

The writer's labyrinth: A reflection on the principles of academic writing - I

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Writers-rest and renewal

It couldn't have been more idyllic. A large red-brick, country cottage quietly tucked away on the edge of the woods – blue sky–white clouds– moss green grass, and great friends. A writer's retreat: a rest from the rest of our busy lives. I have defected from my family, found a community and completely ignored housework! *The Huffington Post* and I agree. I found that I had followed their advice before I even knew about it. Writing is work. Yes, writing is work. I always knew this but wasn't really committed to it as one should be with real work.

As I gaze out the window from my writer's spot, I see a field of grass, tall trees, flowering plants and a friendly deer who ventures out daily thinking she is alone while her babies hide in the bushes nearby. She can trust the writers in this hidden world. Even serious writers are allowed special interruptions. Some distractions must be given our full attention. I saw the beautiful, bold mother deer and stopped to wonder. But I didn't see the labyrinth. It was there, between myself, and the beautiful trees: between myself, and my writing. It was hidden.

Writer's labyrinth

Labyrinths are like puzzles. A labyrinth is described as 'an ancient symbol used as a spiritual tool for prayer and meditation, healing and transformation'. Just as the labyrinth walker has no other decision to make other than to keep walking, so with the writer—the writer must let the process of writing be their guide. An article, book, poem, narrative, biography, research study develops according to the conventions of the labyrinth you choose. There are many different kinds of labyrinths, but the way of the labyrinth applies to all. It will not be a straight path you will move forward and back and around, in and out, until you reach the end – an open space of reflection and contemplation. It is here that you will celebrate a successful ending to your journey with friends who have travelled with you.

Walking the labyrinth as an outer journey can awaken one's soul to the realisation that we are connected to nature, to other walkers and to the creative centre of our being, and our universe.

The way is not perfect. There are many turns that seem to lengthen our journey. If we relax and let the patterns lead us along the way, we connect with deeper things within us and more meaningful things without. We slow our steps. We contemplate, reflect and we pray. We become aware of deeper life meanings. We take the time to listen inwards, outwards and upwards.

The writer's voice

*I soon realised that no journey
carries one far unless,
as it extends into the world around us
It goes on an equal distance into the world within us.*
– Lillian Smith (cited in Quotes, n.d.)

Nuanced stories interrupted with commas and conventions, form like the musical scores of a grand march, or the soft sounds of symphonies and lullabies. Like thumbprints in the hands of a detective, our written words disclose our identities to discerning readers. A writer's purpose and motivation is exposed as issues of justice and injustice reveal the inner and outer worlds of self and others.

Writers, musicians, dancers and artists begin their creative journeys during childhood. I was four years old when I first became aware of the magic of writing. It was my older sister who got to ride the red school bus to a faraway place where pencils of all colours decorated clean white pages. My sister's mark making had talking power. I wasn't allowed to use her pencils but I found a way to create magic with 'talking patterns' of my own. I made circles, dots, lines, crosses and wiggles upon clear cold windowpanes as I watched the school bus arrive and disappear down the road. Mondrian masterpieces and Mozart concertos emerged, as I breathed child-sized puffs of warm misty air into empty spaces exposing clear snail trails where my fingers had danced on glass. Silently traces of me –my imaginings, my mark making emerged as scribbled stories for the world to see.

In reality my world was small. But the old tin mailbox – always on sentry duty beside our lonely, dusty road – caused the mailman to stop and deliver letters and packages. My mother would smile or weep

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as she devoured the interesting marks on tissue thin, white pages. Treasured messages from friends and family in far away places brightened my mother's life. My four-year old heart slowly formed a deep awareness of the power of the written word. I saw this in my mother's eyes – my mother's heart. Hearts and souls bleed through ink like invisible writing on transparent glass. If I could write like this I could create magic to warm my mother's heart.

As the years passed, seated for hours behind wooden school desks I developed my skills as an imaginative writer. The words 'she has a good imagination' appeared on my school reports more than once. Etched on my memory is a one-line comment on my fifth form high-school report – 'Kaye has a talent for writing'. "Mr Bun" read one of my stories out to the class once, as an example of excellent writing and it felt like a moment of emerging fame to me. The moment when you are especially acknowledged for something you love doing can be a moment when excellence and greatness is born!

Now that I am an educator of teachers, I have the task of writing at least two academic articles for publication every year – this is part of my job description. How do academic writers preserve style and voice? I like my words to sing and shout, and to pray and whisper silently. Can I still be me, in the carefully constructed and conventionalised world of academic writing?

Writers cast their own imaginings into everyday scenes, future worlds, and bygone days as gifts to readers. The authentic writer doesn't write just with

words and conventions but with heart, soul and mind, creating and recreating new possibilities and exposing hidden truths. The space between the writer's heart and the heart of the reader is bridged in silence. Thoughts transmit like telepathy along printed lines carrying unwritten meanings. A writing persona reveals whether the writer is being true to self or a hidden other. How do we bring our true self to the task of writing?

Why do I write and what is my purpose for being? What moves me and makes me brave enough to expose my inner world and why should I do it? What do I have of value that I can offer the world? Whose lives deserve to be in print for the inspiration of others? What journey have I taken that has gifted me with enough wisdom to contribute to the worlds of others? Why should I care so much? Writing can literally be choosing to enter a war: a war that can be won or lost with words. What would leave me with deep regret if I died never having tried to achieve it?

Writers give voice to others

*Obedience is an unpopular word nowadays,
but the artist must be obedient to the work,
whether it be a symphony or a painting,
or a story for a small child*

– Madeliene L'Engle
(as cited in Daire, 2007)

As writer and speaker I believe God has gifted me with opportunities to be a voice for young children. As their advocate, it is my intention to develop platforms

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Image: Walking the rose granite, Chartres Cathedral labyrinth replica in New Harmony, Indiana. Photography: Christina Rutz

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where children's voices can be heard. I need to develop creative confidence in the Creator's gifts. When we set out to speak on behalf of voices not heard we can be like Malala Yousafzai (2014) who said, "I'm not a lone voice. I am many."

Loris Malaguzzi, a renowned educational leader of the Reggio Schools in Italy at the end of last century, alerted the world to the multiple ways young children express themselves as learners. Self-expression is important to each of us but especially to children whose voices are just emerging. A young child speaks in many languages. Respectful listening enables children to develop their sense of self and express wonder. I view listening as a teaching strategy and a principle of learning. Listening with intention to understand and welcome each child's unique expression. Listening to children is a gift of compassion enabling teachers to advocate on their behalf as we make their voices visible to others.

Through a poem that has come to define the Reggio Approach to early childhood education, Loris Malaguzzi, a renowned Italian educator (cited in Early Learning and Kinder, n.d.), spoke of and for all children within this excerpt.

The One Hundred Languages of Children

*No way.
The hundred is there.
The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
A hundred, always a hundred
ways of listening
of marvelling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream."*

(Translated by Lella Gandini)

This poem has been the centre of a new labyrinth of learning: opening to the minds of educators and families throughout the world the multiple pathways that children create, invent and dream. We can learn so much from them as teachers, co-creators and writers. Their journey and their stories need to be shared for the benefit of everyone.

A writer's bank – creativity - a cure for writers' block

practice, practice, practice — C.S. Lewis
(Cited in Azquotes, n.d.)

10,000 hours of practice — Michael Gladwell
(Gladwell, 2008, p. 35)

A vocabulary search for 'writers' bank' brings up 'writers' block' as the nearest thing to what I am trying to define. Sometimes the best way to define something is stating what it is not. A writer's bank is all about words, words and more words. Not just any words but words the writer assigns value to. Words categorised into useful, usable and reusable lists, called word banks. Good writers bank words – in notebooks. Quotes, ideas, references, summaries are kept on file for later use. Writer's banks help us to avoid writer's block ("Which is an inability to remember or think of something you normally can do; often caused by emotional tension").

I find myself sitting right there beside the wall of doubt attempting to write. But I am suffering writer's block. "What's wrong with you?" my kind friend asks as she finds me procrastinating again checking facebook, reading a new book, checking my phone. "How come you can't see it? I do – others do." "You keep saying that, but I feel like an imposter!" Like a thief finally cracking a code my kind friend pounces, "It's a real thing – that's a real condition – it's called the imposter syndrome. You've got to build a bridge and get over it!" Finally, she has permission to pronounce a real diagnosis for my puzzling hesitancy to step into the pending greatness she imagines for my future. "We spoke about it in class today". (Guess I missed that part—I must have been procrastinating somewhere).

I have found it helpful to have a diagnosis. I know what I am dealing with now. But it is not like having a headache where you take pain relief and the headache is gone. Imposter syndrome is feeling like an imposter when you are not! That's the best part of the diagnosis, feeling like you are, but you're not. I am not an imposter as my kind friend assures me. It is just a syndrome! Imposter Syndrome is not so simple to 'get over' and many great writers have suffered from it. Maya Angelou (cited in Richards, 2015, para.7) testifies to this; "I have written eleven books, but each time I think, 'uh oh', they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out". Who would have thought the great Maya Angelou would have had such self-doubt.

A dictionary definition (reference needed) claims – (states, proposes) – that, "imposter syndrome (also known as imposter phenomenon or fraud syndrome or the imposter experience) is a concept describing

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high-achieving individuals who are marked by an inability to internalise their accomplishments or a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud". This is encouraging – I might just be a high achiever. So what do I plan to do about this? This imposter may reappear on frequent occasions hence my need to be forearmed and prepared.

Creative confidence is an idea promoted by Tom Kelley (a partner) and David Kelley (founder) of IDEO—a global designer company. They assert, creative confidence is:

believing in your ability to create change in the world around you. It is the conviction that you can achieve what you set out to do. ...this self-assurance, this belief in your creative capacity lies at the heart of innovation. ... Creative confidence is like a muscle—it can be strengthened through effort and experience,

(Kelly & Kelly, 2013, paras. 4, 5)

IDEO aims to help creative people through the process of “design thinking”. I like to relate this design thinking theory to writing. The four steps are: inspiration, synthesis, ideation/experimentation, and implementation. Writing seems to fit these four steps very well. The IDEO team describe this process as innovation and claim that the creative process, (as with the writing process) may cycle through many iterations before the process is complete (Kelley & Kelley, 2013). This process looks a lot like labyrinth walking to me.

I have contemplated C.S. Lewis's thoughts on the creative process. He “described writers who saw their creative capacity in light of their unoriginality. The writer lives, moves, and has their being in creativity. But how a writer views creativity greatly determines how they see their role as a writer and how they see their art” (cited in Latta, 2016, p.166). I find the true source of the creative process by reflecting upon God as Creator in nature and through His Word. It is an honour to be an active participant – to experience the gift of being caught up into the co-creative act of writing with the Author of our origins – the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. **TEACH**

To be continued - Part II included in the next issue.

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