

How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS FOUR • Video Transcript

Welcome back. After devoting the last session to thinking about how to construct a poem according to the instructions of Danny Khalastchi, this week we're going to look at issues of mindfulness. The state of mind that a poet tries to get him or herself into before writing and then in the act of writing.

We'll begin with a writer from India. Sridala Swami is a poet and the author of four children's books. Her most recent book of poems is *A Reluctant Survivor*.

And Alexandria Peary, our second video, is the author three books of poetry. The most recent, *Control Bird Alt Delete*, is the winner of the prestigious Iowa Poetry Prize.

She's a former workshopper and in fact I think she used to work here at the IWP.

So this is IWP week. Yes. Enjoy.

So I'm Sridala Swami. I write poetry and children's books and I am from India and you know, I'm not one of those writers who said when they were five that they wanted to write a book about a rabbit called rabbit or any such thing. I never expressed any desire to write in my younger years and it's something that I started doing much later in my life. So, the act of writing itself has always seemed very mysterious to me because it's not something that, you know, I worked on through my 20s or any such thing and it's another one of those cliches that sometimes ideas and stories come to you fully formed and it seemed to me that one day I was suddenly able to write.

So this process of looking back at how I got there was, I don't even have 20/20 vision about it but it's something that I am only learning in retrospect by looking back at how I got to where I am and it seems to me that I started writing at a point which was simultaneous with my return to doing yoga and so I think of my writing as, fundamentally, an act of meditation and I think a lot of writers would also look at it as an act of meditation without necessarily having to go through the yoga process. So you know that I, when I sit down to write I feel like I step into a yoga class where you have to leave the rest of your life at the door. From the minute you roll out your mat you have to leave the rest of your life at the door and you can't hold a pose, you can't be in balance if there are a million thoughts rushing into your head at the same time.

So when I think of writing and I think of the time that I open a blank page on my computer I think of that as a process of leaving the rest of my life behind when I'm sitting in front of the page and that's impossible to do. It's actually less possible to do than leaving your thoughts outside the yoga room because, when you're actually trying to balance and not fall off yes, you have to actually fix your gaze on a particular point and find balance but in front of the page there's no such thing because there are so many distractions available to you at all times and even if you cut yourself off from all the other distractions as the writer V. Krumsaid does. He has one computer that connects him to the outside world and one computer that's completely... it's just like a... it's like a diary. I mean it has no outside distractions. Even if you disassociate yourself and cut yourself off from

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everything else one's own thoughts are so numerous and so half-finished and so continuous and distracting and distracted that the act of writing itself is a process of becoming still and finding a moment of silence out of which you can convert these thoughts into words. You have to... you have to slow down thoughts into words, is the way I look at the process of writing and the, the thing about it, like the thing about yoga is you can't multitask writing.

You can't, I can't, be listening to music and writing. I can't be listening to the radio and writing. I can't be checking e-mail every two minutes and be writing simultaneously. So for me the act of writing is an act of stopping all multi-tasking processes and just sitting down, slowing myself down, bringing myself into a state of stillness and balance.

And, when I was thinking about this I was thinking about this lecture that Paul Celan delivered, which it's generally known as the Meridian Lecture, and he talks about this process called *atemwende*, which is the turn of the breath. And in it he says, perhaps this turn, this *atemwende*, which can sort out the strange from the strange. This is the other thing about the act of writing which is, which is something I think I get from the process of not writing by reading poetry. I write poetry but I'm not as often in conversation with other poets or poems as I am with, say, cinema or children's writing, or other kinds of, or science fiction, or other things. Things that attract me by their strangeness, by their unfamiliarity.

So, you know, the kind of films that I like, say Luis Buñuel or Abbas Kiarostami, or Tarkovsky, the kind of filmmakers whose works are beautiful and strange and inexplicable, and those kind of art forms, those kinds of strangenesses, are the things that inspire my writing, or I feel I am in conversation with. And so when Celan says *atemwende*, and he says this turn that separates, that sorts the strange from the strange, there are two things here that simultaneously have meaning for me. One is the strangeness of things which I think is what poetry, it's either trying to make the language strange in order to make something new or it draws upon the strange and tries to, kind of find a frame for it, kind of put an empty frame around already existing strangenesses and making them visible for the first time as something separate and strange. But at the same time, you know, when I do yoga, I think of this breathturn as a very strange time. You know, there's a process during which you inhale and a process during which you exhale but there's this little space in between the two and you're not sure what that space is and you constantly try to examine or meditate upon what that moment is when an inhalation turns into an exhalation. And somehow that space expands and expands and allows all kinds of things. And for me, poetry, in my writing, lies in that space between the turn from one thing to another.

I'm Alexandria Peary and today I want to talk to you about mindful writing and invention. So, invention is one of the five Greco-Roman canons of the writing process. Twenty five hundred years ago, Greco-Romans, the rhetoricians described a writing process that entailed invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery but these days because we predominantly write and we don't public speak we spend a lot more time on the invention phase of writing. In fact, as writers we spend most of our time in the invention phase and... So, I'll be talking a little bit about invention and also mindfulness today, and the combination because my theory is that everyone can write in the present moment - that each present moment is

a moment covered, laden with words. It's just a matter of access, that there's this inherent ability and that a lot of anxiety about writing, a lot of stress about writing, comes from an inability to be present. So ... so mindfulness is a range of things, but very simplistically put, in terms of writing, it is an awareness of intrapersonal conversation. So instead of interpersonal, between one or more people, intra, so it's the internal conversation. And all of us have that flow of language going through our minds at all times. It's called discursive thinking or monkey mind and it's a matter of accessing it but it's also a matter of noticing it, accessing it, and accepting what we see there. And accepting the fact that it constantly fluctuates. It's always changing.

Sometimes my students, I've taught graduate and undergraduates how to do this technique, they think to themselves, rightfully so, what's mindfulness? - I don't know what mindfulness is. And so I'd like to share with you a very brief activity that I do with my undergrads for mindfulness, college students for mindfulness.

So, I have them watch their breathing. So just a traditional breathing in, breathing out, putting your mind on the breathing but they keep a notebook to their right and they have a pen or a pencil. And so, before that I'd explain the different types of discursive thinking. So, in our minds we're often thinking about the future, the past, or we're evaluating a situation. And the evaluation could be this is pleasant, this is unpleasant, this is neutral, boring. So present, past, or evaluation and I tell them we're going to watch our breathing and you're just putting all your mind on the physical sensation of breathing, you're just noticing the breathing. And the minute that you think about the past, the future, or you have an evaluative thought you turn to your notebook and just really quickly write either eval, or fut. for future, or past and then return back to the breathing. And so this naturally happens many, many times. We naturally have these interrupting thoughts. So they also see me constantly writing in my notebook, right, but the act of writing the notebook and returning back to the breathing is essentially an act of mindfulness because you're aware of the fact that you've been off on your train of thought and then you're aware that you're bringing yourself back to the present moment. So that's a very easy activity to sort of get a taste of what mindfulness is.

So, again, invention is this phase in which we all fundamentally, as writers engage in. It's the initial moments of coming up with an idea, following through with an idea. I would like to say that invention can happen as a recursive process. So it can happen at anytime during the writing experience. In fact, often revision can entail invention as we all know. You can invent up to the very end but I'm primarily talking about the opening moments of writing.

So put together invention and mindfulness equals sort of the ability to write in the present moment and I maintain that I think it's very, very important to prolong invention and that we need strategies for prolonging invention. We need to be present and so a couple of strategies for prolonging invention are free writing, which is non-stop writing. Peter Elbow is a wonderful person, like elbow as in arm, to check out. Many books from the seventies, eighties, and nineties in the United States on this. Free writing, non-stop writing. There are different types of writing for free writing. There's private writing where you don't share it with anybody. There's shared or guided free writing where you have a topic, you do share it with other people. And there's also, my favorite, disposable writing which means the writer herself doesn't actually keep the free writing. That's a wonderful act of

capturing, and kind of a screenshot of the intrapersonal dialogue but the writer throws it away - the writer him or herself is not actually an audience to the text. They have to dispose of it. It's fleeting like the present moment.

So there are different strategies for doing that and the other thing to think about in terms of invention is how fundamentally important it is to notice the vacancy of the present moment. When we write, unless we're taking an exam or some other unusual circumstance, our audiences are not physically with us in the present moment of writing. They're separated by time and space. They're someplace else. Too many people who maybe stumble over writing, whether it's a permanent stumble or a temporary stumble, I myself included at times, it's as though we're treating writing like an act of public speaking where our audience is right in front of us but fundamentally, most times, our audience, if we have one for a text, our future readers are separated from time and space and mindfulness really helps us notice that we have this fundamental privacy to mess up. William Stafford once said, if you want to be prolific lower your standards. I used to, when I was in school at Iowa, I used to have that taped on my little manual typewriter. If you want to be prolific lower your standards. I think it's very important, and I tell my students this constantly, lower your standards, drop the perfection, lower the standards, access, accept what you see there because the more you accept the more abundance you have to work with, right.

So this fundamental privacy of writing - I think a lot of education doesn't allow students that privacy. There's too much evaluation, too much immediate assessment and students carry that around in their heads quite a bit. Audience is not a physical person, it's actually a matter of proximity and when one finds oneself slowing down in an unhelpful way, writing - now, sometimes slowing down is a good thing but sometimes, you know, it's a resistance, procrastination, stress. This means that the imaginary audience in our head is way too close and we need to use devices like private writing, free writing, or disposable writing and push them away and gain our privacy back.

And it's on this scale and sometimes towards revising, editing, and the end we need to draw the audience in our minds very close and pretend they're with us, almost like public speaking so that we can tailor our words to the audience. So it's really a matter of this proximity, noticing the vacancy, noticing the physical act of writing, which we'll talk about in a minute, noticing the present moment, accessing that inner babble to write, accepting what's there (free writing, again, great way to access that inner babble) and then working with the moment.

I do want to say that Carl Rogers, who was a 21st century American psychotherapist and did a lot of political work too, had this wonderful theory that, it's almost common now, almost as common as free writing is in writing instructor circles, that a person, he was talking about people in therapy, a person whose having - whose neurotic, whose having issues with other people, it's because fundamentally their communication with their self is broken. So the therapist's job was to listen with understanding, to be non evaluative, to repeat back all the cliches of therapy to the person who was in therapy and help them heal by healing the intrapersonal they were actually able to hopefully succeed with the interpersonal. And I often feel that with writing, mindfulness and the phase of invention, a classical Greco-Roman phase, is all about healing one's relationship of, not in a touchy-feely way here, but healing one's relationship with the intrapersonal. One's relationship to one's

writing is really one's relationship to oneself. And for me, I had a terrible block for many years after graduating from grad school and I can say writing is my priority and joy in life. It's a fundamental act of grace and acceptance and I sit there in the morning and I write and every day is a good day even if don't produce a single word because it's an act of meditation, of acceptance, and the paradox is with that amount of freedom quantity is produced so a lot of the restrictions go away.

So, I just would like to also say a couple of things. So I want to repeat some of the key principles here of what mindful writing is and the first one is, in order to write you really need to have access to that intrapersonal dialogue, internal dialogue, and discursive thinking, and again you can have that access through mindfulness activities. Traditional ones, if you're interested in that, mindful walking, meditation, mindful eating, all of those will really help or free writing, private writing, disposable writing, that kind of thing. So the other thing that has to happen is in order to write prolifically and mindfully you really have to notice your relation to your audience. This is something we carry around, we create, all of us are fiction writers, even for poets or journalists or whatever you're writing - scholarship - we're all fiction writers in the sense that we anticipate a reaction from a reader who is not physically in our same space. We're creating a character, caricature, that we're carrying around in our back pocket who can be a negative force, a mixed force, a positive force but for some reason we think we know what they're going to say about their writing. So, we really need to notice our relationship to that audience we carry around and if - this fluctuates - and if the relationship is inhibiting one's writing you need to take charge of that vacancy and push them away, push them away with these methods. If, on the other hand, you need to bring them closer, perhaps to somebody that inspires you, you had a great teacher, or you have someone you exchange work with or readers or a family member, somebody who really fuels your writing then bring that imaginary person, although they're real in real life, they're imaginary in your head closer into your thought.

Oh, the other thing too is - two other things - you really need to be, to have allegiance to the present moment and this probably becomes trickiest to anybody who practices mindful writing because, inevitably what happens is one really starts having a really great time writing, you feel a lot of peace, you start producing things and it's human nature to clutch on to that and want to repeat it, you know. So writers are notorious for their habits, I have them too. I'm sure you do too. Rituals that we have to control the moment, to give us a sense of control over this huge possibility. Like Emily Dickinson said, I dwell in possibility, this endless possibility, that's actually invention. So the problem with that is that if you try and control the moment and repeat things it's bound to trip up because every moment's fluctuating. Even our writing ability fluctuates constantly. It's like a flame, watching a fireplace in front of you, it fluctuates - the colors, the heat, the temperature, and just observing it and accepting it and so one day may not be good, two days, three days, may not be what you consider good but inevitably, just like that river of language, you watch that river of language and something's going to float past that you like eventually. Accepting change actually helps quite a bit.

And then the last one which connects to the exercise I'd like to share with you is the ability, the importance of noticing the physical realities of writing. I maintain that it's almost as important for somebody to notice the physical sensations of their hand while writing as to think about audience. A lot of writing instructors tell their students, think about your audience, what does that mean? The

audience? Who is the audience - the teacher, usually, right? But even if it's a real world audience they're not in the room, I mean, so why are we thinking so much about audience, right? So, noticing the present moment, one way to do this, and an indicator that one is doing it is if you're aware of the physical, material conditions of writing, meaning, most importantly your posture, your breathing, your pulse, your physical state, hands, sounds in the room, sounds of other people if there are other people in the room writing, the taste of coffee on your tongue, whatever's going on there, sensations of the desk, the heat from the laptop. To notice the physical moment will separate you from this fake sense of the future, right, and I'd like to share with you an exercise that I give my students and I also want to say, along that line, if you're interested in this kind of embodied writing because it's called embodied rhetoric - that's what what the theoreticians call it - Sandra Perl, P - E - R - L, is a great person to look at. Felt sense, she talks about this and there are quite a few other people who talk about the importance of embodying writing because, again, an embodied writer is a physically present writer. So I'd like to share with you an activity that I have given to students and I'm just going to walk you through it but really when you do it, if you choose to do it, it's going to take several minutes.

So, this is called yoga for hands so - it's related to the corpse pose in yoga classes where you're lying on a mat at the end. It's my favorite part of a yoga class actually, you're watching different parts of your body with your breath and it's very relaxing. I, again, maintain that thinking about your fingers as you type - I'm going to say typing for this - but you know, you could be hand writing, is probably as productive for a stuck writer as thinking about any audience so any anxiety, this is a great activity to hone in on the moment, that vacancy, and also just simply relax a bit.

So, it's an activity to draw attention to the present moment so you want to start with a brief seated meditation. I'm going to walk through this, again this would take time to actually do it. So you want to start with a brief seated meditation, so with a gently tall posture - a very basic meditation, hands on knees. Breathing in, think to yourself here, breathing in, think to yourself now. Just a very basic seated meditation and when your mind wanders away from the breath which it naturally does think about other things, those discursive thoughts just gently, without reproach, guide it back to watching the breath.

So I would say do this for about two or three minutes and then move your hands to the keyboard, again I'll say keyboard but you could be using paper, pencil, whatever, and begin to free write. So free writing, again, means non-stop, non-judgmental writing. You're following it even if you don't complete a sentence you follow what arises. It's like you're trying to get a screen shot or capture, like a painting, of that flow of language that goes through your head without judgment, without spelling, you find yourself bored with a thought, you follow it wherever you're going. So you free write. Write for anybody, this is strictly private. This is just for yourself. Write whatever's on your mind. If you'd like to have a good quote, I can pass you one right now if you want a focused free write. Suzuki, a zen scholar, once said, in the beginner's mind there are many options, in the expert's, few. So in the beginner's mind there are many options, in the expert's, few. You could free write to that.

So while you free write continue to also do the dual activity of watching your breathing. Breathing in, here, breathing out, now. Keep free writing. I would say two, three minutes - to that quote, to

something else, but then turn your attention to the sensation of your fingers actually touching the keys of the laptop and then change the topic of your free write from whatever you were writing about previously to describing that sensation. Turn all of your attention to the sensation of the fingers, then of the bones. All of your mind is on what it feels like to type, the fingers and the bones. That's what you're free writing about. Also you can start noticing the sounds in the room. So the sounds of typing, the machinery, other people writing, other sound effects in the room, people making noises, drinking coffee, whatever's going on but - fingers, bones.

If it weren't fingers or bones in your hands what would you compare it to, so through out this activity asking yourself to generate a simile or a metaphor. If this weren't my hand what would it be like, this sensation, okay. Keep writing, keep free writing and then draw your attention to the palm of your hand. Same thing, wrist, forearm, upper arm, keep free writing. Just about five minutes, describing, describing, really watching and then watching your breath. You torso, and your legs, and your shoulders, and your neck, and then to your face because as you write actually, and breathing, your face is being effected too. Without judgment describe what you notice. How is writing, the act of writing, whether it's the content or the physical act of writing, impact that part of your body. What muscular sensations, changes in temperature, tensions, and so forth, are happening.

Continue to do this for about five minutes - watching the breathing - you're not trying to produce anything beautiful here, although something could arise. Just watching, developing that mindfulness and then whenever you're ready turn your free writing topic away from the physical point, probably be your face at that point, right, to your project for the day. What is it that you want to write, which poem/story/play/article/book/novel, whatever it is you're working on and slide into that particular activity - what's on my mind about whatever I'm writing and just follow it. And see if you can't maintain that similar level of awareness and also gracefulness and acceptance and calm and see if that doesn't get you out of any tension you may feel. You may find more ideas because you're in that state, you're able to interact with yourself better but, as we all know, as writers we're very - we covet the moment - where we're so inspired that we're mindless so we just write like crazy and that's wonderful because what I'm talking about is not Buddhist or mindful in the full sense because there's a mission here. We're trying to actually get some writing or product accomplished. That's great, being inspired is obviously what we all love and want to pursue. However, once you find that happening if you come to an end to it, go back to some sort of activity like this that instills mindfulness because again, that bout of writing, like anything is temporary and to cling to it and to expect it to repeat itself probably won't work.

So when the bout of writing ends, the inspiration ends, return to noticing the moment and this return back and forth, I think, is this constant prolonging of invention and the privacy of writing and this graciousness of writing can do wonderful things for people's writing ability. Thank you.

So thinking about what we have with breathturn and the space that yoga can open for breath and for thinking about the space between things and thinking also here about Alexandria Peary's ideas for letting go of the audience and instead, creating for yourself a private space to write from, this week we'd like you to try her yoga for hands activity and post your results but while you're doing it really don't think about the forums about the publicness of it. Create your own writing practice in that

space. Let all of the audience come later and instead focus on your body, your sensations and the joy that is private writing. Enjoy.