

The Lonely Writer

By Geoffrey Hineman

Art

By Shawn Johnson



INTRODUCTION

Every writer faces *the question* sooner later: Why do you write? It's a legitimate question. After all, we dedicate so much of our time, energy, and yes, our money, to this task.

But why?

When I'm really into it—I mean when I'm hunched over the laptop on a three-hour stretch—I'm usually writing to learn more about myself, the nature of love and compassion, the universe, and the relationships between all of these things. Another element of my life that addresses these same relationships is Buddhism. And it is the combination of these practices that gave rise to this eBook.

Sometimes what keeps us from truly tapping into our own unique sense of creativity, and letting it flourish in our writing, is the solitary nature of writing; you have to do it for yourself. No one will do it for you. That can be a daunting task - one not dissimilar to meditation.

We humans, by nature, are a social lot. Being alone, and projecting the discomforts of that loneliness can get in the way of productive writing. For instance, how many times have you found yourself looking forward to some uninterrupted alone time as the perfect opportunity to get some writing done. Then, when the time came, you squandered it? And how many times was it spent doing things that weren't as important or fulfilling to you as your writing is?

CANTO 1 :: LESS DESIRE

In this section, we will be talking about desire. In particular, we will take a closer look at the the way desire impacts writers in terms of *resolution*.

Desire is not something that is unique to writing or writers. In general, our main goal for taking action, as human beings, is to achieve a desired resolution. In many cases, the desired resolution is what prompts an action in the first place.

Resolution = having the bills paid. Action = going to work.

You get the idea.

Most of the time, it's a straight line between desire and resolution – a rote list of actions and reactions that become so familiar, we rarely even perceive them anymore. The desire for resolution is considerably magnified, however, when we find ourselves in unfamiliar or uncomfortable situations. We may attempt to end an argument by simply leaving or staying and yelling louder than the other person. Not because either of these options may be the best option, but simply because each of these options might be the action that brings about the resolution—the end of the argument—the fastest.

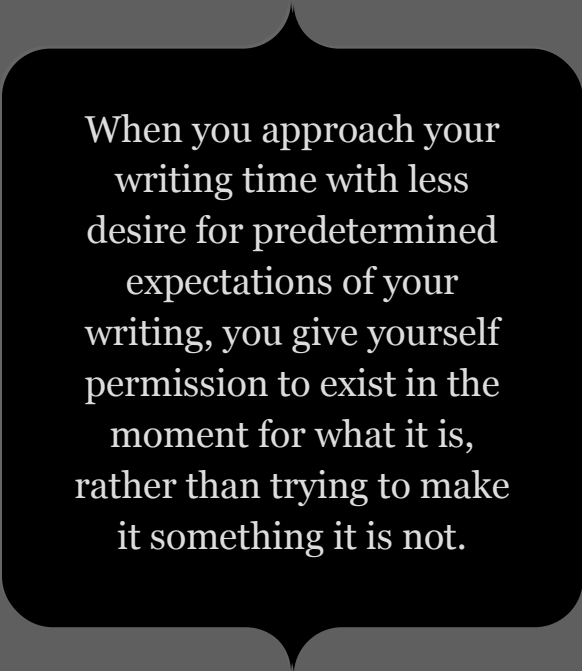


As it applies more directly to matters at hand, many writers (myself included) can get anxious when sitting at the keyboard when the words aren't coming out. Sometimes that sense of anxiety can also be felt when the words *are* coming out, but they're the *wrong* words. In both cases, frustration can soon follow anxiety, because the desired resolution is not being reached.

So what do we do when the words won't come out? All kinds of things, really. We check in on our StumbleUpon friends. We start scanning our favorite blogs. We catch up with our MySpace friends. We thumb through a magazine.

And none of this gets any writing done. In actuality, this kind of ambling doesn't get much of anything done. And in the end, the desire for resolution has led to no resolution at all. To make it all worse, the willingness to sit at the keyboard and write again can also be diminished.

It's an old adage that the successful writers are the ones who put their butts in seats, *and keep them there*. This approach also means writing with less desire for a particular resolution—or at least not the resolution you would normally associate with your writing. Instead of a creative resolution, the shift is to a time-related focus. If you get 4,000 words, that's great. If you



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get none, that's okay, too. When you approach your writing time with less desire for predetermined expectations of your writing, you give yourself permission to exist in the moment for what it is, rather than trying to make it something it is not.

When you can simply approach writing without the desire for a set resolution, you move closer toward tapping creativity on a regular basis. Desire for resolution creates a barrier. When you write with less desire, you are able to move around that barrier. In the end, you are likely to end up achieving better results. And you are more likely to achieve those results more frequently.

This doesn't happen overnight, mind you, as the desire for resolution has been a lifetime in the building. When you are first aware of your ability to approach your writing with less desire, however, you are well on your way to a more productive and more fulfilling writing life.

Canto 2 :: Contentment

There's an old adage that rings like this: When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose. This is, I would argue, the real concept of contentment in a nutshell. People tend to perceive contentment as an overwhelming satisfaction with life. I tend to believe that, if you've got nothing to lose, you are actually in a pretty good spot. When you are content—when you have nothing to lose—you are freer to write without reservation and take the chances that allow you to grow as a writer.



How do we fall into the trap of non-contentment? It happens when we sit down to write and bring our ego along. Your ego is also known as that little editor on your shoulder, the one telling you when something is not right, or when it needs to be rewritten, or when it is just not as good as you are capable of doing. We've all been there. And as much as I am aware of it in my own writing, my ego still creeps up for regular visits.

To achieve contentment in your own writing, you need to allow yourself to make mistakes. When you do this, you are also giving yourself permission to venture into new territory. Will you turn out some stuff that is not great? Absolutely. You'll probably turn out some material that is *nowhere near* as good as you are capable of writing. You will also, however, begin writing *more*, which, in itself, is an improvement over not writing anything for fear

that you have something to lose by not creating work you feel meets your own ego-imposed standards. Sometimes, if you are not careful, you may just write something amazing that you wouldn't have written before. I think that's worth the trade-off, don't you?

Next time you write, be content just to write. Check your ego at the door. Let the words come out. And, after they are on the page, if they need work when you are done, then fix them up later. That's what *drafts* are for.

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Canto 3 :: Avoiding Unnecessary Activity

The Japanese poet, Ryokan wrote, "If you want to find the meaning, stop chasing after so many things."

Think about that for a minute, and ask yourself: How many things am I chasing? And I'm not even talk about the abstracts of inner peace or more good hair days. I'm talking about the practical things: housecleaning, shuttling the kids around, home or car maintenance, etc. Sometimes we are just juggling too many things, too often.

Do you keep "to do" lists? I bet you do.

We all do.

And when you are sitting down for writing time, are you thinking about your "to do" list? I bet you do sometimes, especially when the words aren't coming out as quickly as you would like. So what do we do when this happens?



We *multitask*, baby!

We think, "Well, I can at least throw in a load of laundry." Then we do it and go sit back down.

Then we think, "I could probably fill the sink and let the dishes soak while I write." Then we do *that*, before we go sit back down to write.

Then we think, "I should probably get the coffee maker set for tomorrow morning before I forget about it." Then we do *that, too* before we go sit back down.

Then we think, "If I'm saving time with the coffee maker, I should probably lay out my clothes for tomorrow, too." Then we do it and go sit back down.

How much writing gets done like this?

Exactly.

How much of all that other running around and *multitasking* could have waited?

Usually, all of it can.

What we really need to do is stop, take a breath, and determine which activities are unnecessary, then stop doing those things.

This is, in general, what our lives have become. We rush from one activity to another. All of the new gadgets we get to help make life easier act as a catalyst to keep us rushing to the next thing. And this is supposed to be a good thing?

We don't need gadgets that help us do more. For writers, it starts with prioritizing and avoiding unnecessary activity while we are attempting to

write. What we really need to do is stop, take a breath, and determine which activities are unnecessary, then stop doing those things.

If it isn't possible to weed these activities out of your writing time, then you need to look at parts of your life, compare them to your writing time, and make some real decisions.

And you know the decisions I'm talking about.

The ability to avoid unnecessary activity becomes especially important when the writing is slow to come. In these instances, it is worth remembering that inactive time at the keyboard is not wasted time or time that could be better spent doing something else ... perhaps something unnecessary.

The reason that learning how to avoid unnecessary activity is so important is that because it is often the times when everything stops, and we are not pre-occupied with doing unnecessary things, that the best ideas start coming to the surface. When that happens, you are at the start of tapping creativity.

Canto 4 :: Complete Discipline

Writers sometime struggle in tapping creativity because the act of writing, unlike many of the things we do in life, is a solitary practice. Nobody does your writing for you; you alone are responsible. And to be completely honest, sometimes that's a tall order—one that can get in the way of your writing. This is, essentially, what this whole eBook is about.

When we speak of complete discipline, however, be sure not to confuse the term “discipline” with punishment, parenting, or even pain. The type of discipline we are talking about here involves the ability to focus on a task and follow through on it. In any solitary event, sometimes the mind can wander. Sometimes the body starts to wander as well. For instance, how many times have you been writing something and, before you knew it, you were watching the television, surfing the internet, or IMing with someone?



These things happen. Writing is a lonely practice, you don't have someone there to make you in maintain focus. That is why complete discipline assumes such an important role in writing and your ability to tap your creativity. When you lose focus, you end up like Theo Huxtable.


In one infamous episode of *The Cosby Show*, Theo is using the excuse of being “just a regular person” as an enabler to not be as accomplished as his parents. His father, however, knows that Theo's excuse is not good enough

and makes it clear to Theo that doing your best is not just about grades, it's about defining yourself as a person in whatever you do. Making excuses for why it is okay to lack focus and not try harder is unacceptable. Doing your best and showing complete discipline in what you do is what will lead to success, by whatever terms you use to define success.

So how do you exercise complete discipline?

Simple.

Whenever you notice your mind start to wander, bring your focus back to the writing. Whenever you find yourself sitting at the keys and looking over your monitor at the television, bring your focus back to the writing. Whenever you find yourself getting up to start a load of laundry or setting up the coffee maker, bring your focus back to the writing. It doesn't have to be painful, and you don't have to get down on yourself. It can take practice. Complete discipline is the ability to stay on task and always keep coming back when you start to wander.



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This will get more writing done. And, as you know, writing is like a muscle: the more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes. It also makes tapping creativity easier.

Canto 5 :: Not Wandering in the World of Desire

Throughout other cantos in this eBook, I've discussed fighting distractions that take us away from the writing process. Sometimes these distractions come from being over-critical of our own work. Sometimes these distractions result from letting our attention wander to other places (i.e., television, web surfing). Sometimes the distractions involve letting our bodies wander off to do other tasks while we are supposed to be writing (i.e., laundry, soaking the dishes). These types of distractions are a sort of horizontal wandering when we are looking for something vertical. We want to go deeper in our ideas, not spread our concentration over multiple tasks. That brings us to Canto 5 :: Not Wandering in the World of Desire.

Tapping creativity means changing your perspective. This kind of change can take time, however, as our perspectives are usually cultivated by years of experience. Maintaining focus and writing about a subject, problem, or theme until you've exhausted it will usually allow you to dig deeper into it. Still, there are shortcuts to this process that can come from wandering not in the physical world, but in the world of desire.

Art has a long history of substance abusers. Some were brilliant, not in spite of their addictions, but because of them. We'd be naive to believe otherwise. And it's easy to see how



this can happen. Alcohol relaxes that critical editor on your shoulder and lets you write more freely. Drugs will alter your perceptions and perspectives.

For how long, though?

When we are stuck in the creative process, it is easy to wander in the world of desire to find help. That, however, is a dangerous candle to burn. This type of wandering can cause a crippling creative dependency. Just as drugs and alcohol may help to get more (and different) writing out, so too can they make you think that, if you stop, you will lose this creative push. This rationale leaves you in a worse position than you were in initially.

It is more beneficial to sit at the keys and not write a single word for months than it is to wander in the world of desire with the sole goal of finding help for your creative struggles.

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Drugs and alcohol are only the most obvious examples. When we turn away from ourselves and rely on something that isn't directly related to creativity *in the name of promoting creativity*, we move further away from our goals. This behavior makes it more difficult to take our writing to another level the natural way—with focus, dedication, and practice.

Canto 6 :: Not Seeking Security from Discursive Thoughts

This final canto of *The Lonely Writer* is a short one. If you have put the previous five points into place, this sixth one should evolve naturally. I call it: Not Seeking Security from Discursive Thoughts.

The previous steps were designed to help you learn how to deal with physical, mental, and chemical habits that can get in the way of writing and be preventive in tapping creativity. When we train ourselves to be comfortable in the solitary act of writing, we open a wider channel into our creative core.

Have you ever been into a story and felt like it was writing itself? Like you were simply writing down a story that was unfolding on its own? That is the ultimate state of being for a creative writer. You are in the zone. Your mind and body are not wandering to other tasks, and you need not be talking to yourself to correct those actions. In these times, certain purity comes forth, a certain honesty, if you will. This level of pure creation can be emotional. It can cause tears or excitement. Do not question it. Go with it. This is the discomfort that can sometimes accompany inspired writing. It is also a sign that you are on the path of material that is sure to move readers as well. When you are one with your creative self and letting the words flow forth like water from a fountain, you are like a messenger who is simply dictating the story that needs to be told.



Many published writers will vow that they treat writing just like an office job. They set hours. They have special places set aside for the sole task of writing. They get into a routine. This routine helps promote all of the hazards we have discussed in this series, so they don't have to think about anything else. They can sit down, and open up the creativity. They keep working, letting bad writing come out with the good. And when they are done, they do the other things in their lives that need to be done.

When they write, though, they are enjoying a special part of life that is unique to them, just your experiences will be unique to you. It's not easy to get to that point, but the most important and fulfilling things in are worth working for. You, and you alone, can do it, when you openly embrace the role of *The Lonely Writer*.

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About The Author

Geoffrey Hineman is author of the eBook, *Tapping Creativity*. He also maintains a blog by the same name, from where the seeds of *The Lonely Writer* were first sewn. He possesses an M.A. in Writing from Northern Michigan University, where he also taught writing. If you would like to know more, you can contact him at tappingcreativity@gmail.com.

About the Artist

Shawn Johnson is an American artist working and exhibiting in the United States and Europe. His work can be found online at [Johnson Visual Arts](#).

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