

# The “Not Trying” of Writing

Rachel Forrester

In a previous life, I was a career newspaper writer. Over the course of my twenties, I worked my way up from a tiny rural weekly with a circulation of about 3,000 to a major metropolitan daily with a circulation of nearly thirty times that. Newspapering was fun work, but exhausting, and eventually my life’s path brought me back around to academia, where I am now happily ensconced in yet another language-centered occupation. Lately, I have been catching myself reflecting on how my days in the trenches as a journalist in many ways paved the way to where I am now. I remember, for instance, a day when I sat in a newsroom writing and looked up from my computer with a feeling of nearly inexpressible wonder coming over me. I looked around at my comrades and thought about how miraculous it was that we produced what we did. Almost daily, we created something out of nothing—a story, an entire newspaper’s worth of stories, when the day before no such thing existed. We were handed (or thought of) a germ of a story in the form of a few words that floated out over our meeting table, and somehow, a few days later, something new and readable emerged. I was struck in that moment in the newsroom by the otherworldly-ness of what we actually did every day, which usually seemed so mundane.

Why was that suddenly so miraculous to me? I had daily evidence of the hard work that led from point “A” (the germ) to point “B” (the story and newspaper). It took tracking down phone numbers and playing phone tag, coordinating with photographers, driving through smoggy traffic (sometimes with bad directions), attending meetings and reading minutes, conducting interviews, massaging egos, sorting through my own bad handwriting, revising, and tightening (and sometimes agonizing over) what had to be cut to make a story fit. That wasn’t “nothing.” It took work to make those stories appear out of the thin air. Where was the miracle in that?

Looking back, the miracle was that anything got written in spite of the uncertainty and perhaps even deep dread I experienced *every time, without fail*, no matter how many stories I had produced. How would I “pull it off” this time? I wondered. Every story was an act of faith; every day, I had to battle the feeling that, even after I had immersed myself in my subject long enough to really know and care about it, it could somehow slip away from me at any moment. This was because every time I sat down to actually write the story, it did not really seem like me, or my conscious effort, that finally made the leap from the mess of preparation to the actual words spinning out onto the page; *I* didn’t make sense of it all. It was something else, or at least something I did not have full control of. It seemed like the me that went out and did all the footwork was just the assistant, and it just handed all of that footwork to some other hidden me, or some other hidden somebody to make the magic happen. It was never like *I* was *deciding*

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what to say. It was as if *I* was *hearing* what to say, as though it had already been written, and it was just time for it to actually emerge in physical, black-and-white form.

I am many miles from my newspapering days, but I cannot shake my fascination with this otherworldly transformation that occurs in writing, between the moments before writing hits the page and the moment it actually does—that going from nothing to something, the way we seem to know in an instant that which we did not know we knew the moment before.

### Silence and Not Trying

There are a multitude of ways of naming and describing this phenomenon. It has been described, especially in recent composition scholarship, in terms of the unconscious, the body, intuition, insight, creativity, emotions, imagery, visualization, spirituality, epistemology, psychology, all of which have been crucial to a thorough understanding of what is actually happening in that moment. In many ways, for instance, the recent flurry of scholarship regarding silence attempts to get at this very thing. In her 2004 *Unspoken*, Cheryl Glenn argues for a new look at silence as a rhetorical tool as important and worthy of critical attention as words. “Few documented accounts explicitly demonstrate the usefulness and sensibility of silence, particularly in our talkative Western culture, where speech is synonymous with civilization itself,” she says (xii). And yet, “people use silence and silencing every day to fulfill their rhetorical purpose, whether it is to maintain their position of power, resist the domination of others, or submit to subordination” (153).

What’s perhaps most interesting about silence as a rhetorical tool—the reason Glenn must make an argument about it at all—is that, as effective a tool as it is (and she builds a potent case for it), it represents a certain seeming *absence* of human effort. An absence of sound and motion, an absence of all the usual *appearances* of productivity. It’s easy to miss the effectiveness of silence because it doesn’t call attention to itself in the same way words do, doesn’t seem to offer, at first glance, any immediate trails of meaning. The same is true of listening, a kind of silence: Krista Ratcliffe in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* notes how “we have been slow to imagine how listening might inform our discipline” (19). She considers various possible reasons for disciplinary bias against listening as worthy of critical study, even though it constitutes, in essence, a third of the traditional rhetorical triangle. But when we step back and look at the total picture of the rhetorical act including the spaces where words are not, we see how enormous a role those spaces play. It’s hard to hear, Glenn says, but silence “resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use” (xi). She continues, “We live inside the act of discourse, to be sure, but we cannot assume that a *verbal* matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind take place—regardless of the measure of inward or outward persuasion” (153).

Just as the seeming absence of human effort of silence turns out to be an important part of the rhetorical act, the seeming absence of human effort which I will call “not trying” (and by which I essentially mean the setting aside of cognitive analysis) is often a key element of our best writing experiences. After all our groundwork is laid, writing seems to emerge from the kind of nothingness that

silence represents but where something is actually happening. We tend to resist the thought that good writing might come from anything other than our conscious efforts; our culture values, above all, the work ethic, dictate that things get achieved because we are busy, because we try, not because we are occasionally visited by any mysterious force within or outside of ourselves that knows what we mean to say before we say it. After all, what do we have left to teach our students if drafts comes from somewhere besides their brainstorm lists, clustering, invention notes, and revision efforts? Are we going back to that old notion that writing is "magical," unteachable and unlearnable, that only the gifted elite have the necessary tools?

By no means. Janet Emig made her large leap forward for teachers of writing when she argued in 1981 against "magical thinking" in the teaching of writing (21), as regards to how writing gets done and who gets the credit for it. So began process writing as we now know it: good writing doesn't "magically" appear, but goes through a rigorous, often recursive invention process with parts that all writers share in common, if we can get them to the surface for observation. This is important; in doing so, we are attempting to ease our students' writing anxiety by offering the hope that anyone can do it if he or she just engage in the process. In 1992, William Covino subverted to a degree Emig's work by reclaiming the term "magic" for rhetoricians, saying that "magic" is nothing if not the exercise of rhetoric in all its glory in its (here he borrows from Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe's *Stolen Lightning*) "audacious individual use of existing powerful symbols" (349).

I agree with both. Though he begins his piece by pushing against hers, Covino's thinking isn't necessarily incompatible with Emig's; in actuality, the two represent the balance all writers must strike in their process: writing is not either/or; it's *both* the hard work of the process *and* the culminating leap of faith/invocation of magic that typically characterize our best writing experiences. The hard work of the process of writing—the phone calls, the interviews (in short, whatever research is necessary, whether it's research into the subject matter or into the mind of the writer)—is necessary for the moment when "not trying" occurs, when the piece finally lifts off the ground and takes flight.

The notion of "not trying" when writing comes is of course not original with me by any means. Most advanced writers, and many developing writers, have a story of a moment when a whole piece seemed to emerge from the subconscious in an instant of its own accord. My hope with this essay is simply to remind us to resist the narcissism of the very American belief that it is always and ever our motion, our sound, our busy-ness, that gets us (and our students) where we need to go in writing. Even the most staunchly "unspiritual" writers will usually admit to the occasional feeling that they seem to be in the hands of something beyond their cognitive control (something I will later venture to call spiritual) when they write. At the end of the essay, I will offer some practical classroom strategies for teachers and students who are looking for ways to help this phenomenon occur more often, so deliciously liberating when it does.

I began with Cheryl Glenn's silence-as-rhetoric as an analogy for "not trying"-as-writing. I like the analogy partly because silence can then shift gears to provide both a source for, not just an analogy to, the not trying of writing: the specific words we need when we're composing seem to come out of the silence when we can actually achieve it—the silence or stillness of our minds, or of the

room around us. Peter Elbow describes this in his piece “Silence: A Collage,” where he uses the examples of the silence of the “spaces” between gathered text fragments in a collage. In his essay, Elbow gathers together a number of freewritings from colleagues during a workshop on silence. Each muses in different ways about his or her personal experience with silence; one, for instance, about the different *kinds* of silence, one about what a silent breakfast with colleagues was like, and so on. Reading Elbow’s gathered excerpts, one feels a bit like an observer at a quiet gallery of art, free to follow the pleasures of his or her own line of thinking as the excerpts float past, rather than being required to follow the more logical progress of a formal essay to “get” what is said by the end.

What Elbow is saying is that it is the actual *lack of* formal, cognitive explanations of how these fragments relate to and converse with each other—the “silence” between each of the excerpts—which makes the experience of reading it so powerful:

The principle of negativity; absence. What makes writing good is not what the writer puts in but what she or he leaves out. Silence is often what’s most powerful in music; space in art and architecture. We hear the pulsing energy in certain rests in music. . . . We see the force in the spaces in certain line drawings. . . . Silence and felt sense. The source and foundation of verbal meaning often lies in the silence of what is felt nonverbally and bodily. When writing goes well, it is often because we periodically pause and say, “Is this what I mean to be saying?” It’s amazing that we can answer that question: that we can tell whether a given set of words corresponds to an intention. The source of the answer is the feelings and the body—consulted in silence. (12-13)

It is the things left unsaid which seem to have the most impact. There is an intimacy of meaning that comes with silence, when an idea travels by doing nothing, by “not trying.” The lack of necessity to say something says the important thing: the connectedness of a speaker or writer and his or her audience, which is the message that underlies all messages. Silence works both as a source for the artist or writer and as a technique because where the ideas come from for her, she trusts they may also come for the audience. There is a not-trying in the verbal and visual void of silence—a mind that stops to float for a moment, relaxed vocal cords, a hand that draws back to rest—that is essential to the creator’s overall success.

### Many Terms, One Concept

The recent scholarship of silence makes a helpful inroad into the idea of the “not trying” of writing, but many lines of composition scholarship have contained its traces, describing the same thing—a kind of nothingness where *something* is happening—but from many different vantage points. When we talk about the unconscious as it relates to the writing process, for instance, we are using Freudian terms to grapple with the experience I described above, that of someone “else” (in this case, the unconscious) making writing occur. One of my favorite essays along this line is Barrett Mandel’s 1980 piece, “The Writer Writing Is Not at

Home," which begins with verbal descriptions by the painter Jasper Johns on his creative process during an interview with Michael Crichton:

The author asks Johns why he has just made a change in the handle of a spoon in a lithograph on which he is working. Johns answers, "Because I did." The author asks, "But what did you *see*?" Johns: "I saw that it should be changed." Author: "Well, if you changed it, what was wrong with it before?" Johns: "Nothing. I tend to think one thing is as good as another." Author: "Then why change it?" Johns, after a sigh and a pause: "Well, I may change it again." author: "Why?" Johns: "Well, I won't know until I do it." (370)

Then, Mandel explains:

It is time for writing teachers to begin to take seriously those who create. Johns is not pulling anyone's leg. He is being honest, even at the expense of sounding foolish. Like so many professional artists, he simply and truly does not know why or how he paints the way he does. He does not know where the ideas come from. He is nevertheless clear: that he is responsible for the lithograph; he accepts the fact that it is his.

Johns sees that a work of art happens and that an artist creates it—out of no prior knowledge, thought, plan or expectations. Not that there aren't prior thoughts and plans, but that the work of art does not arise from them; they do not cause the work of art to materialize. Johns is willing to avoid all tenets, dictates, philosophies, and pedagogies concerning the making of this lithograph. He distrusts explanations, reasons, and rationalizations, while accepting the insight which moves his hand across the canvas. It may be argued that Johns at some earlier point had to follow tenets and pedagogies. Perhaps. But my point would be that he became what we would call creative or imaginative by transcending all such rules and by learning to trust the free choice of his hand over the entrapment of his mind by rules of procedure. (370)

Mandel uses this beginning to set the stage for his argument that writing—the moment the words actually come out, which I found so mysterious in the news-room that day—comes from a place other than consciousness. He says that "one writes before one is conscious of what one has to say" (373), as though writing "comes from behind the screen of consciousness, behind which no person can ever hope to see" (374). This changes everything in the writing classroom, Mandel says: "We must push students past their own ego-restrictions so that they will be open to the experience of having the words flow from wherever their source is—as in speech. Wherever that place is, it is non-conscious, non-logical, unsegmented, non-problematic and perfectly dependable. We must, I am saying, drive the student out of the House of Self-consciousness" (375).

The thing Mandel calls the "non-conscious" others might call "the body." This might seem at first a little jarring to consider, as both come from distinct

lines of scholarship, but, in some ways, both are actually saying the same thing: that writing comes from somewhere other than the cognitive effort or “trying” which seems to characterize other kinds of academic or intellectual work. In other words, when we speak about the unconscious, we are saying it’s a “not trying” of the conscious. When we speak about the body, we are saying it’s a “not trying” of the mind. Both are reaching for and theorizing about the same invisible, mysterious thing, but from different avenues. Though Mandel refers mostly to the unconscious, he makes the crossover himself, invoking a subtle body-oriented theory when he says the artist Johns accepts “the insight which moves his hand across the canvas” (370), as though it is his hand, or an insight in charge of his hand (notably, not his mind), doing the work. As with the unconscious, when we talk about “the body” in relation to writing, we are usually saying that our bodies “know” in ways that our brains don’t, though our brains are part of the bodily package. The answers and explanations we seek when we’re writing, the specific ways of putting things, seem to come from our bodies themselves, in much the same way an artist works with his hands. “Sometimes the body knows before the mind knows. Ask a potter about the wisdom of the hands, about the feel of the clay, its moisture and texture, about the form emerging from raw clay,” say Alice Brand and Richard Graves (75) in their introduction to the segment on the body in their essay collection *Presence of Mind*. Sondra Perl describes this as the “felt sense” (78), a sense about ideas and words which is experienced in the body:

Working with this sense is intrinsically creative, and nothing about it stays still. Delving into it does not simply yield a discovery of something already formed yet hidden from view, the way an archaeologist unearths an artifact on a dig. The very “delving in” helps shape what emerges and may shape and reshape the very manner in which we “delve.” This way of working is alive and lives, as we do, in our bodies. . . . Our felt sense of something is always quite specific. The sense you have at this moment is unquestionably *this* sense and no other. But to write what you sense may take some doing. . . . Only certain words will say what you sense; and these may only come by a careful process of slowing down and listening, of paying attention to those hunches, leanings, and subtle pulls. (78)

In both cases, whether the source is named the “unconscious” or the “body,” the point is that both are ways of describing what I think of as the “not trying” that occurs when writing happens. It is not even as though the cognitive powers are put in neutral; it is almost as though they must be actively resisted and curtailed off for the “magic” to happen. Note the flow of conversation between Crichton and Johns in Mandel’s introduction: Crichton’s mind probes curiously with the thinking and speaking pattern of the interviewer intent on solving the equation of “why” with cognitive details. Johns is obviously not only practiced in the skill to resist his own “why” while he paints, but to resist the onslaught of the cognition of another into the intimate details of that process. It is as though Johns knows that the more cognition is applied, the farther away the interviewer will actually get from the knowledge he seeks. It is a knowledge which must, in some ways, come to the seeker; it cannot be hunted down like prey. The seeker’s job—whether artist or interviewer—is to wait and to listen, a position which can

seem agonizingly passive to our culture, especially academic culture.

As with Mandel's example, so it is with the "body" as well. To recap: "these [artistic insights] may only come by a careful process of *slowing down and listening*, of paying attention to those hunches, leanings, and subtle pulls," says Perl (78, my emphasis). The thing we need to happen when we're writing, she says, doesn't happen with aggressive probing, motion, work, or anything like it; quite the opposite. It comes from a slowing down—deceleration, retreat from intellectual speed—and listening. That is to say, that, if there is a motion at all, it is one of intake, not output, of feeding oneself with stimuli, not producing it—something perhaps opposite of what we typically envision when we imagine writing from outside the process. We want so much to give students ways of actively stalking the ideas that make their writing compelling. But the stalking is not, in the end, what actually makes it happen; it just loosens up the soil.

### The Common Denominator

In other words, all of these ways of trying to get at the "magic" that happens at the moment of composition—discussions of silence, the unconscious, the body—have one thing in common: there is a "not trying" at the center of them all which we still cannot quite get at with our minds. There is a kind of putting the self on pause, of release, a cessation of movement or sound, a time when the mind is, in a way, out to lunch rather than in control. Control is subjugated to something else. Whatever that something else may be, the most miraculous part of it is the "work" gets done while we're "away," whether it's by the subconscious or the body, or whatever terms we have of identifying and describing that mysterious force. When writing happens, it feels like the "trying" stops, and the hardest "work" we have in the middle of the experience is keeping faith that the words will come and keeping our minds quiet so we can hear the words as they do. Whatever is still "working" or "trying," if there is anything doing those things in that moment, is still beyond our reach, or at least seemingly beyond the reach of our cognition. We are not filling in sums or formulas by counting doggedly. We are dabbling in words and sounds, letting them speak to us. We are, indeed, in some ways, passively listening for something that appeals to us, pleases us, in much the same way a child mills about a room and doesn't have to *try* to get interested when his or her teacher starts singing a delightful song. There seems to be about grown-up writing, when it does actually happen, an element of the deep, unmanufacturable wisdom and the love for the easy, unexplainable fun of sounds that characterizes the play of children, not the trying and "work" of grownups. In that moment when the words actually come, though we may be sweating with anxiety, "effort" and "trying" seem somehow to fall out of the picture. As I found in the newsroom that day, it doesn't feel like "us" because it doesn't feel like work.

### The Hard Work of "Not Trying"

Notably, within discussions of this mysterious source—saying it comes from the unconscious, the body, silence or any other thing—there is an automatic implication and presence in the room, if you will, of their opposites. We wouldn't have a discussion of the unconscious, the body, or silence if we weren't inclined

to depend on the conscious, the cognition, and noise and motion for the assurance of productivity. We have the common urge among us to work, to move ahead, to believe that it is work and movement and busy-ness which will produce the results we're looking for.

Perhaps a literal definition of work will help here. In physics, mechanical work is described in terms of a relationship between a pressure or force and the distance it moves something in space ( $W=FD$ , or Work equals Force times Distance). When I push a chair across the floor, the amount of work it takes to get it to its new spot is the product of me ("F") and the distance the chair is moved ("D"). We define work in terms of the pressure or energy it takes to move an object, or make something happen, that wouldn't move or happen on its own.

When the "magic" of writing happens, we know a distance has been travelled. There are words on the page where before there were not. And we think of writing as work. But if it is work, then who or what is the "F" force? Is it us, some other part of ourselves, or someone or something else? I contend that all around the process of writing is work, trying, and its evidence, but that at the center of it, like a seed in all its infinitely mysterious intersections of chemistry, biology, physics, and, for some, spirituality, there is non-work. There is an absence of *trying*; there is just a *being*, a rest, a pause, a void, albeit a full, pregnant rest or void. It just does not feel the same way it feels to push a chair across the floor. When writing happens, it feels as though we ourselves are being pushed across the floor, and we are throwing up our feet and hands (if only for a split second) in glee. No matter how it is described or defined, it feels transcendently like "not trying," like sitting back and letting someone else finally take the wheel.

This might make us uncomfortable. The thought of it tends to produce, at least in myself, a range of responses: exhilaration and relief, but also terror. Exhilaration and relief that I am quite possibly, finally not in charge of every last detail; and terror that, if I am not in charge, how can I be sure that it is what Mandel calls "perfectly dependable" (375)? It seems even a little un-American: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." We are brought up to believe that hard work and nothing else brings success—a simple look at the typical annual working hours of Americans (more than 1800 hours, one of the highest on the global scale, comparatively) as compared to workers in other cultures (in Norway, as low as 1300) reminds us of that (Bové and Thill 70). We are not taught to be still and believe that the answers already lie inside ourselves—or somewhere—waiting. Culturally, perhaps especially in academia (though there is increasing openness to it), "not trying" or stillness is equated more with laziness and not knowing than productivity and knowing. If this were not the case, we would not have the downward pressure from upper administrative positions (who get their pressure from boards, legislators, voters and parents—in short, ourselves) to boost full-time equivalent productivity, volunteer on committees, publish for tenure. Notice that all three are things we can physically see the results of; a professor talking to a class, a committee meeting, or an article or book fresh off the press. All are things which certainly have their value in a vibrant and richly interconnected university community. All show tangibly that work has happened or is happening. But is this truly productivity, or is it merely the illusion of productivity? Time for stillness, reflection, not-doing—those are ways of allocating human resources of which we cannot cognitively measure the benefits, and so they are not allocated much at all. Notice even a recent change in terminology: no longer



is a semester away from campus called a "sabbatical" (of Hebrew origin, meaning a time at regularly scheduled intervals allocated "to rest," *Oxford English Dictionary*); it is called an "off-campus scholarly assignment" or an alternative. Our terminology shift gives away our discomfort with "not trying": rest, not-doing, not-trying, seems fuzzy and unacceptable; scholarship (in which learning or some other measurable or tangible product is being produced) is acceptable. If we are to allocate a regular time for non-work in our days, weeks, months, years, we must scramble for it ourselves; it will not come from our culture.

No one is saying, though, of course, that the *trying* part of the writing process is not important; it is simply not the whole picture. According to one creativity paradigm, "saturation" with one's subject is the first step in a process that leads to creative insight (Holman 67). All of that planning, research, meeting-going, and interviewing I did as a reporter was important preparation for the moments when the words did finally begin to spin out. But, when the "magic" did begin to happen, it was never (at least on my good days) just a regurgitation of those facts; the end results always seemed to be more the sum of the parts I had put in, and I never had the sense that I had done anything myself to make that happen. As Mandel says, "Not that there aren't prior thoughts and plans, but that the work of art does not arise from them; they do not cause the work of art to materialize" (370). Things just seemed to come to me at the moments they needed to, in ways that kept me guessing every time I wrote at how I would, as stated earlier, "pull things off" this time. Though we're told hard work is the key to success, inside every success story seems to be, ironically, the kernel of a moment like this, when "not doing" (the Buddhist way of putting it) seems to become key; a miracle just occurs.

In this way, writing seems like a distinctly spiritual endeavor or one that requires daily faith in something unknowable. I contend that the hardest work of writing is the discipline of that faith, in believing that, if you get things ready, the rest will come. Gradually a good writer grows a faith in the knowledge that it will come, even if he or she doesn't know what it will look like in the end. In an essay that deals with modes of spirituality in the technical writing class, Marianthe Karanikas describes a time when Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock was trying to solve a genetic problem; after three days of investigation and analysis, she wasn't finding what she wanted, so she left to "meditate under the eucalyptus trees." Suddenly, after half an hour, McClintock jumped up and "knew everything was going to be just fine" (159), even though she didn't yet have the formal solution to her problem. The sense of sudden well-being in writing always seems likewise to emerge from moments of stillness, of giving in, in a sense, to the unknowability of even what the writer is doing at that very moment.

### "Not Trying" in the Classroom

Thankfully, there is an increasing level of comfort in secular educational contexts with incorporating spiritual (as distinct from religious) notions into pedagogy, but there is also the understandable skepticism and resistance. After all, if we're not here to get our students to "try," then what are we doing? What *is* our job, and will we have one at the end of the day if we tell our students that what they need to learn and produce will happen, in the end, without them trying and

working? I believe the answer to this lies in the understanding that our students, like our children, are absorbing more from our modeling than from our overt strategizing, speaking, or assignment designing in the classroom. They learn our way of life, our ways of handling conflict, our ways of prioritizing, our “tone” of life—our optimism and pessimism, in short, “how things feel in the class” (Tompkins 657)—before they learn the digitizable information we plan so carefully to transfer to them. Appropriately, just as writing happens in some ways when we’re “not trying,” so does teaching. It’s important, of course, to use the contact hours we have with students in ways that maximize the benefits that togetherness offers. But it’s the *feel* of our class which students remember, not what we say or tell them to do or not do.

“Nowhere is such a cultural phenomenon more evident than in our classrooms, where we honor the material over the spiritual, the rational over the intuitive, the social over the self. Critical thinking is given supremacy with little thought to the *raison d’être* for that thinking,” says Kristie S. Fleckenstein, “Thus, the heart of teaching, the spiritual center, is lost and, as Yeats predicts, ‘things fall apart’” (25). When we stop seeing physical and cognitive busy-ness in our own lives as the sole indicators of productivity and meaning, it will inevitably trickle into the lives of our classrooms and our students, saving the “heart” of learning.

Mandel seems to agree with this: “It does not work to teach coherence, unity, and emphasis, since these follow insight. They do not precede it. What works is to stimulate insights by creating contexts in which they are likely to occur” (375). In other words, “teaching coherence, unity and emphasis” can all become tempting forms of classroom “busy-ness” when we don’t know how to express, or perhaps don’t feel safe expressing, what actually happens when we write. Writing is a very intimate process, and we make ourselves vulnerable when we tell the truth, which is that we don’t really know where writing comes from, though we’ve spent our careers studying it. Ultimately, under this model, we become primarily teachers of patience rather than teachers of writing. If we believe fully in what artists and writers seem to say across the board about their processes, then we must believe that students have the writing already, in some ways, within themselves, in which case we teach students how to prepare and then how to wait and listen.

Here are a few extremely simple practical classroom strategies I have used toward this end:

**1. How do you feel? What do you want?** I have long since forgotten which friend or counselor to credit with these two simple questions. Try beginning a class, or try beginning all your classes, with a freewrite for five or 10 minutes, answering these two simple questions. They are notoriously harder than they look; few of us are accustomed to being asked them. If you or they get stuck (and I of course always try to write with my students), try choosing your answer to the first question from one of the four main categories: happy, sad, mad, scared. These are the “primary colors,” if you will, of the emotional spectrum (attributable, once again, to an unknown friend or counselor). The point of this exercise is, of course, honing the skill of internal listening, of self-awareness, the kind it takes to be ready when the “not trying” finally comes.

**2. The Power of the Pause.** The strategic pause is something I learned while writing for newspapers. An editor once told me to sit and listen for more when an interviewee seems to come to a stop when answering an important question. The

temptation is to plunge in and ask the next question, to keep the sound moving. But allowing the pause to stand does mysterious things: almost invariably, the interviewee will suddenly go deeper, revising the previous answer with the details you were hoping for in the first place. I teach my business writing students this strategy for oral presentations: when you ask your audience a question, stop and wait for an answer. This is hard, because silence can be intimidating. What if no one says anything? Live with the silence a moment, I tell them; feel the answers around the room rising to the surface, which they inevitably do. The classroom can be a safe place to help students get comfortable with silence, to learn to ride its mysterious energy, a skill useful when writing.

**3. Listen.** I am continuously having to remind myself that my most important job as a teacher is not to “teach” or to lecture. My most important job is to listen, to receive what students already have to give, and to provide my services as an experienced listener and reader. In her essay “Listening Like a Cow,” Mary Rose O’Reilley describes a situation where a student bolted from a class in tears, so moved by another student’s presentation. When the student presenting asked, “How can we go on?”, O’Reilley responded, “Pay attention. Just be there. Don’t be thinking about a solution, or how you should fix it. Just listen hard and try to be present” (27). When we model this kind of listening to students, we teach them the kind of listening so rare in our culture: the kind that remembers that you already have the answers to your life’s quandaries inside you, and reminds you to trust yourself—often the missing ingredient when we can’t get writing to take flight.

### “Not Trying” as a Form of Grace

“It’s the closest thing to grace there is,” a self-proclaimed “un-spiritual” academic friend of mine said when I told him I was investigating spirituality as it relates to the creative process. The feeling of grace—the unexpected gift, free of charge, from another world—in a tired, spiritually uncertain post-9/11 world is something which, while frightening in many ways, is reassuring in others. As Richard Graves says,

The popular understanding of grace is sometimes limited to the theological realm and, for that reason, some may question whether or not it is appropriate for school settings. I believe to the contrary, that grace has profound implications for pedagogy. The way I am using the word is more akin to its physical and social connotations, as when we say “she dances with grace” or “he acted with grace.” Used in this manner, the term connotes harmony of movement, coordination, poise under pressure. But a hint of the transcendent also pervades this meaning of the word. For the dancer spends hours in practice, but when the moment of performance comes, some magic takes over, some invisible force beyond the muscles themselves. (15)

Grace is experienced when the total is more than the sum of its parts, and not by “trying.” This seems to be what happens when we write. What’s most exciting about the attention that non-cognitive—or “not trying”—processes are being given in academia is that we are perhaps bringing our occupation closer to its true source

of knowledge. Perhaps the source is indeed a simple, still place inside of each of us, making “study . . . about the sacredness of life” (Briggs, Schunter, Melvin 28). If we insist on space for “not trying” both in our personal lives and in our classrooms, and if we keep faith based on overwhelming evidence that something key lies inside of it, perhaps we will find that what we needed to know was there all along. ☺

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