

WRITERS TOOLBOX

WRITING YOUR WAY HOME

Kent Ira Groff

During a time when I was getting several writing rejections, two things occurred to me. First, if I write for myself, rejections goad me to growth. Second, when work or duty demands I write, if at the end of a day I find myself an inch closer to my own heart and the Heart of the universe then obligation has morphed into invitation.

Any form of writing—fiction or analytical essays, poetry or memoir—holds potential for calling forth a spiritual dimension that can unlock the treasure of your life’s passion and purpose. What practices can increase the propensity for such moments of “writing your way home?”

Opening to opposites. After presenting a lecture in Buena Vista, I needed to drive back to Denver at night to make an early morning meeting. Friends warned me of danger of deer and elk crossing the road. Within minutes of seeing an official warning sign, a freight truck lunged in front of me. I despise getting stuck behind a truck. However, I surprised myself, saying, *I’ll stay behind the truck and its noise and size will protect me.*

Writing this story brings me home again: vigilant willingness to shed ingrained habits and entertain opposites carves a keyhole for mini-epiphanies, calling us to our true self. Like the yin-yang paradox, here are some areas to cultivate such dynamic tensions and surprise oneself.

Contemplation and communication. In my book *Writing Tides* I speak of penning your way home to your true Self and out into the world’s need—the tides of contemplation and communication. It means expecting subtle contemplative insights while writing to communicate your purpose.

William Blake bids us “to see the world in a grain of sand.” Contemplation by simple mindfulness in everyday things is like the first ring in the onion leading to contemplation of the Holy at center of all things. To contemplate the surface stuff of ordinary reality can open the door to that deeper Reality.

Secular and spiritual. There is really one Reality. Spiritual traditions start with being present, paying attention, observing the extraordinary in the ordinary. That’s how Alexander Fleming, returning from a holiday to contemplate his students’ moldy Petri dishes, conceived

penicillin. And Leonardo da Vinci advised students to stop and look at stains on walls, mud, fire, ashes or clouds. Such indistinct images could stimulate the mind to marvelous ideas.

Blaise Pascal, forerunner of modern computer science, illustrates how scientific writing can foster contemplative insights. Pascal got so giddy observing higher math calculations that he wrote, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.” Observing his fears as well as the figures propelled him into contemplation beyond calculation. Pascal’s scribbled fragments published after his death as *Pensées*—“thoughts”—still give the world spiritual insights that rival his mathematical discoveries.

Unique and universal. While vacationing on Cape Cod, I bought my two-and-a-half year-old daughter a blue kite with a white Egyptian ankh, symbol of life. It flew wondrously above the world’s troubles—until it got snarled in a tree. After threatening to get a ladder, an idea my wife vetoed, I began driving away. Then I turned off the car and went back. Whether from a gust (German *Geist*) of wind or from my gentle tug on the string, I don’t know, but it miraculously untangled.

When life gets tangled in a hopeless impasse, I need to retreat and relinquish my tight grasp. If it comes back, it’s a gift.

Every writer and poet knows how the reader connects to universal truths garbed in the unique flesh of personal experience, what poet Jane Kenyon called “the luminous particular.”

Playful and passionate. “The best scientists are those who retain the somewhat naïve curiosity of a child. They see the world with a special eye,” says Margaret Geller, chief scientist at the Smithsonian Astrological Observatory.

To become like a child in spiritual traditions of East and West is the metaphor of new life. Getting in touch with childlike delight, curiosity, and wonder is to follow the passion that fuels your life’s purpose. Frederick Buechner writes in *Wishful Thinking*, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Following a single inner-outer focus creates a healing of purpose, a life mission—your “why” for living. I’ve discovered that playing with words, often creating a poem, returns me to my playful child *and* my most serious purpose. I wrote this poem while proofing a copy editor’s frequently irritating changes, but it speaks to paradoxes in all life.

Grit Seasoning

While I do this grit
work, season
the irksome pieces
with enough
Ahas! to remind me
of the reason.

We're back to the tides of contemplation and communication. Mindfulness is the key to research: being present to *all* the data, mind-boggling facts *and* feelings so terrific or terrifying you can't find words for them—yet.

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