

# **SUSTAINING YOURSELF AS A WRITER**

by  
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The final chapter of  
*Breathing the Page: Reading the Act of Writing*

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*Sometimes I am overwhelmed, discouraged: what will help me persist, grow as a writer?*

**I.**

How do you sustain yourself as a writer? Perhaps, surprisingly, this becomes a pivotal question the longer you write and publish. In a word: tenacity. Sheer tenacity. Sheer, meaning from the state of mere to almost nothingness, so that we do not get in the way of each narrative's specific requirements. Tenacity, referring to the state of irreducible devotion to the act of writing itself:

“Between the page & the writer is a magnetism more compelling than any other relationship.” (from “Page”)

Sheer. Thin. To learn to navigate lack. Lack of writing time, which usually is synonymous with lack of money to enable writing time. Lack of understanding what this narrative needs. Lack of faith in ourself as a writer. Lack of writing companions. Lack of support from our intimates. Lack of interest from publishers. Lack of reviews when published. Lack of professional support in the form of writing grants and invitations to professional events. Lack of finding your book on bookstore and library shelves. Lack of almost any financial gain comparable to the time invested in writing, polishing, finding a publisher and promoting your book.

To learn to sheer off, oscillate, sidestep lack — inventively, objectively, flagrantly — is to make lack a generative, fortifying source.

You might be thinking that this sounds rather bleak. Or, you may be thinking, “What about talent? It's inspiration and our innate talent that keeps us going.” Yes, but I suggest that this is merely the match that strikes the narrative's flame. Tenacity, however, is what feeds the fire until the narrative is fully realized. Published. Read.

## II.

The key to sustaining ourselves as writers is this: we must take care of our needs as writers ourselves. Although this may seem obvious, it isn't. The hope creeps in periodically that others will support us in meeting our deadlines, will understand and

always respect our writing time, will contribute to our financial circumstances in various ways to enable our writing. Sometimes there are residencies, grants, retreats and the rare best-selling book, but most of the time no one will enable the conditions for us to write and publish. It is up to us. Each time we renew this resolve, our other skills for sustaining ourselves take firmer hold. If these self-sustaining abilities are insufficient, publishing is a moot point. When we have honed these abilities and finished a publishable manuscript, an entirely different set of skills must kick in to sustain us through the often arduous process of finding an appropriate publisher, negotiating a contract, perhaps consulting an intellectual properties lawyer about libel or defamation, working with the press's editor on final revisions, proofreading the galleys, promoting the book and finally fielding the unpredictable critical reactions.

### III.

A writer can often feel that everything conspires against the act of writing. As a profession, for the majority of us it is an illogical pursuit, offering little financial reward and uncertain reception once we have published a manuscript. Yet perhaps more than they do for any other creative occupation, many people dream of becoming a writer, believe they have a book in them. As an art form, writing is by far the closest to our ordinary, daily lives — revolving around print, storytelling, computers, longhand jottings, paper, tables and chairs. Because writing is so ordinary and does not require extra equipment, special materials, or (some think) space, it is assumed that we can simply add writing on to the rest of our lives. Writing is assumed to be an activity that bears frequent interruption, for in daily life it usually is a porous activity. As writers, however, we are endlessly having to set (and reset) parameters for protecting our concentrated writing time with our intimates and others around us, as well as with ourselves, and even with our writer-friends. When writing or preparing to write, there is no interruption that “will only take a few moments,” for on the heels of that interruption we lose the focus and momentum of what we were in the midst of and it can take hours, even days, to refind it.

The fact that few writers are able to afford a writing room — that we most often write in multi-purpose spaces — compounds the likelihood of disruption of focus. Recognizing your least contested islands of concentrated writing time is crucial. Some writers do their thinking about their writing projects, pursue research, take notes and even do inscription during their routine transit time. Some rise an hour or two before their intimates and write, or conversely, write after everyone is asleep. Some go once or twice a year to writing retreats and write flat out, accomplishing a remarkable amount within a short span of time. Others write in quiet cafés or libraries. Some, like myself, set aside a couple of mornings or a day a week — a time that has the least number of conflicting demands — to write. An advantage of our art form is its portability; it allows for a variety of inscription sites.

Identifying the time of the day, evening, week, even season during which our creative and concentration abilities are typically at their optimum is also crucial. For me, the best time is mornings into mid-afternoon. But once again, our firm resolve to routinely tell everyone we are unavailable (and not to be interrupted) must also be applied to ourselves. Bifurcating activities such as answering phone calls, checking voice mail, email, text messages, postal mail and calendars, or engaging in any seemingly simple problem-solving or reviewing our to-do lists inevitably derail us and must be resisted.

As writers, we must learn to be profoundly self-responsible. There is no one else who will take care of our practical needs as a writer or do our time management for us. Writing is often said to be the most solitary of the art forms: correspondingly, nearly everything in our writing life depends on one thing: *ourselves*.

#### **IV.**

I do not recall ever having heard a writer say that she or he has too much time to write. There is never enough time to write. This is our chronic complaint. To be fair, it is also a fact, and not infrequently, a tormenting one. Occasionally, I hear emerging writers bemoan not being able to write during a period of time that they had set aside to write full

time. Their inability to write, however, is more about their self-doubts and nascent discipline than it is about time; more about the illusion that if we had all the time we wanted, our writing would flourish. But, it isn't time that does the writing.

I have come to believe that we writers have a particular, perhaps even peculiar, relationship to time. And that our relationship to time may be the basis of our bond with each other as much as is our fascination with narrative itself. When I have given myself over in deep surrender to the act of writing, I am outside of time — time becomes an amorphous, energetic substance — and it is then that I glimpse eternity. The grip and pressures of linear time are released: minutes can seem to be hours; hours seem minutes, and the malleability, even benevolence, of time is utterly elating. Other writers may experience this somewhat differently, but it is another almost unspoken reason why we are preoccupied with time. It is in this timeless, transformative state that we are able to access other historical and imaginative times from which our narratives emit, or are influenced by, for we are then unencumbered by the constraints and prevailing logic of the “real” time we purportedly live in.

As writers, we become adept at occupying different times simultaneously, conflating disparate times that are related associatively. Additionally, we move in and out of the time frames and sensibilities of our narrative each time we work on it; each time we set it aside until returning to work on it again. Occasionally, we also put a portion or our entire manuscript in a drawer for a while to gain perspective on it. With the passage of linear time, we return to it with a more objective eye. All these relationships to time can puzzle and frustrate people who are not writers. Recently, an emerging writer told me about a conversation with her teenage daughter who inquired, “So, how many more hours before you finish your manuscript?” This perfectly logical question is illogical when it comes to writing. Even we ourselves can be baffled by our encounters with writing and narrative time. It is not unusual for us to think that we have finished a manuscript several times before we actually have.

Given that writers typically have jobs and familial and intimate commitments (with their auxiliary responsibilities), as well as having practical and professional tasks to attend to in our writing lives, we actually occupy the timeless state of inscription during a minority of our waking hours. Thus, it is imperative that we find an array of strategies to

keep the door ajar on the narratives we are writing. Our methodology is not as important as is our devotion, our resolve. During these not-writing phases, I jot down notes, do additional research, pay attention to my dreams and reoccurring images, words and surprising synchronicities. I eavesdrop, read, watch, attend whatever feeds my relationship to the narrative and consider structural alternatives while standing in a line-up.

When we are approaching the threshold back into our narrative, various kinds of meditative movements and simple repetitive activities — like sweeping or taking a walk — assist us to cross over the threshold with more ease. Not infrequently, this approaching the threshold time can appear to be procrastination. Undoubtedly, sometimes it is! But more often, I believe it is not. Yes, it may appear to be avoidance or aimlessness, but always assess if this is, in fact, the case, for crucial preparatory time may be undermined by your harsh, misguided self-criticism. It is as important for us to protect this kind of time as it is to protect our writing time. I have come to recognize that preparatory activities in my brain and sensations in my body are quite specific — almost like a gravitational shift occurring. I have learned to trust that I can't approach the threshold head-on, but only at a slant. Like a dog conflates its pre-domesticated genetic memory of beating down the grass in the wild with its domesticated ritual of circling before it lies down, I circle my narrative numerous times.

## V.

The seductive, romantic image of the writer in his garret, his time his own, is just that. Historically, there were some authors who were masters of their days, but not as many as we might think. Those who were, were independently wealthy or supported by a relative or spouse. Yet, support can be double-edged: Colette's husband locked her in her writing room to ensure that she wrote, but also to ensure their livelihood! There have been periods in history when it was more possible to make a living as an author than it is today. Few contemporary authors can write full time. As writers, we essentially have two

choices. One is to hold a job or have a profession that has built-in spaces for writing, such as working as a food server with flexible shift work — if you are a morning writer, you write then and work evenings — or working as a teacher, with several extended paid “holidays” during which you can write. The advantage of this option is that you can be certain and confident of when you will have your writing times, and if you learn to pace yourself — do all the preparatory research and thinking about structural concerns between these pre-determined writing times — you can be ready to dive in.

The second option is to develop a set of writing-related skills and become a freelancer. These related skills include editing, working in a bookstore, a publishing house or a library, being a translator, doing independent journalism or technical writing, teaching creative writing or literature, being a manuscript consultant, building websites, etc. The advantage of this option is that when you are not able to do your own writing, you are still being stimulated, you continue to thrive within the sensibilities of the writing and literary communities.

As writers, we commit ourselves to a life of modest, even uncertain, means. Many of us live close to the poverty line. This hit me hard a few decades ago when I had the opportunity to house-sit for a respected senior poet. Her place was a rental; she couldn't afford to own. It was a renovated chicken coop. Her sparse belongings resembled those of a grad student.

Few of us are affluent authors living off royalties from best-sellers. If an author's books are not routinely on academic course lists nor of interest to the commercial market's trends, royalties provide a partial income at best. In a recent conversation with a Toronto creative non-fiction friend, we discovered that we had both come to the realization that we have been essentially giving our work away. When I mentioned this in a keynote talk, a fellow writer piped up from the audience, “It's volunteer work!” Yes, volunteer work that demands the highest professionalism we can muster.

The challenges of earning a living that sustains us are not so dissimilar to the challenges of writing. Sometimes it is possible to pursue them both as creative acts. I have had periods ranging from full-time writing to absolutely no writing time. Although we can understandably long for a period of full-time writing, we can't afford to pine too much for this. Over the past decade, due to life circumstances, I have had to learn how to

write in punctuated periods of writing time. This is when I discovered how to keep the door ajar, recognized how to foster my circling, preparatory time and developed the ability to write with deep focus for much shorter periods of time. In some respects, these skills have made me a better writer. Wishing it different can be counterproductive, can even lead to writer's block. It is essential for us to be inventive, tenacious, wily.

## VI.

Writers need the companionship of other writers, but how do you find other writers? This is not a rhetorical question. Contrasted to other artists, writers are more difficult to identify. Other art forms often involve collaborative activities at various stages, whereas a writer remains solitary and self-reliant (with the exception of working on scripts) throughout nearly every aspect of our writing life. The manner in which specific body types, gestures, choice of clothing and accompanying tools of the trade signal actors, dancers, visual artists, musicians and composers in public do not apply to writers. Nine people intently writing on computers or by longhand in a café may be writers. But, just as likely, none of them is.

I have a vivid recollection of when I first realized just how unidentifiable we are. I was teaching my first ten-day residential writing school. As people arrived — sporadically, lugging suitcases and writing gear — I occasionally passed them in the dark, narrow hallways and our voices would reach out to one another with a tentative “Hello.” That evening there was a faculty and student orientation. As I walked into the room, I wondered if another interest group was also at the retreat centre, for this appeared to be the wrong group of people. No one remotely looked like a writer. Then, I spotted another faculty member I knew, waved hello, and took a seat. I continued to feign nonchalant glances around, asking myself, “Are these writers?” They looked like people I would pass by in a supermarket.

After a few days of engaging with the thinking and work of my students, I easily saw the writer in each of them. Ever since, I have been intrigued by just how incognito

we are. Although this makes it easier for us to observe, eavesdrop, gather material, do research without being questioned, at the same time it makes it harder for us to recognize one another and meet. Unlike other artists, we do not routinely co-occupy rehearsal space or shared studio, performance or exhibition sites. The spaces in which we meet are periodic and brief (such as a reading or a conference), or closed membership sites, such as an MFA creative writing degree.

The informal, writer-instigated gatherings to talk writing that existed in the past — Thursday nights at a certain pub, frequent dinner parties when a visiting author came to town, etc. — have almost vanished. Local literary communities have become more diverse, fragmented. Few writers seem to have the time to organize such gatherings. More and more, these exchanges and relationships are virtual ones online.

This is likely one of the reasons that educational opportunities for emerging writers have expanded: courses, workshops, retreats, creative writing programs (physical or online) have become the only reliable venues for emerging writers to meet their peers and access the training and support they need from established writers. Yes, there are some valid concerns about possible institutionalization of emerging writers, such as graduates being strong on craft but two-dimensional in terms of content; a homogeneity of style; access to the literary community being determined by who can afford tuition; and grants, awards and publications becoming more institutional-affiliate influenced — but what are the viable alternatives? And, if we are honest with ourselves, a number of these dynamics were happening prior to the flourishing of education-based writers' training. Contrasted to when I grew up as a young writer, emerging writers (and many published authors) today are more confused about questions of structure and focus. I suspect this reflects the profound destabilization of narrative we are collectively experiencing in every aspect of our lives. In contrast to a couple of decades ago, emerging writers today need more guidance and support. And I do see remarkable growth in many emerging writers who have had these kinds of support and training.

## VII.

There are, of course, additional ways to find companionship as writers. Satisfying companionship can be found in such activities as attending literary events, giving and organizing readings, writing reviews, volunteering at an event or for a journal, joining writers' organizations, sitting on literary juries, participating in peer-led writing workshops, submitting to journals and competitions, establishing an online presence (if this appeals), and/or apprenticing with an established author who is teaching creative writing.

Some of our most cherished companions may be dead ones: authors whose books, thinking and passions profoundly speak to and inspire us. Urge us on. Embody a sense of home ground we can access at will. Some of our companions will be contemporary writers with whom we share obvious connections of background, lived experience, writing styles, preoccupations and pursuit of a set of particular ideas. We may meet some of these authors through their publications, and they may become personal friends. However, writers who are dissimilar to us, whose writing provokes, disturbs and invigorates us, are equally important companions. Here, the vast world of print offers unlimited access through blogs, books in translation and international writers reading at festivals.

Companionship can also happen in surprising ways. Nearly three decades ago, I attended a reading given by a francophone author. Although my knowledge of French was almost nil, I found this author's reading to be riveting. How can this be? She so deeply embodied the shifting emotional states, the distinct sculptural sounding of the narrator's voice and the resonant structure of her narrative that her reading and writing were one. This created a remarkable focus within her, and within her audience. The power of the writing was unleashed. I had been groping towards this in my own readings, but had never before encountered it so completely. Three decades later, that reading and author still companion me.

Not infrequently, people who have attended one of my readings tell me that I am courageous. This comment never ceases to surprise me, take me aback. I believe we

literary writers write out of necessity; courage strikes me as a secondary impulse. I believe our narratives hunt us down; haunt us until we write them; even ambush us when we try to write something else in an attempt to escape them. It is only much later, when giving a reading or publishing our work, that courage enters in, particularly if our narrative is one that readers are likely to have an initial resistance to. Many of my narratives fall into this category. Fortunately, these are also the narratives — once we can access an audience — that move and invigorate readers the most. It is paramount to remember that it is the writing itself that is giving the reading (not our persona). As we read word by word, we become the narrative's single-focussed, primary listener. The encounter is between the narrative and its listeners. During this encounter, I can also listen through my "third ear," particularly when reading works-in-progress. This is a crucial part of my writing process. As I read, I can easily hear where I have erred from the veracity, tone and flow of the narrative and where I have been faithful to it. It is almost magical. For me, this is an axis of companionship where all forces meet: it is one of the companionships I cherish the most.

The writing community is a small community not that different from any small community. Frankly, it took me some years to understand this because we are a community that idealizes itself. A proudly held tenet within our community is that we are judged on the excellence of our work alone. I took this to be absolute truth when I was an emerging writer. I was deeply impressed by this high-mindedness. I now know this admirable tenet is only erratically realized. Literary history confirms this. A significant number of great books around the world were endlessly rejected by publishers — came perilously close to never seeing the light of day — before a publisher finally offered the author a contract. Indeed, there are other decisive criteria (usually unspoken in public) that determine which writers are frequently, even automatically, included. By "inclusion," I am thinking of everything from getting grants, to reviews, to festival invitations, to awards, to being anthologized. It is important to acknowledge this reality: our writing can indeed achieve excellence and still not be supported.

Like any small community, we are reluctant to forgive perceived wrongs and aberrant ways. I caution emerging writers to think through their actions and comments very carefully; to be prepared to live with them, for they may have repercussions for a

long time. Sometimes self-interests collide and everyone suffers in one way or another — I can attest to this. Vexing or offending someone from time to time is unavoidable; however, whatever we can do to stay on good terms is important, for few of us have an excess of support!

Ultimately, our most crucial and reliable companion — the one that sustains and incites us — is the act of writing itself.

## VIII.

Over and over we seek out intimate companionship with each narrative we write. We fall in love, or sometimes in hate, which ends up being the same thing. We are given our narrative material; it entrusts itself into our hands. Initially, it may seem that we are drawn to it, that we choose it. Or sometimes, it may seem that the narrative material is seeking us out. Occasionally there is mutual, simultaneous attraction. But more often, in the early stages, we must elbow our way through our resistances and avoidances until we accept our narrative. Then a pact is made, and we and our narrative are in it together. Once we commit to the narrative material that hunts us down, unsettles us, even terrifies us, it will prove to be the narrative that pushes us the hardest to learn more about craft; more about the human condition; more about the possibilities of perception.

When our narrative becomes our companion, the forcefulness of the insistent narrative sustains us through debilitating doubt. Then, when we have finally finished the narrative, that same force will fuel us to find a publisher so that our readers, too, can encounter this narrative's particular force. What the writer and the publisher then must share is the fact that they are both drawn to the narrative; eagerly give their allegiance to it. True, the publisher must be more concerned with producing and selling the book, but a book stands a better chance of selling well if the publisher takes pleasure in it.

How then to determine who the ideal publisher is? This, in itself, is a kind of narrative pursuit: What will the story of our search for a publisher be? Who will be the "characters"? What will the back story be? Given that nearly all (probably all) publishing

houses and literary journals are sorely understaffed, more responsibilities are falling on writers. Thus, when we submit a manuscript, it must be as close as possible to a professionally edited “clean” manuscript. Nearly print-ready. This helps a publisher make an accurate assessment of how much editorial work the press will need to offer — which may well sway a decision to offer a contract or not.

As writers we must also do market research and be able to speak knowledgeably about what other books are similar to, yet different from ours, how positively they were reviewed and how well they sold. We must be able to write a professional, curiosity-provoking, succinct manuscript précis and cover letter. Only then are we in a position to research specific publishers: study their backlist; talk to other authors who have published with them; study their website for submission guidelines and procedures, and, if it seems a good match, send off a professionally formatted manuscript. Then, wait. And wait. And wait. And when you receive the most frequent reply, “Sorry, this doesn’t fit our list,” begin again. Sometimes this takes months; more often it takes years. Finding a publisher can take longer than it took you to write the book! Tenacity? Tenacity in spades. Here it is worth mentioning other or parallel alternatives to consider: self-publish a chapbook; publish excerpts from your manuscript in journals, magazines, zines or on your blog; investigate self-publishing (now a more respected option) either in book form or online as an e-book.

High-profile authors are often asked to submit their manuscripts to mainstream publishers. For some other authors, once you have published with a press, the publishing contract will have optioned your next book, or the publisher may simply be interested in publishing your subsequent book(s). But most authors must go through the arduous submitting process. Occasionally, a manuscript is snapped up because it fits a popular trend, addresses a socio-political hot topic, has the “I discovered this astonishing first-time author” marketing potential, is on a solid selling topic (like hockey, in Canada), or is recommended by an author who knows you and publishes with the publishing house you are approaching. These scenarios, however enticing, are not as frequent as we might imagine.

Considering how much work and effort is required on our part, and that publishers are overwhelmed with substandard, unsuitable submissions, the more skill we bring to finding the right publisher “companion,” the better the outcome is for everyone.

At the conclusion of this essay, consider doing the concentric exercise (not included here) that I created years ago. The value of this exercise is that at any given time — and it is instructive to do it from time to time — it precisely delineates what aspects of our writing life are working well and what aspects are frustrating us. Most important is the first inner circle: “How do I feel in the act of writing?” This is the core: what we must protect and nourish above all else. We must not allow other closely related, sometimes disheartening questions, such as “How do I feel about myself as a writer?” to seep in and blot our feelings about the act of writing itself.

## **IX.**

How can you most effectively sustain yourself as a writer? The source of renewal is the act of writing itself. It is the endless fascination with discovering each narrative’s requirement; giving yourself over to each narrative’s idiosyncratic force. All the other aspects of our writing and professional life are important but provisional, unpredictable, transitory, even compromised.

In the act of writing I encounter the profoundest of teachers. This also extends to my experiences of teaching creative writing and doing manuscript development and editing. I am endlessly intrigued and challenged. It seems absolutely bottomless. My learning and occasional moments of enlightenment continue to surprise and humble me. As hard as it is (and it often is), I could not wish for a better teacher or profession.

When teaching a residential writing retreat recently, I spontaneously held up a blank sheet of paper and said, “This is my homeland.”

This is my homeland.

Like all homelands, as soon as I assume that I know it, I discover that I don't know it.

This homeland compels me to be fully alert to each step I take or do not take in its territory, while simultaneously offering me endless possibilities.

I began this essay with a quote from "Page" that stunned me when I first wrote it:

"Between page & writer is a magnetism more compelling than any other relationship."

It stuns me still. Elates.