

WRITING AS PANDEMIC HEALING: REGARDING OURSELVES AS ARTISTS

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A New York City sound jolted me awake...again. I glanced at the clock. 3:26 a.m. *What on earth is driving this new iteration of chronic insomnia? Has the pandemic finally taken its toll on my psyche?*

On May 1, 2021, as I scrolled through countless emails from individuals already pressing me to make decisions about the fall semester, it finally hit me: I am completely and utterly burned out. Like *epically* fried, to my utter core. Not since 2001, when divorce and 9/11 trauma brought me to my knees, did I feel this raw.

The first week of May, I pushed myself to finish grades earlier than usual, and then I did the only thing I knew would breathe fresh life into me as a human and as a writer. I researched every location around the globe that would accept vaccinated Americans. Then I booked a one-way ticket to Croatia, a gift to myself for surviving this year. And a rebellious declaration that I needed to begin treating myself like a writer again. Navigating COVID PCR test timing (absurdly long waits for results bumping up against 72-hour travel validity windows) added a smidge more to my stress level. But the moment I held a KLM boarding pass in my hand, I knew everything was going to be okay. I reminded myself, *You're a writer. Now go write.*

I muse at the irony that a person whose well-being is, putting it mildly, currently precarious is embarking on an adventure to write a third well-being book for law students and lawyers. But I know that

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the act of writing, though obviously a slog at times even for those of us who love the process, can be therapeutic and healing. My hope in writing this essay is that you too will feel encouraged to find your writer voice again (or perhaps for the first time) this summer, though by no means do you need to be as theatrical as booking a one-way ticket to Europe.

It took me a while to develop a workable process for shaping and nurturing a writing idea from initial inkling to final published creation. But now I have a system that works for me. This writing practice unfailingly provides motivation, reassurance, and a level of trust that I can and will finish another project. I hope some of the following suggestions will inspire you to embrace your inner artist and create. I'm rooting for us!

Regard Yourself as a Writer or Artist

As you may know if you've read some of my prior publications, I'm somewhat obsessed with the band U2. (I annoy my legal writing students with countless examples of lyrics that model storytelling, analogy, and persuasion.) In 2015, during U2's INNOCENCE + eXPERIENCE tour, each time Bono introduced the song *Iris*, he credited his mother (named Iris), who died when Bono was fourteen. Each night during the tour, Bono whispered into the microphone, "She left me an *artist*." Those five words gripped me. At first, I felt a twinge of jealousy; I wished my parents had nudged me to pursue art instead of the paths of least imagination and most safety. But then I realized, *Wait, I am an artist. I'm a writer.*

And so are you.

This past February, I enrolled in my friend Sarah's online workshop on somatic (bodily) awareness as exploratory research for my new well-being book. In the first session, Sarah led us through a body scan and asked us to give ourselves *regard*, which she defined as "one of the most healing things we can offer ourselves; it's saying to ourselves, *I see you*." I like the word *regard*.

Something shifts when we begin to *regard* ourselves as “real” writers and artists. Writing becomes less something we feel obligated to do as a requirement for status (my least favorite word in legal academia); instead, writing becomes our essence, our self-identity, our soul, our oxygen.

Tip #1: Experiment with self-identifying as a writer. Say *I’m a writer* out loud to strangers who ask you what you do for a living. A few years ago, when prompted to list my profession on various forms, I stopped using fancy labels like “law professor” and started inserting “writer.”

Create a Protected Writer or Artist Space

I’ve always romanticized cool, bohemian writers sitting in Parisian cafés, sipping coffee, smoking Gauloises cigarettes, penning profound literature. However, I can’t write in public spaces. Loud conversations, dogs barking, any genre of music, and people who don’t mute their phone alerts rile my inner writer into an enraged misanthrope. To write, I need a quiet space with a positive, artsy vibe and zero human intrusions. A designated writing space can be small. We only need room for our bodies, a laptop, maybe a legal pad, a pen or two, and a few talismans to remind us we are *artists*. I like curating a writing space with a candle, a journal, and a few travel treasures: sea glass I collected in Sicily, a postcard from a Picasso museum in Barcelona, a rock from a volcanic black sand beach in the Canary Islands.

Tip #2: Create a personalized writer space vibe. If you share living accommodations with other humans, gently let them know that this space needs to be as protected as an environmental habitat, a UNESCO historical site, or Fort Knox. Because majorly important things are going to happen here.

Nurture Seeds of Ideas

A guy named Tom Sturges wrote a book called *Every Idea Is a Good Idea: Be Creative Anytime, Anywhere*.² In the idea germination phase of our writing process, *there are no bad ideas*. Write that down on a colorful Post-It Note and stick it in a prominent place in your writing space. There. Are. No. Bad. Ideas.

Speaking of Post-Its, when a nugget of a new writing idea pops into my head and I feel a little jolt of, *Oh, THAT would be kinda cool to write about*, I jot the idea on a large (6X8 inch) orange or pink Post-It and stick it on a window in my Manhattan apartment. In the mornings, after I've finished writing my Morning Pages—three pages of longhand journaling practice recommended by author Julia Cameron in her book about the creative process, *The Artist's Way*³—I sip coffee and stare at the lone Post-It. The singular idea usually percolates and transmutes from there. Cameron explains that three pages of longhand journaling every morning (no editing, no re-reading, no judgment) nudges ideas out of the corners of our brains into the universe. Connections among thoughts, notions, and concepts begin to sprout. The Post-It process has guided tiny seeds of ideas to publication of my two well-being books, and the third I'm writing now. One idea captured on a colorful Post-It leads to another Post-It and yet another. I now know and trust that when I have 10-12 major Post-It ideas dotting my Manhattan window (and smaller Post-Its capturing sub-ideas beneath the major ones), I'm looking at the arc of a new book's Table of Contents. This process works.

Tip #3: If you haven't read it, I highly recommend Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. Start doing Morning Pages. Three long-hand pages of journal writing take no more than 15 minutes each morning but can completely kickstart a creative practice; they clear out brain

² Tom Sturges, *Every Idea is a Good Idea: Be Creative Anytime, Anywhere* (2014).

³ Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (1992).

clutter, allowing great ideas to bloom. Order large, colorful Post-Its. Jot *all* your ideas. There are no bad ideas in this phase. Sip your morning coffee and stare at your Post-Its. Watch your ideas percolate and grow.

Oust the Critics

Our new writer life needs to be a no-critics-zone. Last year, during my tenure application process, I self-imposed a rule: *Under no circumstances will you read the internal scholarship reviews in your tenure packet.* And then what did I go do? I slumped into a shame spiral when I read that one of my colleagues had referred to my work as “pablum.” Honestly, I had to Google the word to make sure I fully grasped the insult. Ouch. Over the past decade, I’ve also received unpleasant typewritten letters from (always male) readers of some of my *ABA Journal* articles, critiquing my ideas, grammar choices, etc. Worrying about criticism is natural, but to get actual writing work done, I like to invoke novelist Paulo Coelho’s ethos: “Haters are confused admirers.” I also like to tell myself, *If you reach literally one person with this piece of writing, you’ve done your job.*

Tip #4: To keep your writing space a no-critics-zone and get words on the page:

- Start by writing what you know
- Write about what excites you, not what you think will impress people or sell
- Consider beginning with writing a short piece about your idea—a blog or an essay
- Who cares if someone has already written on the same topic; realize that no one will write about the topic with your same voice or perspective
- Getting words on paper is the most important part of the initial writing process; you can edit, workshop, fine-tune, and adjust tone later.

Set Up a Realistic System

Ritual and routine are the key to getting words on the page. Choreographer Twyla Tharp wrote a great book called *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*⁴, in which she emphasizes the importance of ritual for setting aside hesitation or trepidation about starting a new project. She says that establishing a creative habit reminds us, “I’ve done it before. It was good. I’ll do it again.” I also love author Steven Pressfield’s advice from his motivating book on the creative process, *Do the Work*⁵: “Get the first version of your project done from A to Z as fast as you can. Don’t stop. Don’t look down. Don’t think.”

I can’t write for more than two hours a day or I get a migraine. So, when I launch a new writing project, I commit to a routine of waking up, brewing a pot of coffee, doing my Morning Pages, and then writing for two straight hours. At the end of the two hours, I close the laptop and go about my day. I do my two hours every single day, including weekends, for as many days in a row as it takes to get the first (horrifyingly bad) draft done. And then I start from the beginning again and set a daily page quota for editing. And then I start from the beginning yet again and set another daily page quota for editing.

For my past two book projects, I conducted research first by collecting stacks of articles and books, highlighting excerpts, and then typing up the selected passages. It’s highly motivating to start a project with a substantial hunk of raw material sitting in a Word document, ready to be shaped and molded. Then, when I was ready to hunker down and write, I wrote for two hours a day for two months straight (no skip days), and the pages added up into a 300-

⁴ Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life* (2005).

⁵ Steven Pressfield, *Do the Work: Overcome Resistance and Get Out of Your Own Way* (2011).

page manuscript. Then I started at the beginning again and edited ten pages a day for thirty days. And then again. This process works.

Tip #5: Every writer is different, obviously. You might find you do your best work late at night or midday, instead of mornings like me. The important thing is to discern the right time of day and a realistic daily goal that works best for you, whether that is a time limit, or page count or word count quotas. Establish your system, set boundaries for intrusions (family, email, social media). Give yourself the gift of routine and the pages will add up.

Reward Yourself for Sticking to your System

Let's face it: writing can be mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting. When I emerge from a two-hour writing groove, I look like I've just hiked Mount Etna. My hair looks like Medusa; my eyes are wild; I'm famished. I also realize that I've just experienced what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as a state of *flow*⁶: when time and space disappear and we become fully immersed and absorbed in an activity, finding equipoise between challenge and skill. Each time we follow through with our routine, we deserve a reward. Julia Cameron's *Artist's Dates*—solo excursions with one's inner artist—suggested in her book are marvelous rewards. Each day after I finish my two hours writing pages of my new book, I'm going to go explore something cultural in Croatia as my post-writing reward.

Tip #6: Establish a writing reward system. What post-writing activity sounds fun to you? What types of *Artist's Dates* would replenish your creative soul: Making a collage? Baking? A virtual gallery visit? A walk in a botanical garden? Emerge from your writing groove and take your inner artist on a well-deserved date.

⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990).

Trust your System, Hear Positivity, and Lift One Another Up

Writing is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying. One of U2's lyrics describes how I feel when I pour my soul onto the page: *Where poets speak their heart then bleed for it*. Yes, we are in a tough profession chock full of (often gratuitous) critique and judgment. But we also have something to say and deserve to say it in our authentic voice. Here's the best advice I can give on how to make sure your important message becomes memorialized in writing and reaches the people who need to hear it:

- Establish and trust your writing system; the words and pages will add up.
- Forget trying to please everyone; it's impossible. When I stress out about so-and-so faculty member thinking my work is too touchy-feely or not intellectual enough, I remind myself: *They are not your audience!* Think about who your audience really is. I know my audience is anxious and fearful law students and lawyers, so I write solely for them (and myself).
- When you receive positive feedback from a reader, immediately stop everything else you are doing and read or listen to that priceless gem again. Like, really hear it and let it sink in. Keep a positivity folder. Respond to every single communication from a reader telling you that your work spoke to them. Those moments and connections are why we write.
- Let's lift each other up. Let's help each other get words on the page. My legal writing colleague, Professor Maria Termini, launched an incredibly helpful Writing Days initiative at our school in which we convene (online) in small Writing Pods of 3-4 writers and write for three hours and then report our progress.

So, dear writer, let's get to it. I can't wait for us to get started. If you need a nudge to set up your protected writing space or establish a workable routine or brain-storm Artist's Dates, I've got your back. I can't wait to read your work. Our profession needs your voice. Happy writing.