem. Problems tend to exist in the past or the future, both of which require us to use our imagination (please see: "Now is not then"). Monsters and demons need us to imagine them. It's possible instead to imagine the best (angels and other forms of benevolent magic) for yourself. In fact, it's the best course of action. Which leads us to…

It's possible. This one's about more than staying positive and hopeful, though it is about that, too. Most anything *is* possible, after all, even things that cause suffering. But saying "it's possible" is also about coping with fear and anxiety. If I'm afraid of a particular outcome—if I'm fearing the worst, and often I am—this mantra reminds me to consider the many other possibilities. There are almost always other possibilities, other explanations, other potential outcomes that don't involve catastrophe.

What are they? Make a list. Read it to yourself over and over again. Even if you can't think of the other possibilities, remember that somebody else probably can think of them. Find a trusted somebody-else to help you entertain the better possibilities. Also, catastrophe is rare. Even better, it's almost never insurmountable. And then there's this: suffering is always a teacher. It's possible to learn from it. There is an alchemy to suffering, where it can lead to a more sustainable peace and freedom.

I don't know. You don't have to. Very often it's better not to. Dwell in mystery. Get comfortable there. Let it be your neutral ground, your default mode, your re-set button. Not good or bad. *I don't know. It's okay, it's fine.* That's real enduring strength, a strength most people shun. I know that I have a problem with not knowing, and it's not just my ego (i.e., wanting other people to think I'm smart). It's tied to childhood trauma—uncertainties and instabilities large and small that my sweet little mind couldn't comprehend at the time. That sweet little mind is still inside me. I have to reassure him (please see: "It's okay. It's fine.") that "knowing" is not my responsibility. It is my responsibility to be in the present moment. That's it.

I'm listening. It's a Chatty Cathy, the Cosmos. You just have to tune in.

I'm here for you. The "I" I most need to be here for is myself. It's been important (and very difficult) to learn to be nice to myself, to *mother* myself in the ways I need to be mothered. Two things are embedded in that assertion. First, I've had to learn to mother *myself* and not wait for (or expect) someone else to do it for me. Second, I've had to learn the various ways I need to be mothered. Sometimes it's pampering—delicious sandwiches, soups. A long nap or a walk, or a hot bath, with salts. A good book and some silence. A phone call to a far-flung kindred spirit. But often it's more basic than that. Taking care of my body. Feeling my emotions as they occur. Breathing properly. Avoiding excessive consumption, labelling repetitive patterns and behaviors. Being still. Being present.

Then there's being "here" for someone else. My son, my wife, my sister, a student, a colleague, a friend. I have found this can be an antidote for a lot of the emotional distress that's rooted in self-consciousness and/or self-doubt. But I have found it impossible to be "here" for someone else in a sustainable and healthy way without first being "here" for myself.

III. Take Care of Your (Creative) Spirit

I wrote what follows for a presentation I gave during a faculty in-service at the school where I teach. Again, it's a magnet school for gifted, ambitious students in grades seven through twelve. They "major" in one of six specialties—five which are arts-related (Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre Arts, and Visual Arts) and one of which is more academic in nature (Math/Science). This is in addition to a full slate of academic core classes, many of which are taught at accelerated levels. It is a singularly diverse (and often stressful) place, but I think there *is* one bit of crucial connective tissue to this unique environment. And that's what this talk was about.

The thesis of my presentation, as you will see, was that our students' outsized creative capacities come with a highly calibrated sensitivity to the world around them. Something similar can be said for teenagers, generally, I believe. That's not a bug. It's a feature. But it does require some particular attention to the details of creating the right environment where they can thrive.

I offer this talk here, slightly edited, because I'm convinced this bond between creativity and sensitivity does not have a shelf-life. If we aspire to creative lives—if we seek communion with the Creative Spirit—we must attend to our sensitivities using the very same methods and insights I shared with my fellow teachers of sensitive teenagers. In this manner, we creative types can (in fact, we must) be our own mentors, our own advocates, our own teachers.

In other words, I think it's both helpful and accurate to think of the Creative Spirit that dwells in all of us as if it were a Highly Sensitive Child/Teenager. The trick, then, is to treat this sensitive spirit of creativity within us accordingly: with love, patience, wonder, faith, and optimism.

The talk I gave was called "The Tie that Binds Us?" As you read it, I invite you to imagine yourself as part of a broader collective audience of creatives, one that is larger and more inclusive than the faculty of one little specialty school somewhere in the American South.

The Tie that Binds Us?

I'm nearing two decades of teaching at ASFA. In all that time it seems that we've been searching for the thread that connects all our multifaceted parts. There have been times when we've seemed closer to discovering it, and there have been other times when we've seemed farther away. It's remained elusive.

And yet there *is* a tie that binds us. Most of us feel it, intuitively. The smart hunch has always been that it doesn't have much to do with what we do (individually, collectively) or even how we do it. Those things are clearly and necessarily different, so trying to find similarities and synergies has always felt like putting a square peg in a round hole.

No, the smart hunch is that what truly connects us is not what we do but who we are. Individually, collectively.

We've had several professional development sessions over the years regarding personality types. Myers-Briggs. Emergenetics. They've been popular and informative, but they've also focused on (A) our faculty and, specifically, (B) the ways we as individuals are

different. Diversity is wonderful, essential, unavoidable, and I think we're better at appreciating our individual differences because of these sessions.

But they haven't brought us closer to our common thread.

Recently, a friend and teacher (@havi | The FluentSelf.com) suggested I read a book by Elaine Aron called *The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them*. Frankly, I was reading it to try to understand my own weirdness, so I wasn't, at first, thinking about how this concept—the Highly Sensitive Child—might be an important clue to finding our thread as a school. Turns out I am highly "Highly Sensitive" according to Aron's rubric. I suspected as much already, as did others in my life. That's why my friend suggested the book to me. The epiphany was that Aron's book had so many implications for what we do at this school. That's when I started to suspect I had stumbled on our thread.

I would bet a lot of money that I'm not the only HSP in our faculty. But more important than sussing out which of us is "Highly Sensitive," I believe the real thread that binds us is the fact that, highly sensitive or not, we all teach in an exceptionally stimulating and stressful school environment that is home to a disproportionately large percentage of highly sensitive *adolescents*.

This, then, is an extended persuasive essay of sorts. It's also a call-to-arms/how-to guide. I'd like for us as a community to consider the possibility that Elaine Aron's work regarding Highly Sensitive children and adults might not only help us better understand who we are—individually, collectively—but it might also help us (our *students*) thrive beyond our wildest imagination.

What follows is based on my reading of two of Aron's books—*The Highly Sensitive Child* and *The Highly Sensitive Person*—augmented by a little bit of Google searching and informed by my experience of teaching here. Then there's the nearly 50 years (and counting) of stumbling and bumbling through life as an HSP myself. I don't claim to know everything about any of this: HSPs, teaching, life, myself. I want to know more about all of it, and I hope you do, too.

The (Mad) Science

Jerome Kagan was a Psychology professor at Harvard. He spent his career studying what he called "highly reactive" babies and children. In a nutshell, this is what he found: 20% of all infants are "highly reactive." They pump and flex their limbs vigorously in response to minimal stress and stimuli. They often arch their backs as if irritated, and they cry more than other babies. (This incidence of highly reactive infants holds true in most higher animals.)

Kagan's follow-up studies show that, by the time they reach their first birthday, two-thirds of highly reactive babies are "inhibited" (his word). They show higher levels of fear in new situations, and they have more allergies, insomnia, colic, and constipation than their non-highly reactive counterparts. Also their resting heart rates are generally higher and, under stress, their pupils dilate sooner and their vocal chords are tenser. Crucially, they tend to have much higher levels of norepinephrine and cortisol—stress hormones—in their bodily fluids, even when they're not under duress.

Kagan's takeaway: there are important physiological (and probably genetic) differences between the way these babies and children process stress and stimuli and the ways their non-highly reactive counterparts do. They are physically, mentally, and emotionally more sensitive

to their environment than the majority of their peers. And they don't "outgrow" it. This is probably how they were in the womb, this is definitely how they are now, and it's how they will be as adults. Given the presence of similarly "highly reactive" infants in other species, it would appear that, in terms of evolutionary biology, this difference might also be advantageous to a given species.

Over the years, in longitudinal studies, Kagan found that "highly reactive" infants become children who are disproportionately influenced by their environments. As you might expect, if the environment was unstable and unsupportive, the kids Kagan studied were worse off than their non-highly reactive peers were in similarly unstable, unsupportive environments.

Even more fascinating: the highly reactive kids reaped MORE benefits from supportive, stable environments than their non-highly reactive peers did from similarly supportive, stable environments. A bad environment exacerbated the challenges of this temperament, but a good one nurtured and developed the special gifts associated with it. For these kids, the right environment can mean the difference between a life dominated by persistent, predominant neurosis (namely, but not exclusively, anxiety and depression) and one that taps the potential of the exceptional creativity and insight that is often the birthright of this temperament. That's hugely important, not just for the highly sensitive individual but to a world at large that seems to be in increasingly short supply of the kind of attributes these individuals offer. These Highly Sensitive kids are clearly worth the extra effort.

The Highly Sensitive Person: A Rose by Any Other Name

Enter Dr. Elaine Aron, a psychologist who has also studied this temperament. She agrees with Kagan's findings but she quibbles with his terminology, particularly because it emphasizes the inhibitions and drawbacks (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) associated with this temperament. She's the one who coined the term "Highly Sensitive Person" (HSP) because she believes it reflects a more accurate, holistic attitude toward the temperament.

The Four Attributes of HSPs

- HSPs process their experiences in greater depth than others.
- HSPs are easily over-aroused by stress and stimuli, regardless of whether the experience is positive or negative.
- HSPs are sensitive to subtle stimuli in their environments.
- HSPs have deep emotional reservoirs and are capable of uncommon empathy toward others.

Aron emphasizes the advantages of these attributes, and there are many. HSPs tend to be intelligent, intuitive, and imaginative—often exceptionally so. They see things others don't see and feel things others don't (sometimes can't) feel. They make great artists, writers, teachers, inventors, clergy, and visionaries. They also make great librarians, researchers, doctors, architects, and software engineers.

The primary disadvantages of this temperament, Aron argues, are largely due to the fact that Western culture isn't geared to value HSP strengths: it's loud, overstimulated, and superficial. She also argues—as does Susan Cain, in her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a*

World That Can't Stop Talking—that we desperately need HSPs to find ways to assert their gifts in order to temper some of the more vulgar and violent attributes of the Digital Age. Both Aron and Cain believe that's up to the HSPs themselves, and the key to unlocking their gifts is helping them to develop (A) self- awareness and (B) the confidence that comes with self-acceptance.

Speaking of introversion and HSPs: Aron is adamant that not all HSPs are introverts. In fact, she took Cain's book to task a little bit for confusing the two. An outgoing person can exhibit all of the four HSP attributes above just as easily as a reserved one can. Aron estimates that approximately 70% of HSPs are "introverted," leaving a significant number of "extroverted" HSPs. The important thing to remember is that this is a temperament, not a personality, and as such, it's somewhat less malleable. An introvert can learn strategies to be more outgoing, even if it doesn't feel natural at first, and over time, his or her attitude toward social interaction can change. An HSP's brain chemistry and central nervous system are always going to respond to stress and stimuli in pretty much the same way. Also important to remember, especially for teachers: you can usually see the traits of introversion in someone else; you can't always *see* the types of sensitivity an HSP is experiencing.

The Three Types of Sensitivity in an HSP

- **Aesthetic Sensitivity.** This reflects a heightened awareness of aesthetic experiences. The HSP diagnostic questionnaire Aron has developed asks such questions as "Are you deeply moved by art, films, poetry, nature? Do you have a rich inner life?"
- **Low Sensory Threshold.** This refers to an individual's sensitivity to unpleasant stimuli: "Are you made uncomfortable by loud noises?"
- **Ease of Excitation.** This is the tendency to feel overwhelmed in response to demands: "Do you get rattled when you have a lot to do in a short amount of time?"

The latter two (low sensory threshold and ease of excitation) tend to be correlated. Aesthetic sensitivity is not necessarily correlated with either of the others. Strong tendencies to any one of these types of sensitivity can classify someone as an HSP, even if he or she doesn't identify with the other types of sensitivity at all. That said, many (but not all) HSPs strongly identify with more than one type of sensitivity, often all three.

The Two Brain Systems

As we consider the workings of an HSP brain, Aron finds the crux of the matter in two related brain systems:

- **The Behavioral Activation System:** parts of the brain that take in messages from the senses and send out orders to our body to take action. This system pushes us toward curiosity, boldness, impulsiveness, and sensory stimulation.
- **The Behavioral Inhibition System** (aka: "Pause-to-Check"): parts of the brain that make us alert, cautious, watchful for signs and dangers. Stress hormones play an important role in this system. It stands to reason that an overabundance of stress hormones — norepinephrine and cortisol, in particular—would create a more active "Pause-to-Check" system.

Both of these systems are important to individuals and to a species. Bold action creates opportunities and abundance. A little caution goes a long way, though, especially when it prevents catastrophe. In terms of a group or a species, you probably don't need (or want) everybody playing sentinel. One in five (the proportion of HSPs to non-HSPs in any given population) is just about right. Thus, we can deduce the evolutionary role this more cautious type of temperament plays, and it's an important one.

It gets a little more complicated when you're talking about finding the right ratio in an individual. The short answer is that there isn't any one perfect ratio. It's about balance. People who have a very active "Pause-to-Check" system but a pretty inert Activation system are content to sit back, watch, and stay out of harm's way. Likewise, people with very robust Activation systems and relatively inactive "Pause-to-Check" systems are happy to jump out of planes or run with the bulls in Pamplona or quit a stable desk job to open a restaurant in New York City.

That's not to say either of these relatively well-balanced temperament types won't have to deal with the external consequences of their action or inaction, or that all of those external consequences will be good ones. (The chute might not open, the restaurant might fail; the stock might have soared, she might have said yes.) And, while either type could be an HSP, they're just not likely to have much psychic unrest regarding their basic nature. The uninhibited bold ones might be aesthetically sensitive but they probably aren't overwhelmed by excitement and stimuli, while the cautious ones very well might be easily overwhelmed, but they're not likely to put themselves into positions where they're over-aroused, either positively or negatively.

The psychic unrest comes in for people who have robust Behavioral Activation Systems—they're curious, sensory, imaginative, and perhaps even, in some ways, bold—but they also have robust "Pause-to-Check" systems. They think three steps ahead, see details (and obstacles) others don't see, and pay close attention to changes in their environment. They probably also produce more stress hormones than most people, and they're probably scared to be wrong or to fail. If they also happen to be HSPs—which, in the case of creative types, is quite possible, if not likely—this Mind-Body-Spirit tug-of-war can tax them to the core. In the worst case scenario, all this overstimulation can drain their creativity altogether.

Guess which type of HSP I think we tend to have at our school? You got it: the tug-of-war ones. My evidence is mostly anecdotal and all qualitative. I've got no double-blind longitudinal studies to back me up. But I've been here for a long time. Experience and institutional memory counts for something too. Plus I'm an HSP. I pay close attention to my environment.

What's more, HSP that I am, my guess is that we have more than 20% HSPs in our student body and in our faculty. Probably a lot more. Our primary mission is, after all, geared toward students who process their experience deeply and who have above-average aesthetic sensitivity. Likewise, HSPs tend to be creative, and a lot (though not all) of them are very conscientious. Especially gifted creative people tend to be much more attuned to their environments, they tend to process their experiences more deeply, they tend to be more sensitive to subtle stimuli, especially in their field of interest. That description sounds like an awful lot of the students I encounter at our school, across the specialties. If an ordinary high school has 15-20% HSP population, how high might our percentage be?

In fact, even ordinary high schools likely have an above average percentage of de facto HSPs. Given the volume and intensity of overstimulation in Western/digital culture, that HSP-ness is even more pronounced among teenagers. Maybe 80-85% of the students at regular high schools weren't HSCs when they were little kids, and they might not end up as HSPs when they're adults, but while they're adolescents, a whole lot of them sure do act like HSPs, particularly in terms of aesthetic sensitivity and ease of excitation.

Adolescents: De Facto HSPs

Let's go back to the two brain systems: what is adolescence, for everybody, if not an awkward, harrowing tight-wire act between the two systems? It can plummet out of control in the best of circumstances. These strange new messages, this overabundance of sensory input, plus a witches' brew of new hormones—it all conspires to push adolescents TO TAKE ACTION!! NOW!!! And yet it's unfamiliar territory, the possibilities for humiliation and epic failure seem to lurk at every turn, and the absolute last thing many adolescents want to do is make a mistake and look childish and/or stupid. Everything is dangerous and alluring, scary and exhilarating all at once. Life is fraught with possibility and peril for these kids. It's a psychic tug-of-war.

And do you want to know what the ninth circle of hell is for most actual HSP adolescents? It's called high school. Especially the regular kind.

The Proper Environment: A Diverse Community of Explorers!

But we're not a regular high school. According to our mission statement, we're "a diverse community of explorers." As such, we're better with HSPs—the actual ones and most of the de facto ones, too. I think that's because we're smaller and because we have a higher than normal population of HSPs, both as faculty and as students. In that way, we're sort of like the Hogwarts of HSPs, which is why so many of our new students feel as if a whole new world has been opened up to them when they arrive, and it's why they often come out of their shell here. It's safer to express many of the aspects of their personality that they were hiding at their former schools. They just didn't know there was a place where they could interact with so many people who are different in the ways that they are different, and that knowledge is liberating and empowering.

I also think it's because we offer our students more autonomy than ordinary schools do. Students can carve out their own space here. That's very important for HSPs, as is the fact that we're able to provide more one-on-one instruction than most schools.

Are we the perfect environment for HSPs, de facto or otherwise? No. No school is. Are we as good as we can be? Honestly, no. Not quite. We're not bad. We're good. But we can be better. And we should want to be the best because a place that's great for HSPs is a place that's great for all creative people—and, I would argue, for most adolescents in general.

So how can we be better?

The Three E's of teaching HSPs

In fact, much of what Aron suggests can be boiled down to these three words, all of which happen to start with the letter E:

- **Empathy**—Be kind.
- **Encouragement**—Stay positive.
- **Equanimity**—Stay calm.

Those are all important markers of good teaching. The goal is to exhibit them as close to 100% of the time as we can, keeping in mind that 50% is often just as bad as (if not worse than) 0% when it comes to teaching HSPs because the type of kind, positive, and calm environment they must be *reliably* kind, positive, and calm. Inconsistent environments breed anxiety, which is the kryptonite of an HSP.

Achieving 100% empathy, encouragement, and equanimity is difficult but not impossible. I know I'm not there yet, but I've seen it in others, so I know it can be done.

My ~~Two~~ Ten Cents: How This Applies to Our School

Here's an Aron-informed list of some important attributes of an HSP-friendly environment, some of which I think we're pretty good at doing and others we need to improve.

An HSP-friendly environment provides:

1¢— Regular interaction with other HSPs. As I've already suggested, this is our ace-in-the-hole. Almost by default, it seems, we're surrounded by HSPs. But we can't rely on that to create the best possible environment for us and our students. We have to build on the advantages it creates.

2¢— High rewards for effort, risk, and creativity PLUS low consequences for failure. It's the combination of these two approaches that so powerfully and exponentially fosters creativity. The most important values we can instill in our students are creative risk, extra effort, and resiliency. Fall down seven times, get up eight.

Notice that I'm advocating low consequences for failure, not low opportunities for failure. The first part of the statement—about effort, risk, and creativity—requires *more* opportunities for failure. Many more. Any worthwhile creative endeavor in any of our specialties involves far more failure than success. Therefore, we have to teach our students how to respond to and learn from failure, how to use it as a catapult and not a roadblock. That's why the consequences have to be low. If they're too high, too early, the PTSD of cynicism and anxiety (apathy, negativity, fear, sadness) quickly sets in, and the Creative Spirit retreats.

3¢— Prioritized correction. A self-indulgent personal anecdote: When I was a little kid, I sometimes went to work with my dad. He was a lawyer for the government in DC, so this wasn't always the most interesting environment for a Highly Sensitive Child such as myself. One time, I guess I was six or so, I was in his office while he was having a casual conversation with one of his colleagues, a really nice man named Bill Trencher. Bill was a close friend of my dad's,

several years younger, a new dad himself, and I always liked being around him. He had a good vibe: kind, positive, calm.

So in this scenario, I was bored and nobody was paying attention to me. There was a floor fan running near where I was sitting. I can't remember what possessed me to do this, but I decided to stick my finger in the fan. I still have all my fingers and luckily I wasn't injured. But when the blade hit my index finger, it sounded like a shot had gone off. My dad couldn't see me from behind his desk, so he instantly said, "What the hell was that?"

Bill Trencher *could* see me and, from my reaction, he realized what I had done. He also knew that, while my dad had his positive qualities, he would overreact to my quixotic and predictably ill-fated experiment with the fan. In fact, both Bill and I knew this was the sort of thing that would make my dad's head explode. He'd be post-facto stressed that I'd done something so dangerous and silly. Because I'd made him stressed, he'd be mad at me, and because he was mad at me, he'd yell at me. In front of Bill Trencher, no less, which would embarrass me and hurt my feelings even more.

But Bill Trencher was a really nice man. And wise. He could have told on me, knowing that my dad's correction would be way out of proportion to my error. Or worse, he could've corrected me himself, which would've meant double the correction: one from him and an outsized one from my dad. But he did neither of those things. In an instant, he sized up how to deal with me and my transgression. He could see that I wasn't hurt so he shot me a glance—a raised eyebrow, a slight but unmistakably warm, empathetic grin—that said, *hey kid, you know you shouldn't put your finger in the fan. But it's okay. Don't do it again and your secret's safe with me.* And then he told my dad he'd shifted in his chair and that's what made the noise.

They continued their conversation. I kept being bored. I'm positive Bill Trencher didn't give that moment another thought, but I've remembered it for forty years and counting. Yes, I've never put my finger in a fan again, but that's not what I learned. I learned how correction with empathy—what gets corrected (and what *doesn't*) and how and when—makes all the difference. The right kind of correction helps lessons last. That's likely true for everyone, but it's especially true of HSPs.

4¢— Genuine, strategic praise. Everyone likes to be noticed but not everyone likes to be watched. That's especially true of many HSPs, some of whom will often forego being noticed for something they do well in an effort to lower the risk that people will *watch* them doing it. So how do you notice someone without watching them? You don't. You *do* watch. You *do* listen. You just do it discreetly. And you read between the lines. Then you file it away. The right opportunity for praise will present itself sooner or later. It's worth noting that I've found discreet, personalized praise goes a long way, too, especially with HSPs. I think that's because one-on-one interaction is their preferred method of interpersonal communication. Which leads us to…

5¢— One-on-one instruction. This is an area where the logistical differences of specialty classes and core classes make themselves known. It's somewhat easier for specialty teachers to provide one-on-one instruction because they have more time to do it. There's one important and useful tool of one-on-one instruction we all can use, though: written feedback. As such, I

think it's important to think of grading as teaching. On paper. And it doesn't have to be long-winded. In fact, it's better if it's not. Try to keep it:

- **Simple.** This is where prioritized correction comes in. Focus on the most important stuff and let the other stuff go for now.
- **Succinct.** When I'm responding to a poem or story, I give students three things I like about it, a sentence or two covering what I think they're trying to accomplish with the piece, and three suggestions or questions for them to consider in revision. That's it. Any more than that and they're overwhelmed. And I'm a creative writing teacher. Written feedback on a math test can be even more succinct than that. But showing that you've engaged what they've produced enough to provide more than a little red X is, in itself…
- **Supportive.** And there's no better opportunity for genuine, strategic, discreet praise than in your written commentary. (HSPs, for those very reasons, often prefer written praise.) And, again, it doesn't have to be long-winded.

6¢— Familiar routines. Scheduling around this place is subject to all manner of cataclysms and conflicts. We've got a lot going on, all the time. That's not going to change. While our students crave autonomy, I think they also (if secretly) crave stability and order, too. HSPs in particular don't like change and surprises. The more consistent we can be, the better. When we need to adjust our schedules, we need to make it a priority to not add stress. One way to mitigate the stress of a schedule in flux is to reduce the overall workload if at all possible. Another is to get back to the routine as quickly as possible, even if it means adjusting your approach to the material. And, of course, adding unexpected work on short notice is never a good idea. It makes students' heads explode, which can diminish their performance in other classes and their specialty—an unexploded head being a prerequisite for a vast array of mind and motor functions.

7¢— Autonomous learning. Here's another area where specialty instruction and core instruction differ somewhat, so my suggestions might not be applicable to everybody. Again: specialty teachers have more flexibility to use class time for autonomous learning. That's somewhat less true for core teachers, who often have more specific material to "cover" and, more importantly, less time per class period. I do think it's useful for all of us to keep in mind that creatively devised, challenging solo activities during class time can be just as useful as small or large group activities (HSPs prefer them), and they don't have to be associated with extended, high stakes projects. Also, if it's possible, try to give your students a couple of different options in the ways they can fulfill a given assignment, even the less-involved, daily ones.

8¢— Regular access to calm, familiar, inviting spaces. The more you can make your classroom *not* look and feel like a classroom, the better. The more you can allow your students to avail themselves of the entire campus, the better. Yes, it often feels like we're herding cats around here, and no, our students aren't always being "productive" when they're in the courtyard or the cafeteria or the library or their respective specialty areas. Yes, we always need to know where our students are, and, yes, they're not always where they say they're going to be. But we have to risk giving them as much freedom of movement as possible. It should be a privilege for

them, not a right, and a fair number of them will lose it, either temporarily or for good. But most of them will cherish it because it fosters an atmosphere of trust, autonomy, and creative freedom. It also allows them the opportunity to regulate their own decompression throughout the (very long) day, as needed. Their instincts about that are at least *sometimes* better than ours.

I'll close with these two simple thoughts. I think they're very important and I think they're related:

9¢— Resist sarcasm/cynicism. The costs of being sarcastic in front of students far outweigh any perceived "benefits," especially for HSPs. Two reasons why:

- **By definition, sarcasm involves saying something that is the opposite of what you believe to be true.** For a teacher, that's always dicey. If a student doesn't get the sarcasm, they're confused and, as a result, they're probably self-conscious and they might even feel stupid for not getting it. Even if they do get it, you've just subtly (or maybe not so subtly) undermined your credibility and trustworthiness. Not only did you say something you don't literally believe, you probably did it at somebody else's expense. Maybe even at their expense. In the process, there's a good chance you've made creative risk and self-expression feel somewhat less safe for somebody. That's not cool or funny. It's mean.
- **By nature, sarcasm is mean-spirited and negative.** It's often rooted in (or at least it implies) cynicism. Whether it's the result of a faded emotional scar or an active open sore, something that happened a long time ago or something you're living through now, cynicism kills the Creative Spirit. It's a lowest- common-denominator response to some brand of fear and sadness. At ASFA, not only are we trying to breathe life into the Creative Spirit (not kill it), we also have a high percentage of students who have trouble navigating the choppy waters of fear and sadness. I think that's because a lot of them are HSPs, but even if they're not, they're teenagers. We can't model the lowest-common-denominator response for them. Cynicism is absolutely not okay in our students. (For them, it usually and most problematically manifests not as sarcasm but as apathy and avoidance.) If our students are cynical, if they succumb to some combination of the fear, sadness, and stress that are so often a part of the creative process, they have failed in what we're trying to help them achieve. And, obviously, that's our failure, too.

10¢— Our task is one of persuasion. When I'm thinking about the art of persuasion, I gravitate to the three elements of classical Greek rhetoric:

- **Logos.** Logic. Facts. Evidence. HSPs can sometimes be frustrating students in this respect: they're not always interested in the "right" answer, and they don't always connect with subjects (or teachers) that aren't open to different interpretations of the material. With some subjects, that puts you (and them) in between a rock and a hard place. The quadratic equation is the quadratic equation. If your subject matter offers the luxury of different interpretations, try to give your students leeway to be wrong or to hold opinions that are outside the accepted analysis of a text or concept. Engage and

encourage their energy while modeling your own method of interpretation, your own process and standard of analyzing information and evidence. Regardless of subject matter, look for opportunities to praise and reward effort and engagement, and try to validate their thought process ("I see how you came to that conclusion…"), even if what it produces flies in the face of convention.

- **Pathos.** Emotional appeals. This one is tricky, too, because while HSPs (and teenagers generally) tend to be susceptible to such appeals, they're also not in complete control of their emotions, and they tend to feel things more deeply than others might. Of the three rhetorical elements, this one runs the most risk of over-arousal for HSP (and adolescent) students. I think it's best to use it judiciously and always in concert with the other two elements.
- **Ethos.** The credibility of the orator (i.e., *your* credibility) is paramount to an HSP. And this isn't just about your mastery of your subject matter or your ability to deliver it. It's about demonstrating your curiosity, your consistency, your authenticity, your sense of fairness and empathy, your willingness to admit when you're wrong or when you don't know an answer. That's just good teaching. The more you model the behavior you expect from your students, especially the HSPs, the more credibility you're going to have with them. We all have to earn that credibility with every student, every day, and it's crucial to the ASFA enterprise that we do so. The more credible you are, the more persuasive you'll be.

Postscript

That's the talk. I'm not sure it had much of an influence on my fellow teachers. I think the ones who were already teaching this way kept doing so, and maybe they felt a little more encouraged to do so. The ones who weren't teaching this way didn't change their approach much, either. In most cases, that meant they kept up with a hard-driving, high-stakes style of teaching that can lead to high student achievement, but that comes at a high cost, particularly for HSPs. Chronic anxiety, exhaustion. Incessant striving. Never knowing how or when to stop, to rest. For most people, that approach isn't sustainable. And it's not very pleasant. For HSPs—and for creative people, generally—that approach can be crippling.

So. There's that.

Again, I'm inviting you to think of your Creative Spirit as an HSP. And *you* are Its teacher.

Your Creative Spirit processes experiences in great depth. It's easily over-aroused by stress and stimuli, regardless of whether the experience is positive or negative. It's sensitive to subtle stimuli in the environment. It has deep emotional reservoirs and is capable of uncommon empathy toward others.

If you make a habit of engaging your Creative Spirit with calmness, positivity, and kindness, Its enormous attributes will flourish and enrich your life in ways you probably can't even imagine.

Part III

The Three P's: Practice, Process, Projects

I. What It Means to Practice

The Four Tenets of Any Creative Practice

Here are four basic truisms about making things (i.e., "being creative"):

It's Not a Subject Matter. A grad school mentor used to tell us, "Creative writing is not a subject matter!" By that he meant there are no formulas, no quadratic equations. There's very little in the way of a standardized set of information or principles. It's a means of uncovering the subjects that mean the most to the artist. In other words, it requires effort and experimentation. You have to find the subjects—and the meaning—of your art on your own.

It's an Act of Connection. That connection can come in the form of an audience, of course, whether that's one person or one million of them. But there's also a connection to the subjects that mean the most to you. And, ultimately, therefore, that implies a connection to the innermost self. Still more effort and experimentation.

Intention is Overrated. If I don't think too highly of my intentions, I create some space for myself to have a higher opinion of my "mistakes." My mistakes aren't really failures to execute my intentions—well, they *are* that, but they're also something else, something more interesting and empowering. They're Invitations. Invitations to trust the Creative Spirit, the unexpected opportunities that always emerge from It, if only I remain open to that particular kind of connection. This is why experimentation is so important. Effort with too much certainty can often lead me astray.

Make It Interesting. At first blush, "making it interesting" might seem to be easier said than done. What does "interesting" even mean? Who gets to decide? But it's pretty simple. The best way for me to be interesting is to be *interested*. Creative people are insatiably curious and passionately invested in the subjects that mean the most to them. That passion and curiosity is infectious. I know a guy who wrote a book about pluots. It's an interesting book, not so much because of pluots (though it turns out they are pretty interesting) but because the guy knows how to be interested in something.

Practice Is a Noun

A creative practice is a vocation. Not just work but a life's work. It's a Spiritual Discipline. A calling. The stakes are very high, then. If we don't answer our truest callings, we wither away.

Practice Is a Verb

A creative practice is the act of teaching yourself. It's about learning. Committing to that way of life, lifelong. It's a means of taking action to be your better self, all your better selves, all the forms of your human intelligence. Again: the stakes are high.

Howard Gardner and Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner is a professor at the Harvard graduate school of Education and he is the pioneer of the concept of Multiple Intelligences. Right off the bat, there's an important distinction to make between Gardner's work and the popular idea of "learning styles." Gardner himself rejects the notion that most individuals learn things better in one particular way or another, but his work isn't about whether someone learns better visually or aurally or kinesthetically. It's about articulating the many different components of human "intelligence."

More specifically, his work suggests that conventional schools have always privileged two sets of "intelligences" in particular—linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence—and they don't give nearly enough attention to the other seven kinds of intelligence he's identified: bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential, and naturalistic. (He's added others over the years—"Spiritual" among them—but these suffice to elucidate the concept.) Gardner believes the different intelligences he articulates work interdependently, and that we're not mining our human resources to their full potential if we don't figure out how to (A) take better advantage of the other "non-academic" kinds of intelligence and (B) better develop all our intelligences in concert with one another.

The metaphor he often uses to explain the concept is that of a network of computers. Each kind of intelligence within one particular individual is its own "computer" and not all computers are created equal. They work differently, some have different software, different memory, different processor speeds, etc. And some just plain work better than others. In order to develop to our fullest potential, we have to learn how to synchronize our network.

Learning to Create vs. Learning to Consume

Gardner's ideas on *creativity*, in particular, are pertinent to anyone who wants to better nourish and sustain the Creative Spirit. Here's an extended quote Gardner gave during a Q&A session after a lecture at Harvard:

> *Creativity is always an interaction between an individual with his or her abilities—what we call a domain of study, which can be music or chess or physics or architecture or law—and a group of judges who decide what's good and what's not good. And you cannot tell how creative a person is even if you knew about everything in their brain and even if you knew about all their intelligences because you'd have to know about what society they live in, what domains exist that they can work on, and how people decide who gets privileges like getting to go to a school, getting a scholarship, getting their work displayed, and so on.*
>
> *So we think of creativity as systemic rather than as the property of an individual mind/brain. That said…when I first studied creativity—and I've been studying it for a long time—I really thought it was primarily about your "computers" and how good they were. I have since come to the conclusion that the creative individual—and I'm going to use the word individual here deliberately—is distinguished from other people less by how good the computer is and more by their motivation.*

> *Creative people are people who like to take chances, don't mind falling flat on their face, and when they do, they pick themselves up and they try again. And if I wanted to generate creative people, I would create a society, so to speak, where you can make mistakes and it's okay and if you give an answer that other people don't want, try to understand why, and you give them lots of room to work. As you probably know, 30 or 40 years ago, east Asians were very frustrated because they would do very well on tests but they didn't see people as being creative. So they would come to my office, even 30 years ago, and they would say, "Tell us the 23 things we need to be creative." And I said, "The first thing you have to throw out is there aren't 23 things, it's not an orderly kind of thing. But if you want to generate people who are willing to take risks and be rewarded for that rather than punished, you'd probably have a more creative kind of environment."*

As Gardner's work implies, conventional American schools, by and large, don't create the kind of environment he is describing here.

I believe that's at least in part because they exist within a framework of consumerism. Good conventional schools can help create mindful consumers. Many (mediocre and/or bad) schools help create *mindless* consumers. Given a choice, I'd rather consumers be mindful than mindless, and I think there is a place in a healthy society for schools that primarily work toward the former. A sounder understanding of (and commitment to) the concept of multiple intelligences would help make that happen.

But helping people develop a truly sustaining and sustainable creative practice requires us to break free from that framework of consumerism. That requires another model of teaching and learning altogether. One that is both process-oriented and project-based.

II. Creative Process ÷ Creative Projects

A creative practice is made up of two related elements: a creative process and the projects that process yields. The ratio between the two is key to whether your practice feels sustaining and sustainable.

It's been a while, but let's revisit dolphins as a metaphor to illustrate my point. Here's a syllogism:

> Leaping dolphins are to the Deep Blue Sea as…
> Creative Projects are to a viable Creative Process.

A lot of the time, you don't see the dolphins. Sometimes they're not even there, but more times than you know, they're there, underneath the teeming surface of the ocean, zooming after krill, grinning their crooked dolphin grins. Maybe they play a few pranks on some sharks. You know. Just dolphin stuff. But a dolphin's gotta breathe, so every now and then she breaks the surface. Sometimes she just bobs up, takes a big gulp of air, and sinks back down into the undulating, liquid world in which she was born and where she is always and forevermore most comfortable.

Sometimes, though, the dolphin takes a different approach. Sometimes he starts from way down in the coolest depths, gets up an enormous head of steam, and bursts forth from the water like a shot. And he spins in the air and he laughs and he says, "Hello, Great Wide World, here I am!" Sometimes (often, in fact) that happens and no one's around to see it. Maybe just some other dolphins. A stray gull. Other times that happens and there's a few humans around. With cameras! And they post it to YouTube and it goes viral and we all think: wow, dolphins are really cool.

But it's easy to forget something that's as important as it is obvious: you can't have cool dolphins leaping up out of the water if there's no water. And lots of it.

The ocean comes first and foremost. Then come the dolphins. Dolphins that only occasionally leap and whose leaps are even more occasionally appreciated by a few human eyes. Mostly dolphins hang out in the ocean, eat, and make baby dolphins. And of course they raise said babies up to be big dolphins—that might someday, occasionally, leap themselves.

Your creative *process*—the self-directed reading and watching and listening, the noticing-and-documenting, the generation of lots of material that never sees the light of day—that's your fathoms-deep (and also mostly *unfathomable*) ocean.

Creative *projects*—stories, poems, essays, novels, movies, paintings, ballets, etc, etc—are tantamount to those leaping dolphins.

Also: stories, poems, essays, novels, movies, painting, ballets—they procreate too, in a sense. The more of them you make, the more you *can* make. And the more likely one (or some) of them will decide to leap in the general vicinity of someone who appreciates it. But, again, not all good stories, poems, essays, novels, movies, ballets, etc, get noticed. In fact, most don't. Like those dolphins, they leap up for the sake of leaping alone. They leap up into (and disappear down into) a vast obscurity.

Don't get me wrong: dolphins are very cool (sonar receptors in their teeth!), and so are projects. And yet, in my own creative life, I've found it way too easy to place too much

emphasis on my projects. Especially a certain kind of project. A project that is—or might be considered—a *product*. A commodity. Something that other people might buy, something that would confer upon me a professional identity (i.e., "Writer," "Artist").

I've already hinted at a couple of very powerful cultural forces reinforcing that overemphasis: School and the Marketplace. Which leads us back to the importance of learning to create versus learning to consume.

What (Typical) Schools (Typically) Produce

For a long time, I have been studying and/or teaching creative writing in an academic setting. In Europe, where they've had universities a lot longer than we have had them in America, this sort of vocational path (so-called) was mostly unheard of until very recently. The phenomenon of the "creative writing program" has taken much longer to catch on in European colleges and universities because the prevailing wisdom there seems to have been that creative writing isn't something that should (or even *can*) be taught in school. Writing, in other words, is not a subject matter.

This is where the intersection of school and markets, particularly in the United States, enters the equation—though admittedly it's a subtle merging, as opposed to a plain-to-see crossroads.

Public school as we know it is rooted in the Industrial Revolution. Child welfare laws of the late 19th century all but eliminated children from the industrial workplace, thereby creating a problem: how *in the hell* do we keep all these kids off the street? Industrialized society also demanded a steady supply of workers (and consumers) with a relatively standardized set of knowledge, values, skills, and abilities. In other words, conventional American public schools are largely designed to prepare young people for successful integration into the marketplace—as cogs in the wheel of production and consumption.

For its sake, the university system as we know it in America, particularly the public university system, really took shape in response to the explosion of new enrollment following the passage of the GI Bill after WWII. More students, more classes, more professors, more degree programs, more alumni, more buildings. Not to mention more tuition, more donations, and more corporate-academic partnerships (a.k.a., "synergies"), particularly in the area of research and development. It's become something of a positive feedback loop, and the bottom line is, well, the bottom line.

What's more, universities are in a weirdly bipolar position. As originally conceived, they're little bubbles of esoteric learning—places where professors and students alike can give themselves over to the Life of the Mind (whatever that means). But for the past eighty years or so, they have taken on the role of picking up where high school left off in training folks for gainful employment, specifically middle management. (Which, in itself, is a problem: if everybody's a middle manager, who are they going to manage?)

The concept of American schooling, then, from grade school through college and beyond, has been profoundly shaped—if not wholly created—by the market forces of supply and demand, by the all-important ouroboros of production and consumption.

“Learning” to Be “Creative” in a “Marketplace”

That is nowhere more evident than in the rise of the American creative writing program in the second half of the 20th Century. The original (and still most prestigious) creative writing program—anywhere in the world—is the Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. It opened its doors in 1936. Turns out, that was perfect timing. Just as the American university system was set to become a booming growth industry, there was a critical mass of Iowa Writers’ Workshop graduates who had master’s degrees in creative writing and who could use their Iowa experience as a template to develop new creative writing programs in other colleges and universities throughout the United States.

In 1936, then, there was (roughly) one creative writing program. In the entire world. Today, there are well over 300 such programs (and counting) in the United States alone. For a good long while, supply and demand did their happy dance in the world of Literary Academia. Somewhere along the way, though, supply started outstripping demand.

Not himself a product nor a direct beneficiary (per se) of what I like to call the Literary Industrial Complex, the celebrated American novelist Cormac McCarthy once said that teaching writing is a hustle. By that I think he meant that it’s all an elaborate ruse set up by writers who can’t make a living at their craft. (Roughly all of us.) They’ve convinced university administrators to create a system of patronage, whereby the writers teach a few popular college classes nine months out of the year to impressionable young undergraduates and graduate students alike. Maybe they publish well, win a Pulitzer, bring positive attention to the university. Or not. In return, these writers receive a living wage, health insurance, and old-age pensions. Win-wins all around.

Enter the Great Pyramid Scheme of Academia. It goes something like this: if you’ve got a small army of inexperienced, impressionable graduate students who, for the most part, lack credentials—and who are angling to emulate their mentors (e.g., “writers who teach because writing doesn’t pay the bills”)—there’s a chance you can pay them below-subsistence wages and they might gladly take a thorny problem off your hands: who are we going to get to teach all these required service courses (e.g., Freshman Comp) that nobody wants to take or teach? You might not even have to give them health insurance. You might not even have to give them much training or supervision, either. Just let them figure it out on their own.

And while it’s not always been as ill-intentioned as that, that’s pretty much exactly what’s happened. Most sizeable public universities would be in a terrible predicament if there wasn’t a large and constantly replenished pool of graduate students (and adjunct teachers, who are often recent grad-school grads who can’t find gainful employment in their field) to teach entry-level courses in the humanities and other disciplines. The cracks in that system are becoming great fissures that increasingly threaten to bring the whole thing crashing down, largely because a college education is becoming more and more expensive even as its overall value in terms of teaching, learning, and preparedness is less and less certain. Again: do we really *need* all those middle managers? (Do we really need all those teaching writers?)

But that’s just the economics angle.

The Professionalization of Creativity

There's also the so-called "Workshop Model" itself and how it has influenced our relationship with what might be called "literary art."

Something happens when an artist—a poet, let's say—submits a work-in-progress to a small group of ten or fifteen people whom he knows fairly well but didn't directly choose herself. It's a weird situation. Maybe the poet has, say, been naked with one or two of the other people in the room, or maybe they're roommates with somebody in the room and the poet always leaves her gross food-caked dishes in the sink. Maybe two or three of the people in the room *fucking hate* (and/or are in desperate unrequited love with) the poet. Or. You know. Whatever interpersonal hell we often make for ourselves, especially if we're poets.

That's a charged human situation. It could—and does—get *very awkward*.

The general remedy to that awkwardness is to focus *exclusively* on the work. It's a thing, a product. The artist is ostensibly removed, isn't even allowed to make a peep throughout the whole ordeal. Everybody just talks about the work itself, as if it appeared out of nowhere. It's just a thing. A thing we can consume and then talk about. Maybe that makes a workshop easier or better, but it probably doesn't make it easier or better to make art.

And then, within the framework of the Literary Industrial Complex, the ultimate value of those things we make for workshop is as potential bullet points on a resume and/or bibliography—i.e., publications—that can help us take our place in the firmament, either as Famous Writers Who Don't Have to Teach or, far more likely, as not-so-famous writers who *do* have to teach but who, at least, have jobs. Unfortunately, the "market" for teaching writers is now beyond glutted. The Literary Industrial Complex has created far more qualified creative writing teachers than there are gainful positions teaching creative writing (certainly in a university setting). The jig, as it were, is mostly up.

Admittedly, it's not that way for all creative people. It's not even that way for all writers. But it's that way for a lot of us, and the whole sordid process can really mess with your head if you're not careful. If you're not careful, the Thing You Made (story, poem, thesis, what have you) becomes the only aim. If you're not making a viable Thing, well, then you're just not a writer and/or creative person at all and you suck and you should basically just shut the hell up and go, I don't know, do whatever it is that uncredentialed, suck-ass failures do. Watch cable TV or something. Scroll through your feeds. I don't know.

I've seen that attitude kill (or else at least severely maim) the Creative Spirit in far too many gifted people. I'm not advocating that we remove the creative enterprise from schools or markets entirely, mostly because I think it's too late for that but also because I don't think schools and markets are inherently evil. They serve a purpose, and they're not all 100% bad or ineffective. Clearly I have benefited from the trine of creativity, school, and the marketplace. Which is to say: I like school and I like creativity. Also I like getting paid, at least in the form of a decent wage that affords me and my family all of what we need and much of what we want.

The trinity of creativity, school, and the marketplace isn't inherently *spiritual*, though. At any rate, it hasn't been for me.

Here I must return to Thich Nhat Hanh, who reports that with each step of his walking meditation he says to himself, "I have arrived, I am home." We are always running, he says,

striving. We never get where we're going. We run towards something or away from something. His walking meditation is an invitation to fully inhabit the present moment. To stop running.

I learned how to be creative in an environment that taught me to strive, to run towards something (achievement, notoriety, success). What's more, my specific creative enterprise—writing—is such a longitudinal pursuit. It takes so long to make something, and then it takes even longer to get it published, and still *longer* to see if anyone will read it and heap praise upon it. It feels impossible to arrive. Even after your publisher has mailed you a box of books with your name on them. (*What's next?* you ask yourself.)

For that reason, I have come to learn that I need to be very conscious of the role these large cultural (mostly secular and, yes, ultimately economic) forces play on my own interaction with the Creative Spirit. It's particularly crucial for me to keep in mind the essential functions of the Creative Spirit, and to invite them to complement each other in my creative practice as best they can.

The Genius and the Madman

As an example of these different functions—roughly, what Lewis Hyde calls the market exchange vs. the gift exchange—let's detour out of academia for just a little bit and do a quick compare/contrast between two creative people who, at first, seem to have lived very different lives and come to very different ends. (But have they?)

The Genius: Steve Jobs

We'll start with Steve Jobs, whose story is so well known as to have become some kind of Digital Age Messianic hero quest.

Given up for adoption at birth, Jobs was an iconoclast almost from the very beginning. He epitomized the self-taught, DIY outsider: he attended Reed College in Portland—already itself a bastion of liberalism and outside-the-box thinking—only to find even its loose structures and strictures too confining. He proceeded to bend the curriculum to his sensibilities, gladly forgoing official degree-seeking status (along with steady meals and a reliable place to sleep) so that he could ricochet from class to class, discipline to discipline, listening to lectures as what might be described as a form of academic squatter. In the process, he formed his own set of intellectual and creative ligatures to link an eclectic but cohesive set of principles that would come to underpin what is arguably the most dynamic and influential brand of products in the entire course of human history.

Somewhat less well known but also well documented are Jobs's personal idiosyncrasies, many of which made him a difficult man to get to know and love. He had an eccentric relationship to eating and bathing, for instance, and his attention to detail—often cited as his truest vocational trademark—reflected a kind of mania that was almost certainly rooted in a Howard-Hughes-like obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Likewise, his interpersonal style was unusual, often off-putting, and at times even offensive. Even—or especially—to those closest to him. Folksinger Joan Baez, whom Jobs dated for a time, tells the story of a high-priced dress Jobs had seen and thought would suit her—evidence of thoughtfulness, to be sure. They went to the shop to see the dress together, and

when Baez tried it on, Jobs told her he thought (A) she did *indeed* look great and (B) she should splurge and buy it for herself. This from a man who (A) brought the dress to her attention in the first place and (B) had a net worth measured in the billions.

Needless to say: (A) Baez didn't buy the dress and (B) that relationship didn't last.

So. Yes. Obsessive-compulsive. Self-absorbed. Perhaps an array of clinically diagnosable issues. Under other (far more common) circumstances, Jobs might have been relegated to the fringes of society, to a life spent on the outside looking in.

In other words, he might have ended up a lot like a man named Henry Darger.

The Madman: Henry Darger

Like Jobs, Darger was an outsider from the beginning. Born in 1892, his family splintered when he was just a boy, probably for economic reasons but also perhaps because young Henry was not the easiest child to raise. As a result, Darger spent much of his childhood in an asylum/orphanage, and he had very little contact with his real family. Throughout his life, he had few friends and meager prospects for anything approaching normalcy, much less the American Dream of abundance epitomized in someone such as Steve Jobs.

When he was sixteen, Darger settled in Chicago, where he found work as a janitor in a school. For most of the last forty-three years of his life, he lived quietly and alone in a small room in a boarding house. He died in 1973.

The few people who knew him—knew *of* him—saw him as a weird old man who kept to himself. And, well, he *was* a weird old man who kept to himself. But that's not all he was.

Upon his death, when the landlord went into Darger's room to complete the unenviable task of clearing out his effects—who else was going to do it?—he discovered what was more a jam-packed art studio than a recluse's spartan living quarters. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of drawings, paintings, mixed-media murals. There was a 10,000-page (typed, single-spaced) episodic novel, complete with alternate endings—one happy, one sad. All of this creative energy—the visual and literary art—was devoted to a single narrative structure, one in which a plucky band of cherubic sisters fights the forces of evil and endeavors to save the world, once and for all. Just by virtue of the sheer volume of his output, it's clear that Darger must have spent every free waking moment he had on the project. For decades.

Admittedly, the images and the accompanying novel are strange and unsettling, with their pervasive expressions of violence and what seems to be a just as pervasively repressed confusion regarding sex and gender. Henry Darger was not a normal, well-adjusted man.

But neither, it could easily be argued, was Steve Jobs. Decidedly unlike Jobs, Darger died penniless and obscure, misunderstood and more or less unhinged. But like Jobs, Darger is something of a posthumous icon himself—albeit in the considerably smaller world of outsider art. Darger's landlord, himself (as fate would have it) a knowledgeable art collector, could see through the odd subject matter—after all, there's lots in, say, the average Hieronymus Bosch to make us wince. Not unlike the editors of the strange and reclusive Emily Dickinson, the landlord took it upon himself to bring Darger's life's work into the light of day.

It turns out Darger wasn't so much a technical virtuoso. Many of the images in his pictures are traced or transferred from photos and other drawings. He was, however, ingeniously innovative in the ways he mixed media—drawing, painting, water colors, transfers,

clippings—and his natural inclinations for color combinations, image composition, and overall design were impeccable. What's more, he had no formal training. All of this he taught himself through painstaking trial, error, experimentation, and relentless repetition. (Not unlike Jobs.)

Darger's work has been displayed in museums all over the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Individual pieces have fetched six-figure sums from private collectors, and he has a devoted cult following, especially among artists, musicians, and assorted other misfits, for whom the man, his work, and the myth surrounding the symbiosis of the two provide an explicit testament to the sustaining power of the Creative Spirit.

Much of that also applies to Jobs. His genius, too, was less sourced in his ability to create something that didn't exist before and more in his ability to see how existing disparate elements—mixed media, in fact—go together in vital new ways, and in his relentless (obsessive) attention to detail and design.

That Jobs and Darger—a "genius" and a "madman"—have a good bit in common is interesting and even instructive, but those similarities are not so much why they interest me. I honestly don't aspire to be like either one of them, nor would I want my students (or my son) to aspire to be like them. Jobs's net worth aside, I believe both men led difficult lives that were animated by forces (and demons) they could *barely* control. It was a white-knuckle struggle for both of them to the end. To their credit, they channeled those forces into creative output, but I suspect even that output was more likely the tangible residue of affliction than it was a transcendent gift of the Creative Spirit.

I'm interested in how these two guys were *different*. Not in the obvious, worldly sense. In a creative sense. That leads us (finally) back to the functions of our creative output—two functions in particular: one I'll call extroverted, one I'll call introverted.

The Extroverted Function of Creativity

It's hard for me to fathom the degree of shamelessness and ego that possessed my Creative Spirit for far too long (and that still grips me more than I would care to admit). Shortly after I had moved fifty miles north, from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham, to teach at ASFA, I had coffee with some friends from my graduate program who were still living in Tuscaloosa. Both of them were (are) writers, none of us had yet published a book, and both of them were seeking jobs as tenure-track professors in writing or literature. Like me, they were varying degrees of desperate to publish a book, but their rationale was different from mine. "You already *have* a job," one said to me that day. "What are you worried about?" I was, for a moment, stunned silent by the question. The other "emerging writer" in our party answered for me: "He wants to make a name for himself as a writer." At the time, I couldn't imagine how any young writer couldn't understand that having yet to publish a book was a source of consternation for any other young writer. But we weren't really talking about the same thing.

My friend was talking in market terms, as (in fact) was I. But they were different markets. My friend needed a book publication because that was the coin of the realm in the academic job market. Looking back now, I think his market obsession is obviously more defensible than mine was. Markets are about filling voids. There's an open tenure-track position; you try to fill it. Seen from the perspective of the applicant, he has a job-sized void in his life; he needs to fill it. That need is more urgent, more real than mine was. The applicant's

CV has a hole in it—he has to publish a book—so he frets until he does. (Sidebar: both of the friends in this story have gone on to publish multiple books, to considerably more acclaim than I have achieved, and they both teach in large universities.) But I didn't have those kinds of voids to fill—as my friend rightly pointed out. I (miraculously, it seemed) had a good job teaching creative writing, one that would never require me to publish a single word as a means to keep my job. My voids were more personal, more ego-driven. I wasn't ashamed to say "the world" "needed" "my" "art." There was a book-shaped void in the world: only I could fill it. I can see the arrogance in that attitude now. I was blind to it then.

Steve Jobs was arrogant and ego-driven, too. Like me, he might have been driven by a search for external validation to salve longstanding internal wounds. And yet, like my friend who needed a job, his creative impulses were more attuned to what might be understood in economic terms, as a simple question of supply and demand. He produced (tangible) things that filled voids for other people—voids many of them didn't even know existed at first. His leaping dolphins were so cool, so singularly a product of his strange ocean, they have come to define life as we know it, even after his death. His creations (and the creations they have inspired) had the quality of necessity. They filled needs—more important, they filled needs *for other people*.

Can a novel do that, or a poem or a painting? Most of us would reflexively answer that question in the affirmative: of course art can fill needs for other people. We've all had the experience of being moved, shaped, inspired, gutted (etc, etc) by art.

A better question might be *how* does art do that? That answer seems somewhat more elusive. There are, I'm sure, aspects of a logical, plausible answer to be found in brain science and in metaphysics, in philosophy and psychology and even, perhaps, in mathematics or geometry. For me, it transcends logic. The need I'm talking about is Spiritual. There are no interesting or fitting words for it. When that Spiritual need is met by a piece of art, I feel it—or I don't. It's transcendent—or it's not. It's very like what Emily Dickinson said about the top of her head being taken off when she reads a good poem. It's a high bar to clear. High and very subjective. Clearing that bar, for large numbers of people, with one (or any) of our creations is an uncommon feat. The "world" "needs" "art"—but it's not always for us to say whose art it needs (or how or why or when).

The Introverted Function of Creativity

Because it's worth quoting again at length, here's Allen Ginsberg:

> *The parts that embarrass you the most are usually the most interesting poetically, are usually the most naked of all, the rawest, the goofiest, the strangest and most eccentric and at the same time, most representative, most universal…That was something I learned from Kerouac, which was that spontaneous writing could be embarrassing…The cure for that is to write things down which you will not publish and which you won't show people. To write secretly…so you can actually be free to say anything you want…It means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless—abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world. Abandoning the idea of being a prophet with honor and dignity, and abandoning the glory of poetry and just settling down in the muck of*

your own mind…You really have to make a resolution to write for yourself…, in the sense of not writing to impress yourself, but just writing what your self is saying.

Ginsberg is advocating for an audience of one. Yourself. He's advising privacy and eschewing prophesy. The creative function is not always a communal one. Its gifts are gifts we give ourselves. It's rarely necessary for those gifts to be shared. And by that I mean to again emphasize the word *necessary*. There is no emptiness in the world that needs to be filled by something I create. The void isn't anywhere else but inside me. The emptiness is in me.

What's more, that void is necessary—it's one I don't particularly want to fill, at least not all the way. I believe the Creative Spirit is interested in not filling space but making it. In those spaces—silences, solitudes—we can be renewed. We can heal ourselves. In those spaces, we are able to secure our own mask before assisting others. In those spaces, we do the necessary and urgent work of tending to ourselves.

Henry Darger carved out that sort of space for himself. It made his simple, solitary life worth living. It had nothing to do with other people.

There's Value to Both Functions

Of course, there are times when it *is* necessary for you to share your gifts. Your gifts yield insights the world can use. Or maybe just one or two other people in the world need those insights, but still: it becomes necessary to fill a real and demonstrable void outside yourself. In my experience (limited though it is) the world tends to come after you when it needs your gifts. And it's often not the gifts you, yourself, value—or gifts you wish the world valued. In those cases, though the impulse will be to turn inward, it's stingy—selfish—not to share.

There's Trouble When the Two Are Conflated/Confused

And that, perhaps, is the point I'm trying to make: we often don't know which is which. When am I to be "introverted" and when am I to be "extraverted" with my gifts? The short answer is, I don't know. Not for sure. But when your gifts are frustrating you, that's a clue. Ask yourself if you've conflated or confused whether the true function of this particular expression of your gifts is "introverted" or "extroverted." Often it will be the opposite of what you think or want: you will write the Great [American] Novel and, instead of awards, accolades, and advances, it will yield you a set of priceless, intimate insights into some private heartache you haven't let yourself feel. On the other hand, you will utter what you thought was a semi-silent prayer, and the person behind you in the supermarket line will, with tears in his eyes, offer an "Amen."

Another Way to Know Which Is Which

Trust your process, and remind yourself it's not always necessary for you to decide which is which. Most of what you do—80%, let's say, or more—should not be product-oriented. This lion's share of your creative process is not about what you make. It's how you live. It's your "walking meditation." *I have arrived, I am home.* Your process is your home—just as the ocean is the dolphin's home.

The other fifth or so can be leaping dolphins. It's a burst of exertion (hone, craft, tinker, obsess) and then a splash back down into the ocean of our process.

Here's how that 80/20 split breaks down for me:

The 80%: Chronic. Extended. Chaos.

For me, reading is nourishment. This is true for all writers. For other creative forms and media, the nourishing act might be different. Drawing, let's say, for visual artists—even those who work in three dimensions or with other tools (paint brushes, print blocks, etc). Scales for a musician. I don't know. Whatever helps you train your eye, your ear, your creative muscles (literally, figuratively).

Then you also have to generate. For a writer, that means making words. For a musician, it means making music. For a painter it means painting. (You get the point.) It helps very much to do this regularly. Some people need to be pretty regimented in this regularity—every day, same time, same place, you put in the time. If that notion of work "works" for you, know that about yourself and your process, and honor it. Show up, do the work, grind it out. But there's lots of people for whom that notion doesn't work at all. It makes them feel like shit about themselves, in fact. And so it gets in the way of them generating. Those people are often well served by broadening their notion of what it means to "generate"—what counts as generated material. For writers, a journal entry, a blog post, a letter/email, a gratitude list—these can count. Break it down. Make words. Did you make words today? And did you read? Well, then, you did it.

Either way, this generating stage is almost always chaotic for me. And it almost never comes to closure—not in any finite way. Yes, I stop—after five minutes or 5000 words or somewhere else in between. But I know I'm not "done."

You're never done generating, just as you're never done nourishing yourself. Of course, that metaphor of nourishment—feeding—yields to a metaphor of excretion—shitting. And that's about right. There, the verb—to shit, to have shat—is far more valuable and satisfying than the noun—the smelly turd itself, which you flush away as quickly as you can.

The 20%: Refine. Polish. Finish.

This unfortunate metaphor breaks down considerably unless we shift to some other organic process. (Checks notes…) Pearls! Right, a pearl is made of excretions too. It's a natural response to some irritant. Often a parasite—not a grain of sand. Something, that is, that aims to live off the host organism, suck the life out of it, if it can. And so the host coats it many times over in something called nacre—which, it turns out, is iridescent and quite beautiful.

Maybe our projects are like this. To defend against what is truly eating at us, we make a thing. Layer after layer. It takes time. No one's watching. What we make may or may not be perfectly round. We're not making it for perfection, not at first. We're making it because something's eating at us. Only after a while does this thing that's eating at us stop being a parasite and start to become a semi-precious gem. This shift (towards the possibility of "semi-precious gem") requires a new way of looking at it. "Hmm. This thing isn't quite round. But it could be." It requires a little obsession, a little compulsion.

It also requires that you know when to stop. Another one of my writing teachers used to say, “It’s never done. But it is due.” He was talking about term papers, but I think our creative projects have their due date, too. It’s probably a due date like the one we assign newborns (not term papers). There’s a time when they’re ready for the world, after which they will invariably grow into what they were truly meant to be—and that last part (the growing-into-what-they-were- truly-meant-to-be part) is largely out of your control.

But how do you *know* when it’s due (finished)? Another thing I don’t know. I like to believe I finish my projects, but it might be more accurate to say they finish with me. Again, I don’t know for sure. It will often be hard for you to know for sure too. I can only tell you what I find myself asking myself when I sense I’m nearing the time to stop working on a given project:

What counts as a whole thing?

In other words, how *small* can I make it, especially if it doesn’t have to be measurable in the first place?

Then again, how big can I make it?

What if I wait a year?

Or five years or ten?

What will I know then that I don’t know now? (Confession: All of my books have taken years to draft and re-draft. In every case, I entered into refine/polish/finish mode too soon. More than once. They were all served by tossing them back into the ocean, to get bigger, stronger, better, more alive.)

What if I stop and write something else? (Sometimes making something new is the only way to know you’re not quite finished with another something; it creeps its way into the “something new” and it turns out you’re really just re-seeing a project that isn’t finished with you.)

Do I have to share it? (Sometimes—perhaps more often than not—you write a novel to tell yourself something you didn’t know you needed to hear.)

If I do have to share it, does somebody have to pay me for it? (The answer to this question is usually no.)

What happens if I (gulp) give it away?

If I give it away—if, more crucially, I’m *willing* to give it away—well, then, maybe it truly is a gift. And maybe it’s ready for the world. And maybe, just maybe, it’s worth something. Maybe, just maybe, it’s something the world needs from me.

Notes & Acknowledgments

Part I

The Malcolm Gladwell interview with Bill Simmons can be found on-line here: http://es.pn/dgF3

The work of Tim Mackie and Jon Collins and their team at Bible Project (bibleproject.com)—particularly their podcast—has been very illuminating regarding the composition of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, particularly in terms of the Ancient Israelites' contribution to the art of narrative.

For more about the Minutemen, whose DIY ethos is a core inspiration of this project, check out *We Jam Econo*, a 2005 film documenting the life of the band.

Part II

I have found the teaching, writing, and thinking of Andrew Weil very helpful in understanding the relationship between the body, mind, and spirit. His book *Eating Well for Optimum Health* was particularly eye-opening for me, as was *Spontaneous Happiness*.

Another book, more obscure, worth your time: *Saving Yourself from the Disease Care Crisis* by Walt Stoll, M.D.

And here's an article on the topic of walking in the *New Yorker*: "Why Walking Helps Us Think" by Ferris Jabr: https://bit.ly/3egUBSe

I first encountered the Ginsberg quote about free writing in Lewis Hyde's extraordinary book *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. I highly recommend reading Hyde's book in its entirety. Preferably more than once.

I got "Now is not then" from Havi Brooks (@havi | FluentSelf.com), whose workshops on self-care and "de-stuckification" were essential to my early progress as a more creative, more mindful person.

The Thich Nhat Hanh quote regarding the ghosts of the past and the future is from *Our Appointment with Life: Discourse on Living Happily in the Present Moment*. I also use and highly recommend the Plum Village app, which is chock full of dharma talks, guided meditation exercises, and other resources in learning to be more mindful.

Part III

The grad school mentor is the writer and teacher Michael Martone. A true mensch.

I must sheepishly admit that I can no longer find the YouTube video in which Howard Gardner discusses his recipe for creativity. Perhaps it's still out there somewhere. If not, the gist of the quote is surely embedded elsewhere in Gardner's writing and in other presentations and interviews that are readily available online. I beg your indulgence, as well as Dr. Gardner's.

My assertions regarding the history and practice of public education in America are informed by the work and thought of Dr. Gardner as well as Sir Ken Robinson and Seth Godin. They are also, of course, primarily sourced in my four-plus decades of experience as a student in public schools (from elementary school through two graduate degrees at state-funded universities) and as a teacher in such schools.

The stuff about Steve Jobs is either common knowledge or readily available online, but of course Walter Isaacson's biography of Jobs is the definitive one.

Henry Darger material is also readily available online, but a 2004 documentary biography called *In the Realms of the Unreal* is particularly compelling.

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When you subscribe to the Write Mindfulness Project mailing list **here**, you'll get an expanded version of this guide, which includes a ten-week syllabus with a weekly regimen of sequenced prompts to help you pre-write, draft, and then revise. Subscribers also receive a free quarterly communique of prompts and creative inspiration, and they're eligible for substantial discounts on editorial services, one-on-one coaching, and workshops. Because it's a lot easier to do-it-yourself when you don't have to do it *all* yourself.

(Thank you for reading this far.)