



HAPPY: FIT WRITE IN

short essays and poems by Sasha A. Palmer

“This little book won’t push you to take a giant leap.
Won’t point you in a zillion directions at the same time.
It’ll merely encourage you to take one step. Just one.
One powerful step to a happier you.
I took it. Certainly worked for me.
Why not give it a try?”

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Happy: Fit Write In

Who Am I?

I'm The Happy Amateur.

Don't get me wrong, I don't always feel happy. But as the years go by, I become happier with my—far from perfect—self. I daresay, I become a bit wiser.

One proof of that is my frequent arrival at the same conclusion as Plato's, "*I only know that I know nothing.*" I realize that no matter how much life experience I gain, I'll never become a pro.

And here comes the 'happy' part — I don't want to become a pro at living.

I want to engage in life as a favorite pastime, not a profession.

I want to remain a novice, humble, and hungry for knowledge.

I want to be a constant devotee and admirer of life.

In other words, I want to be an amateur.

If it strikes a chord with you, let's talk.

“Live for the Love of It”

Live for the love of it, my friend,
A loveless life comes with a cost —
Those precious moments that we spend
With heavy hearts, are moments lost.

Don't worry so, lift up your face,
Live for the love of it, my friend,
Slow down and drop out of the race,
You'll be the winner in the end.

While sounds and sights die down and blend,
A loving heart does not know fear,
Live for the love of it my friend,
So you may see, and you may hear.

Cut off the chains, your soul set free,
True happiness you'll comprehend,
Go have a son, or plant a tree,
Live for the love of it, my friend.

Let's Begin

“Man wishes to be happy, only wishes to be happy, and cannot wish not to be so.”

— *Pascal*

We all want to be happy.

Each and every one of us. Even the most determined pessimists that concur in Freud's statement:

“the intention that man should be happy is not included in the plan of creation.”

The father of psychoanalysis was obviously miserable, at least at the time; but even he, no doubt, craved happiness just like anybody else.

We're all wired for the pursuit of happiness from the day we're born. Somewhere along the way we become discouraged. We get off track and lose sight of happiness. Yet sooner or later we resume the pursuit.

But what is happiness? And is it a choice? Or an obligation? [“A part of a new psychological standard of living”](#)?

How exactly do we catch happiness by the tail?

Many of us turn to motivational self-help books for answers and a little bit of a push to get us moving in the right direction. However, the number of happiness titles is so great, it can have a paralyzing effect.

A search for “happiness book” on Amazon yields more than fifty thousand results. This number is likely to grow. Overwhelming, isn't it?

Seven principles, twelve strategies, eighteen rules, etc. — apply them and be happy. Pick your precise step-by-step happiness instruction. But how do we pick it out of thousands?

Where do we begin?

First of all, let's relax. Stop looking for "our true, unified self" that according to Confucius et al. doesn't even exist. A long, very long, time ago Chinese philosophers argued that [everything in this world—including our own selves, including happiness—is in constant flux.](#)

That's the nature of things. Nothing's permanent. Everything's subject to change.

Now that we've accepted it, let's play pretend, because as human beings we long for constants. Let's imagine happiness as something concrete, tangible.

How about a beautiful mosaic that we put together, piece by piece, as we go through life? Happiness is not homogeneous. It's made up of different colorful things. It's a pattern that's never-ending, and ever-changing.

Happiness takes time, dedication, and creativity. It requires seeing the big picture, and zooming in on small details.

No two mosaics of happiness are exactly the same. Each happiness is unique.

There's no "one size fits all" when it comes to happiness.

So, why yet another happiness book?

Take a chance on this one. Look at it as a tiny colored stone for your mosaic art project. Try fitting it in, and see what happens.

This little book won't push you to take a giant leap.

Won't point you in a zillion directions at the same time.

It'll merely encourage you to take one step. Just one.

One powerful step to a happier you.

I took it. Certainly worked for me.

Why not give it a try? No strings attached. Right?

Write.

“Back When”

Back when the world was grandma's couch
Of comfy sun-kissed plush
That would dispel our biggest *ouch*
While springs sang softly, “Hush,”

Back when the teddy bears weren't toys,
But pals, when you and I
Shared tons of troubles, tons of joys
And one enormous sky,

Back when beginnings had no end,
Before the *why* and *how*,
We used to know the truth, my friend —
All that we have is *now*.

Chapter 1

Solving “the Chicken or the Egg” Dilemma

A modified version of this essay first appeared in [Writer’s Digest](#).

*For that fine madness still he did retain
Which rightly should possess a poet’s brain*

— *Michael Drayton*

“I was standing in the schoolyard waiting for a child when another mother came up to me.

‘Have you found work yet?’ she asked. ‘Or are you still just writing?’”

No, it didn’t happen to me. You know who the questioned mother was? The “wickedly good”—in the words of John Updike—Anne Tyler. The great Anne Tyler. And at the time of that schoolyard conversation she already was a successful published author.

There’s something you need to know. If you take up writing, quite a few folks will think you’re a lazy bum, not “doing anything halfway useful.” And quite a few will think you’re crazy.

[When in fact you’re smart](#). You’re shooting for a happy, healthy life. And you’re a true leader.

Studies have shown that writers are a smart, emotionally intelligent lot.

“People with high EI— meaning: the ability to identify, understand and assess their own and others’ emotions — have greater mental health, increased happiness and more compelling leadership skills.”

It doesn’t matter. They’ll still think you’re crazy.

How about a little experiment? Next time people ask you: What do you do? — try telling them you're a writer. Or better still — a poet. If you're lucky you'll get a rendition of Madeline Kahn's famous line from Mel Brooks' deliciously crazy 1974 horror comedy "Young Frankenstein": *"Excuse me darling, exactly what is it that you do do?"* But that's rare. Stunned silence is what you normally get. No wonder.

You're a poet = something's wrong with you.

"Writing is a socially acceptable form of schizophrenia." A tongue-in-cheek statement, isn't it?

But it has more to it than E.L. Doctorow—described as one of the most important American novelists of the 20th century—likely intended to convey. The results of recent studies support a connection between creativity and psychosis. It appears that [people of creative professions—particularly writers—are more likely to carry genetic variants linked to schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.](#)

"To be creative, you have to think differently from the crowd," said Kari Stefansson, the founder and CEO of deCODE, a genomic analysis company, *"carriers of genetic factors that predispose to schizophrenia do so."*

According to Dr. Alan Manevitz, a clinical psychiatrist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, *"beliefs about commonalities between creativity and psychosis are long-held."* In fact, the relationship between madness and creative imagination is ancient.

However, its nature remains a mystery. Is it about "cause and effect"? Does a mental disorder lead to creativity? Or is it the other way around? As author Janice Hardy noted, ["Being a writer can make you crazy \(or maybe that's a prerequisite to being a writer?\)"](#)

The eternal dilemma of “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” Try solving it, and you’re bound to go bonkers. So don’t.

Or do, as long as you have fun. Writers are crazy, they say. If you claim to be a writer, and show no signs of insanity, you’re missing the point. Fine. Give your craziness a boost, follow Alex Hughes’s simple step-by-step guide called “How to Drive Yourself Crazy as a Writer.”

Laugh it up. But, joking aside, there is a correlation between creativity and psychosis. This much is clear. According to a study by Professor Kay Redfield Jamison, major British and Irish poets (between 1600 and 1800) were twenty times more likely to have a mood disorder, be put into an asylum or commit suicide than the general folk.

Lord Byron’s one of the notable “patients” in Jamison’s “Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament”. Here’s what George Gordon had to say for himself and his fellow poets: *“We of the craft are all crazy. Some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched.”*

It’s the 21st century, and nothing has changed. Poets are as affected as ever. Writing like there’s no tomorrow, participating in Poem-A-Day challenges, doing all sorts of crazy things. Why? Professor Fredrik Ullen caught a glimpse of the answer among the squiggles of the brain.

Remember “Finding Nemo”? Imagine the thalamus as the ocean of information. The cortex as Nemo, the clownfish. And the dopamine (D2) receptors as the tentacles of the anemone, protecting the cortex-clownfish from the informational overflow.

D2 receptors act as a barrier, a filter, making sure that not all of the information from the thalamus ends up in the cortex.

According to Professor Ullen, highly creative people—and people with schizophrenia—have a lower than expected density of D2 receptors. Apparently their cortexes are flooded with unfiltered signals.

“Creative people, like those with psychotic illness, tend to see the world differently to most,” said UK psychologist and member of the British Psychological Society Mark Millard, *“It’s like looking at a shattered mirror. They see the world in a fractured way.”*

They zoom in on details. They spot connections others miss. They’re capable of “suspension of disbelief”—a phrase coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his “Biographia Literaria”—*“suspension of disbelief...which constitutes poetic faith.”* Everything is possible.

Sounds alluring, doesn’t it?

Be careful. The relationship between psychosis and creativity is a difficult topic. As Jemison—bipolar herself—noted, it concerns *“devastating illnesses that you don’t want to romanticize.”* You want to address them, no question about it.

However, there’s something to be said for that “fine madness” Michael Drayton wrote about. Maybe Edgar Allan Poe’s hint at madness as “the loftiest intelligence” seems like a stretch. Maybe Emily Dickinson’s “Much Madness is divinest Sense” is a bit too much.

Yet, “fine madness”, a touch of it — might be just what the doctor ordered. To keep your creative, poetic—*“Abby something...Abby Normal”* (another nod to “Young Frankenstein”)—brain going.

Have some fun. Go a bit crazy.

Write.

“Birth of a Poem”

Thousands
Of fluttering
Little wings flash
Before
My eyes,
Blowing away the
Thatched
Roofs of
The forgotten tales.
Dreams
Hard to
Grove with, bubbling,
Throbbing
Inside my
Head, sizzling like
Stones
In the
Hearth of my
Soul,
Waiting for
Me to take
It
All apart,
Rebuild once more,
Open
The gate,
Set them free.
So I can start breathing again.

Chapter 2

Happy Pill, Anyone?

A modified version of this essay first appeared in [Writer's Digest](#).

"If I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad."

— *Lord Byron*

Hear, hear, Lord Byron. "We of the craft"—aka poets and writers—can relate.

In our ideal universe, creative writing is everybody's "space bar"—the most popular key on the keyboard. Smooth and jamming. In reality it's more of a "Scroll Lock"—something weird most people choose to avoid. The techie world of today hasn't discovered the mind boosting place Byron used to frequent.

How come?

Let's be fair. It's not just a regular guy—it's George Gordon—we're talking about. No wonder he was ahead of his time. Besides, he was probably no stranger to other—popular during the Romantic era—ways of mind stimulation. In fact, his mind might have been overcrowded and in need of emptying due to laudanum — an alcoholic dilute solution of opium.

Byron made a reference to it in "Don Juan" in 1823:

" . . . for Cupid's cup
With the first draught intoxicates apace,
A quintessential laudanum or 'black drop',
Which makes one drunk at once . . ."

Sounds like a firsthand account, doesn't it?

I won't go into analyzing the effects—however intriguing—of addictive drugs on creative process. Whether or not they're partially responsible for Lord Byron's poetic works, or "Alice in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll, or "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"—written in just six (!) days—by Robert Louis Stevenson, I discourage you from trying to find out for yourself.

If you're at all like me, you'd much prefer literary obscurity and good health to fame and drug addiction. You don't want to add yet another reason to the long list of reasons we use to justify medicating ourselves.

Roughly one in every ten Americans has taken some sort of antidepressant. This is a lot of supposedly happier people. [Do all those who reach for the "happy pill" really need it?](#)

At one point I was very close to taking Prozac. My husband and I had gone through some major life changes in a short period of time. The death of a family member, international move and birth of our first child.

Plus shortly before the move we lost a bundle on our stock market investment. All of our savings, to be precise. A job in a different country didn't happen right away, and the money was tight.

All those stress factors piled up, and by the time we were blessed with our beautiful healthy baby girl, I was a total wreck. (So was my husband for that matter, but that's a different story.)

I was not myself and desperate for help. Although I'm not fond of pills generally, medication seemed like a good relatively quick solution.

I was almost ready to take the plunge when in my research I came upon a book written by Dr. Joseph Glenmullen of Harvard Medical School. The book was called [“Prozac Backlash: Overcoming the Dangers of Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, and Other Antidepressants with Safe, Effective Alternatives.”](#)

It gave me a good scare, completely changed my perspective and became that very “happy pill” I was seeking. I realized I didn’t need any meds, and that realization alone made me feel better.

The author convinced me that, although for some people *“judicious use of medication can be invaluable, even life-saving...most people can overcome the obstacles to leading satisfying lives through the help of more natural alternatives that treat our whole selves — psychological, physical, intellectual, and emotional.”*

Since then I’ve never considered antidepressants. Of course I’ve had my fair share of lows, I’m not always happy. However, natural alternatives provide all the help I need.

Counselling; lifestyle changes (yes, that includes the dreaded diet and exercise combo), making plans, and snapping lots of pictures of the happy everyday moments — these are just a few of the natural mood remedies I swear by.

But one remedy—writing—tops them all for me. And I’m definitely not alone.

In April of 2014, Robert Lee Brewer—a Writer’s Digest editor—led his Poetic Asides blog readers on a quest to shine some light on the value of poetry. Throughout the responses poetry sparkled like a multifaceted gem. One theme, however, was dominant — the therapeutic value of poetic expression.

PA folk echoed each other, calling poetry a “shrink,” “lifeline” and “lifesaver.”

Some of the responses were particularly personal. *“I, myself, am Bi-Polar,”* read one, *“and poetry has more than once saved my life (literally).”*

The writing folk are courageous. They accept—to quote Janet Martin of Another Porch poetry blog—*“the invitation to brave private fears.”* They open up their hearts and share their most hidden thoughts. It’s a scary process. But it’s rewarding.

Although the benefits of expressive—personal and emotional—writing have been a subject of scientific research, the field is still relatively new. James W. Pennebaker, the pioneer of Writing Therapy, was only born in 1950. The scope for work is vast, with new branches of knowledge bound to emerge.

Poetry Facilitation is one of such new and rapidly developing branches. A groundbreaking technique employing “the power of poetry to engage Alzheimer’s patients” is nothing short of a miracle. Even to its designer, Molly Middleton Meyer.

“Even for a word person,” she confessed, *“it is hard for me to explain the wonder of poetry facilitation, and its therapeutic benefits.”*

Molly—poet, writer, facilitator, and founder of Mind’s Eye Poetry—has channeled her grief into a mission. Having lost both parents to Alzheimer’s, she’s *Rewriting dementia*.TM Molly talks to people suffering from the disease — people often considered “gone.” Poetry’s both the starter and stunning outcome of her conversations with “poet/patients.”

Here’s one of the hundreds of poems Molly helped facilitate:

If Happiness Were a Sound...

It would be loud like a beating heart,
the sound of children laughing,
church bells ringing, a choir singing,
the sound of clear blue days
when the sky sings love.

Sam, Peggy, Judy, John, Jeannine, Sallye, Bettie, Mary W., Maureen, Mary A., Tom, & Helen
Autumn Leaves assisted living memory care community, Carrollton, TX

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Writing is not an elite club. Molly's work proves that. Writing is a place open to everyone. It
boosts your mind, memory, and imagination. It soothes and heals. It makes you feel alive.

Come on over.

Write.

“The Most Beautiful Thing”

Those rare tangible moments
When you feel so alive
When every cell of your being
Overflows with joy
When your love for life
Transcends the shell of your body
Enwraps you, sets you afloat
Presents you with myriads of senses
You do not know the name of

Yet know so intimately
When this all-consuming love lifts you up
And shows you the world as it is
In its simple glory of existence —
Those fragile moments of truth
Are the most beautiful thing.

Chapter 3

Legends We All Live by

“The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself.”

— *Thales*

My mother would heartily disagree with Thales, and scold him for making lame excuses. For as long as I can remember she’s been saying that we, human beings, do know our own selves, no matter what the comforting ancient wisdom teaches us.

I’d say it’s a tie between my mother and Thales.

It would be untrue to claim we don’t know who we are at all. We know our own strengths and weaknesses, gifts and flaws.

But what we don’t know is the scope of our potential.

People can, and do, change over time, if—and that’s a big IF—they want and allow that change to happen.

Take me for example. I'm horrible at math. I've been that way since primary school. It's obvious that math isn't my strong suit. Okay, so that's my flaw, and I'm stuck with it. Or am I really?

Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh (authors of "What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life") argue that Xunzi would encourage us to "*think of the self as a project.*"

The approach certainly worked for the authors' acquaintance — a dyslexic man who, through determination and hard work, mastered Sanskrit, one of the world's most complex languages.

Yes, we have gifts and flaws. But we also have an infinite number of possibilities. They're there for the taking, and "*as the Chinese philosopher Xunzi would implore us to remember, what's most important is what we do with them.*"

I could've made a conscious decision to train myself to understand math. I could've become another Sofia Kovalevskaya... Hmm, not sure about that. But at least I would've been able to help my middle-schooler with his math homework without breaking a sweat.

I could've had some fun pretending to be a different person — someone who loved math.

Would've I fallen in love with math while pretending? I didn't give myself a chance to find out.

Instead I chose the path of least resistance — sticking to what I was naturally good at.

Now, there's nothing wrong with nurturing talents we're born with. But we do rob ourselves of something valuable by deliberately rejecting activities we don't feel an aptitude for.

We don't know the scope of our potential, remember?

Many—if not most—of our strengths are hidden. The more strengths we discover—through leaving our comfort zone, and challenging ourselves—the happier we grow.

Let's say you love writing. Great. Go for it. But if you aren't a natural born writer, go for it anyway. Just give it a try. What if it doesn't pull you in? Move on. Try something else. But chances are, once you dive into writing, it'll transform you. You'll emerge stronger. Happier.

Molly Middleton Meyer, the pioneer of Poetry Facilitation, named her business Mind's Eye Poetry. Here's the story behind the name, told by Molly herself:

“One gentleman I had the pleasure of working with at an Alzheimer's Conference in Dallas told me that he wasn't creative, never had been, and it would be ‘a miracle’ if he wrote a poem with me. ‘I'm an engineer. I don't do poetry!’ He was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. He knew he was forgetting, but he was adamant about poetry. ‘Don't like it. Won't do it.’ I assured him he would surprise himself and maybe even have a little fun. He reluctantly agreed to try. As part of the facilitation process, I asked him to close his eyes while I recited several poems. When I was finished, he opened his eyes and with a look of amazement said, ‘When you read poems, it's like I have an eye in my mind that sees pictures.’ That's how Mind's Eye Poetry was named—by the process itself and by a reluctant engineer-turned-poet. Pretty cool.”

It is pretty cool indeed.

You can probably tell I have a soft spot for poetry, but it's not just poetry writing that helps us look within, see things for the first time, or in a different light.

I've said before that in this world of continuous change human beings long for something permanent. If they fail to find it, they make it up. They create legends.

This reminds me of a bitter-sweet Russian movie from the seventies — “For Family Reasons.”

Young newlyweds share a small apartment with the bride's mother, a well-meaning, but quite bossy business executive. Just married, “the kids” goof around a lot—play blind's-man's-bluff,

or tag—and occasionally break stuff. One day the groom shatters a china cup, and is scared to death of his mother-in-law. He expects she'll say the usual thing: the cup was particularly dear, because—like everything else in the house—her late husband bought it. The groom's young wife, though, tells him not to worry: the truth is her father hated that cup. Hated shopping in general. Why would her mom say he loved it? "People need legends," she explains.

Sometimes a legend is an anchor providing a sense of security and home. Sometimes it's a dead weight, or worse — a millstone around the neck.

We've all heard tireless inner voices dictating our personal stories to us. Oftentimes we follow those voices without thinking. Submit our stories without bothering to check them for errors.

Many, I mean many, years ago a little voice told me that I was bad at math, because I'd missed a week or two of primary school. Silly? You'd think so. But to this day I hear this voice in my head, and I need to take care to keep it from growing loud and bold.

It's one of my own legends—the math legend—I just cannot seem to give up. I need to watch out: whatever we hang on to, may be pulling us under.

The good news is: we don't have to go under. We have choices, possibilities. "But what are you going to do with them?" Xunzi wants to hear. [Well, one of the options is to write—actually put down on paper—and then edit our personal narrative.](#)

Research suggests this practice works, for it "*can really nudge people from a self-defeating way of thinking into a more optimistic cycle that reinforces itself,*" said Timothy D. Wilson, a University of Virginia psychology professor and author of "Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By."

The “writing interventions” help uncover the meaning of our experiences, and identify obstacles that prevent us from living a healthier, happier life.

The next step is to remove those obstacles. But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.

You know where the journey begins.

Right here.

Write.

“The Road”

I watched the road from my bedroom window,
A ‘stay at home’ type, ‘sit by the fire,’
I never ever really truly wondered
What it was like out there—
Beyond the bend—

But then one day I changed my name to “Pilgrim,”
The warmth and home I traded for the road,
The loss was meant to be, for what I found
Was my own life that lay
Beyond the bend.

Chapter 4

When Words Fall Like Apples

“Writing is always a process of discovery — I never know the end, or even the events on the next page, until they happen. There’s a constant interplay between the imagining and shaping of the story.”

—*Kim Edwards*

Uncovering lies woven into our personal stories may prove transformational. *“When you get to that confrontation of truth with what matters to you,”* Dr. Jack Groppe, co-founder of the Human Performance Institute, said, *“it creates the greatest opportunity for change.”*

But it’s not just lies, big or small, that we uncover as we write. Scratch that. Do we in fact “uncover” lies we ourselves have carefully crafted? Face them, admit them—yes—but uncover? No. Not really.

What might come as a surprise, what we might uncover while writing, is the truth. Or truths. Inclinations and motivations we never knew existed.

During one of the Poetic Asides Poem-A-Day challenges participants were asked to write a work poem: a poem about work, or using the word “work” itself, etc. Here’s what I wrote:

i am happiest
when i work in my garden
digging up the weeds

I remember having a revelation of sorts. My own eureka moment. I’d just uncovered a very important truth about myself. Discovered a personal law, if you like.

Laws are right there in front of us, but we cannot see them until something triggers a discovery.

A falling apple, an overflowing tub...in my case — a poem.

When I work in the garden—dig, dig, dig (as my son calls it)—I’m truly, without reservations, happy.

I’m in the zone. I feel present, and at the same time somewhat dissolved in my surroundings. I’m joyfully oblivious to anything, but the task at hand.

I’ve achieved the state of flow.

The concept of flow is ancient, but the term was introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a prominent contemporary psychologist specializing in the study of happiness and creativity. In the course of the interviews Csikszentmihalyi conducted, different people—in order to describe their experiences—would refer repeatedly to the image of water carrying them along. That prompted the name “flow.”

Csikszentmihalyi spent years researching the phenomenon. According to him, flow is the secret to happiness.

So, what is flow exactly?

Csikszentmihalyi described flow as *“being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.”*

You don’t have to be a musician to experience something like that. Pick a challenging task that requires skills to perform, stick to it, get better at it with practice — and you have a very good

chance of achieving flow. We've all been there. Whether playing a musical instrument, tending to roses, or engaging in (ahem) certain pleasurable activities associated with adulthood — the possibilities for flow are endless.

And the more of our everyday life we manage to put into that flow channel — the happier we are.

Lost your flow? Feeling bored, or anxious? Increase the challenge, and you won't be bored. Learn new skills, and you won't feel anxious. Fight boredom and anxiety. Reclaim your flow, and build on it.

One flow activity leads to another. That's what happened to me: I was already in the zone—writing—when flow illuminated my other passion — gardening. It was great.

Writing's special that way. It has the ability to unlock our secret compartments, and show us possibilities.

The more we write, and get into the flow of writing — the more possibilities we enjoy.

And the best part? The surprise factor. You never know what you'll discover when writing. It may be something as big as your vocation. Or making peace with your past.

My namesake Sasha—Sasha Martin—set out to write a fun unconventional cookbook describing her family's Global Table Adventure: cooking and eating a meal from every country in the world.

"But everything changed when the actual writing began." Sasha confessed, "My gut lurched when my editor challenged me about my motives for cooking the world. I saw flashes of my childhood — time spent in foster homes, being separated from my mother, traveling to twelve

countries by the age of nineteen, the death of my brother. It seemed unrelated, and yet I couldn't shake the memories."

Sasha did write an unconventional cookbook. "Life from Scratch: a memoir of food, family, and forgiveness." A story that brought to fulfillment her "*lifelong search for a sense of belonging.*" Not the story she thought she wanted to write, but the one she needed to write. "The gift" to her, and her readers.

There's something reverend about the effect writing can have on us.

As a young girl, Lindsey Hartz—now "a wife, mother and mentor"—had a real dream of becoming a writer. Instead life happened, and Lindsey built a successful career in the corporate and online world. She tried to go back to her dream, and one day—while writing—asked herself, "Why do I write?"

The seemingly simple and straightforward question had many layers to it. What Lindsey actually asked herself was something along these lines: What do I believe in? What am I good at? How can I combine my faith and my strengths to live my dream?

"I truly believe," Lindsey answered herself, *"that we were made to create to show the glory of God, and that artistic expression such as writing allows us to build incredible mediums for a deeper connection and to offer hope to a hurting world around us."*

Another thing Lindsey realized—as she pondered her reasons for writing—was that she could use her experience as a marketer, and her "love of words," to help other writers get heard; and thus fulfill her dream of making a difference.

That realization marked the beginning of a new, successful and rewarding, career for Lindsey.

Through writing she discovered, and worded, her own true vocation: *“My passion is to help you use YOUR words to bring life, hope and healing to that same world.”*

That’s Lindsey’s eureka moment. What’s yours?

Want to find out?

Write.

“Shadows of the Past”

Forgetful,
Blissfully ignorant,
We stroll through life
Shielded by a naïve conviction
That nothing came before us.

No one ever lived,
Or loved,
Or suffered,
We are the first ones
To breathe and wonder,
The chosen ones,
Who will know no death.

But then one day

We feel the rough texture
Of an old tree,
Caress the smooth coolness
Of a weathered stone,
Watch grains of sand
Escape through our fingers,
And vanish.

All of a sudden
A gust of memories
Engulfs us,
A somber revelation
That there indeed were others,
Who came, and passed,
And wait somewhere ahead
To comfort us,
And teach us what they know.

That death will be,
And there will be no death.

Chapter 5

For the Love of Writing

“Just write every day of your life. Read intensely. Then see what happens. Most of my friends who are put on that diet have very pleasant careers.”

—*Ray Bradbury*

One of the surprise discoveries, you might stumble upon while writing, is that you love to write, and want to be a writer. Good news: as long as you write, you already are. And more good news: there's never been a better time to be one.

Why? Because of the countless possibilities that never before existed.

Traditional publishing, small presses, self-publishing, indie publishing, e-publishing — it's overwhelming, especially if you're just starting out, but it's good to have options.

Two pieces of advice: don't put the cart before the horse, and be realistic.

Don't worry about publishing your work if you haven't got any work to publish yet. There's nothing wrong in educating yourself about the industry, but don't do it at the expense of writing.

And don't expect a big win. Don't rule it out, either, but don't count on it, the same way you wouldn't count on winning a multimillion dollar lottery.

Because it is a lottery.

Let's say you decide to go the traditional route. You assume you'll complete an MFA program in creative writing, get your foot in the door, and publish your first book with one of the biggies.

Well, a lot has changed since 1936 when the first MFA in creative writing—the Iowa Writers' Workshop—was established at the University of Iowa. [By 1994, there were sixty four programs;](#) by 2016 — more than three hundred fifty (not counting undergraduate) creative writing programs in the United States. [Each year about twenty thousand people apply.](#)

That's a lot of competition.

Okay, say you have the money and time for the MFA program, you complete it — does it automatically make you a soon-to-be-published author?

Nope.

Although a creative writing MFA may help you establish connections, “gain access to an elite club” so to speak, and as a result, get published; like with anything else in life, there are no guarantees.

Teaching creative writing is a more feasible career path for a diligent and lucky MFA graduate. Not a bad path, unless of course he or she dreams about writing the next great American novel, not controlling the classroom.

Besides, he or she would be very fortunate indeed to land that kind of job.

Here’s a quote from an open letter written by one hundred and ninety MFA teachers, including authors David Shields, CD Wright, Bob Shacochis, David Lehman, Tony Hoagland and Heather McHugh, [*"In economic times like these, there is no immediate correspondence between any degree and employment.*](#) *This is particularly true of the MFA in creative writing and PhD in English with a creative dissertation. While we work hard to help our graduates find jobs, it is essential to understand that creative writing for the vast majority is not a profession. Some writers earn their living as teachers, but others are lawyers, full-time homemakers, doctors, editors, business owners, sales clerks, and mechanics. No applicant should consider pursuing a creative writing degree assuming the credential itself leads to an academic job. And no applicant should put her or himself in financial peril in order to pursue the degree."*

So, what am I saying: creative writing MFA is no good?

Richard Jean So and Andrew Piper, professors of language and literature at the University of Chicago and McGill University, correspondingly, assumed that, *“the intensity with which readers and critics feel and think about the MFA ... has become disconnected from its moderate-to-minimal effects on the literary landscape in America.”*

On the other hand, Sandra Cisneros—an American novelist, poet, and short story writer—described an experience she had while attending the Iowa Writers’ Workshop as a life-changing revelation, *“It wasn’t as if I didn’t know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn’t think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn’t make sense until that moment, sitting in that seminar. That’s when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about.”*

Andy Weir—whose first published bestselling novel “The Martian” was turned into a blockbuster movie starring Matt Damon—had no formal training in the craft of writing. Cynthia D’Aprix Sweeney—whose notable first novel “The Nest” became an instant bestseller—received her MFA from The Bennington Writing Seminars.

So, I’m saying, it’s all good. Because it’s all about options.

Every week somebody somewhere wins a lottery. There’s no reason to think it’s never going to be you. It could be. But you need to buy yourself a ticket.

Do your research, find what’s right for you. Maybe you’ll receive an MFA in creative writing and get hired to teach at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Maybe you’ll submit queries until you find a perfect agent, and publish your novel. Maybe you’ll choose e-publishing, and one of your books takes off like Hugh Howey’s “Wool.”

You'll strike gold. Become the next success story. Quit your day job.

Maybe you'll win a multimillion dollar lottery. Possible? Yes. Probable? No. Can you have fun playing? Absolutely.

Don't lose your head, or throw away all your money — be realistic. Don't count on the win, just play, and have fun.

Be daring. Bold.

"I teach poetry in the graduate writing program of the New School in New York," said David Lehman, "A favorite prompt of mine is to read "Musée des Beaux Arts" and other poems about paintings. Then I suggest that the students visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and write about Brueghel's sublime depiction of summer, "The Harvesters." Try it—not in competition with Auden (you can't win), but with Auden's marvelous poem as your model."

I say, don't be intimidated by "you can't win." Try it — not in competition with anybody, except perhaps yourself. Go ahead, and write your own marvelous poem.

And don't forget: you can always write for the love of writing. Do what you love. Nobody's going to take that away from you.

Writing's driving you forward. Like that horse.

Take care of your writing, and the publishing cart will take care of itself when the time's right.

Just write.

My verse is...

...a child's first step
And it is a walk on the moon
My verse is a bitter-sweet remedy
That springs from a troubled heart
My verse is a pilgrim in a strange land
And it is an open door
My verse is all that I have done
And all I have failed to do
My verse is a silver birch
And it is a red bud tree
That changes from tender purple
To deep and fulfilling scarlet
My verse is a sleepless night
A train whistle calling me back
My verse is a rising sail
Awaiting the breath of dawn.

Chapter 6

Pourquoi Pas?

A modified version of this essay first appeared in [Writing Tips Oasis](#).

“Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère.” (“Beautiful books are always written in a sort of foreign language.”)

—*Marcel Proust*

An unusual book stands out like a foreigner in a strange land. An uncommon perspective, distinctive voice, unique style — these “sort of foreign” qualities make a book beautiful.

It’s not about “foreign” in its literal sense. At least, not always.

"La Gritona. Such a funny name for such a lovely arroyo. But that's what they called the creek that ran behind the house." If you, like I, don’t know Spanish, the alluring mystery of “arroyo” that pulls you in, is promptly and satisfyingly solved — you have no trouble whatsoever understanding that “arroyo” means “creek.”

The quoted lines are from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* by Sandra Cisneros. Here’s another line from the same book: *"And at the next full moon, I gave light, Tía Chucha holding up our handsome, strong-lunged boy."*

Again, you might not know the Spanish "dí a luz"—literally “I gave light”—but you understand instantly what it means; the seamless use of loan translation adding depth to the description of a common miracle.

If you’re bilingual like Cisneros, or trilingual like Vladimir Nabokov; as a writer, you are indeed very fortunate. You’ve been presented with a treasure trove of possibilities. Don’t waste them.

But even if you’re just beginning to learn a foreign language, there’s no reason why you cannot incorporate this new knowledge into your writing.

Mix and match words, use direct translations, phonetic transcriptions — have a bit of good linguistic fun. It might prove beneficial.

There’s a lot to be said about writing in a language that isn’t your mother tongue.

A native language can both empower and constrain when it comes to developing a unique style of writing. The weight of tradition, grammar, and stylistic norms can crush our creative efforts.

A foreign language can liberate your writing.

Samuel Beckett, an Irishman, claimed that writing in French made it easier for him to write “*without style.*” Often this absence of style—or rather freedom from style—becomes style in itself. Treat a foreign language as “*tabula rasa*” — “*blank slate.*” It’s up to you to fill it with writing. So, pick up your stylus, or pen, or hit those computer keys — and write.

True, your native language may at times become what Beckett called “*a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothing-ness) behind it.*” Yet, you might find that the more you escape into a foreign language, the closer you feel to your own.

You may even come to appreciate the grammar rules you ran away from in the first place. Or you might invent creative ways of bending, and breaking them. Maybe you’ll eventually become a bilingual (multilingual) writer. Maybe you’ll come back to your mother tongue with a deeper understanding of it. Only one way to find out.

Try writing in another language. Experience a very special connection.

We all crave connection. To each other. The universe. Everything seen and unseen. When we learn a foreign language, we open an invisible door to a different culture. When we write in a foreign language, we immerse ourselves in that different, new world. Comparing it to the world we know, we arrive at the inevitable conclusion:

People everywhere are very much alike.

That's another eureka moment for you. It's powerful. And you're bound to experience it sooner or later when you write in a foreign language. So, do it. Feel connected.

Heal.

Writing is good for you.

Expressive writing—“*personal and emotional writing without regard to form or other writing conventions like spelling, punctuation and verb agreement*” (John F. Evans, Ed. D.)—is therapeutic. Writing Therapy pioneered by James W. Pennebaker employs different types of writing, such as poetry writing, for instance. Writing in a foreign language is another branch of knowledge worthy of attention.

Here's a comment—and an example of expressive writing in itself—someone anonymously submitted after reading John F. Evans' article “Expressive Writing” in Psychology Today,

“I have tried writing down my feelings in the past although not according to the given structure in this article. [It really worked for me to put behind something that was bothering me for more than 25 years.](#) it may be interesting to say that I can write more expressive in English which my second language rather than my mother tongue in which I have been thought to reserve my feeling not to express them!”

As someone who writes in her second language, I can relate.

When we write, we tap into deeply hidden, often dark, thoughts and emotions. We all have personal demons lurking in the shadows.

Writing in a foreign language creates a buffer between ourselves and the not always pleasant truths we uncover. It brings the eerie duality that happens in dreams and occasionally in real life, when you're both—the doer and the observer—at the same time.

Arm yourself with a foreign language to become a more perceptive writer, bring to light and defeat your demons, and heal.

Have the “can do” attitude. Boost your self-esteem.

When I first began writing in English—my second language—self-doubt was my middle name.

What right do I have? Why not my native Russian? Who am I anyway?

I'm happy I was able to stand up to myself and say,

“I happen to be a human being, and a writer. At this point in my life I want to write in English that's not my mother tongue. And guess what? I have a perfect right to do so.”

Writing in English is something I need and enjoy. Sharing my writing is equally important to me. Every time I post a poem to my blog, or enter a contest, or submit my work to a publisher — it's a small victory. It takes guts to write in a language that's not your own and put your words out there for the world to see.

C'mon, show the world how gutsy you are.

Write in a foreign language. Try it. Just go for it. You have nothing to be afraid of, nothing to lose. You're bound to gain something from the experience. Quite possibly — a lot. It might be life-changing. Or just plain fun.

If anything, you'll be in good company. Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, Jack Kerouac... — can you hear them cheer you on? They did it, why not you?

Ready, Set, Write!

Good luck! Bonne chance! Удачи!

“Silver and Gold”

winter sun

crispy walk

sparkling blue

frozen lips

learn to speak

“ya lyublyu”

silver snow

golden sky

you and i

Chapter 7

What’s Your Silence About?

“That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.”

—[Audre Lorde](#)

It takes guts to put your words out there for the world to see. Whether you write in your mother tongue or not — doesn't matter. It's scary.

What if they laugh at you? Reject you? Ignore you?

What if they accept, and recognize you?

They can do all those things. Because they see you. You're visible, hence vulnerable.

You're much safer blending in with the crowd. Wearing a mask.

“Under the most rigid conventionality,” said Anaïs Nin, “there is often an individual, a human being with original thoughts or inventive fantasy, which he does not dare expose for fear of ridicule, and this is what the writer and artist are willing to do for us.”

And we're grateful for what they do. We read great stories, and absorb great art, and move a little further along the road to *“greater sincerity.”*

But is it always enough — to read a story written by someone else?

Is it always satisfying to just listen, and not say anything?

We all can be storytellers.

You might think you have nothing to say, but it's not so.

Every human being has a story.

“And,” as Lorde reminded us, “there are so many silences to be broken.”

Not all silences are about race, identity, oppression; but all are about freedom, and *“greater sincerity.”*

Because if you resist the burning urge to tell the world about something “small”—a raindrop, a new leaf, a child’s first step—you’re holding something back.

You’re not sincere. And you’re not free.

Fear is natural. There’s no shame in being afraid. What we do with our fears is what counts.

When we’re brave enough to share our stories—however small and insignificant they might seem to us—we contribute to global understanding, and ultimately make the world a better place.

Don’t let fear win.

Break your own personal silence. Tell your story.

December 7, 2011, 9:30 a.m. My initiation as a writer. The first time I clicked “submit.”

Want to see the “masterpiece” I published?

Here goes...

“Every Dog Has His Day”

There once lived a merry chap Kyle,
Had a doggy that never did smile.
There and back in the blink
Of an eye, “Where’s my drink?”
Kyle is sad, but his dog’s got a smile.

Definitely not Shakespeare. Not even Edward Lear.

Still, it was something I wrote, and shared. My limerick. And it got the ball rolling.

I’ve always been scribbling something. Ever since I was quite young.

To say that I've been writing since kindergarten might be an exaggeration. However, at the tender age of seven I documented the perils of my first crush. The boy was fourteen. An unrequited love, of course. (I wish I had that diary now.)

At thirteen I dipped my toes in poetry. I curbed my growing pains with rhyme and meter.

Writing was the best medicine. The best friend. And—for a long time—the best kept secret.

Until that December morning of 2011. When I went public.

Back then I couldn't dream of winning a major poetry competition. Ever. The fact that I managed to press the "Enter" key with my shaking finger, and submit my limerick was all the victory I could handle.

Yet, five years later my "Storytelling" was chosen out of more than five hundred poems as "the most powerful piece."

I'm so grateful to the judges of Theatre Cloud Loneliness Project for their kind words about "Storytelling." I just want to highlight one of their comments, ["It's very confidently written."](#)

That word—*confidently*—means a lot to me.

I believe all writing's rooted in loneliness. Our desire to connect. And writing—sharing our stories—helps us connect. Across continents, oceans, languages, and other minor barriers.

I'm not afraid anymore. I've broken my silence. I'm telling my story. *Confidently*.

My growing pains aren't going away. I guess I'm still growing. But unlike my teen self I know nothing. (Plato — hear, hear.)

Scratch that. I do know a couple of things. I know that happiness arrives with a few wrinkles, a few tears, and tiny—like Styrofoam pieces—bits of wisdom.

I know who I am.

Now, in my forties, I feel free to share this knowledge with the world. I feel free.

I'm a writer. I do what I love.

Write.

“Storytelling”

He tells her of ancient Greece,
Mount Olympus with its gorges,
and peaks, and gorgeous gods,
quick-tempered, violent,
unleashing their vengeance
against mortals and each other.

He tells her of shining Ithaca,
a tanned boy out in the sun,
a man with sea water in veins,
longing for voyage and land,
a wanderer whose very name
is casting lament upon his brow.

At nightfall he sheds his stories,
heart bared, stands before her,
trembling, heeding her silence,

a boy-man, rugged, tender,
weathered skin — a map of travels,
its salty lines aching for touch.

She takes his hand, leads him
into the deep of the island,
through the familiar orchard,
to the wedding bed, the olive
still rooted to the ground,
awaiting his homecoming.

On a Happy Note

"You know when you're happy...There's been so much talk about the mechanics of happiness—psychiatry, and pills, and positive thinking, and ideology—but I really think that the mechanism is there, all you have to do is get quiet for a moment or two, and you know; you know where you are."

—Leonard Cohen

I love this quote. I too think that “the mechanism is there.” And despite all its complexity, happiness is essentially a simple thing. Anybody can figure it out. Anybody can be happy.

“Get quiet from a moment or two.” Write a line or two, I would add. (I don’t suppose Cohen—a poet—would have had any objections.)

I’m going to conclude this little book with something I wrote in 2008 (three years before my initiation as a writer.) Something that—as I realize now—humbly explores the same theme ancient Chinese philosophers used to ponder. So, from Confucius and me, here’s a short personal essay on fluidity of all things.

HAPPINESS ON A STRING

I'm six years old. I sit on the warm sand, crying my eyes out. Five minutes ago life was perfect. I was holding on my open palm a small pebble. I found it myself. It was flat and perfectly round. Like a coin. It had a tiny hole, just big enough for a string to go through. "Pebbles like that bring happiness," I was told. I found mine. I held it. Then I watched it slide off my palm and disappear in the sand. I lost it. My parents try to calm me down. They try everything. My father says, "If you don't stop crying, I'll take your picture." He is pointing his camera at me. I don't care. Nothing matters anymore. I lost my happiness. I'll never be happy.

"I'll never be happy." For every new find there is a new loss, lying in wait. We grow up, but our parents grow old. We fall in love, but soon become disillusioned. We have children, but one day they set off on a journey of their own. Without us. All along the way we never truly possess anything. Yet we never stop searching. We search frantically for the meaning of happiness.

When was it? Thirty years ago? Yesterday? My father did take a snapshot of me back then. I'm forever miserable, trapped in a photo album. I look at the picture. The memory of that long gone summer has a strange possession over me. When things go wrong, I travel backwards in time. I return to that beach. My palm remembers the smooth roundness of the pebble. I look down at the sand beneath my feet. I come here in search of the answer. As years go by, I begin to realize that I will never find it. As losses accumulate, I begin to understand the beauty of the search. I take my eyes off the sand. I look at the sea, lying outstretched in front of me. I shield my eyes from the sun. I look all the way across the water to where the sea meets the sky. Sometimes I feel

happy. Happiness is like the sea that carries pebbles to the shore. It is always in motion. It comes and goes, like the tide. You cannot wear happiness on a string.

I'm thirty six years old. I sit on the warm sand, watching my children play. They're down by the water. They're almost surreal in their perfection. My daughter comes running. She shows me her treasures. Seashells and pebbles. She puts them on my open palm, and the sun dries them off quickly. "They're beautiful," I tell her. I look at her face. It is lit from within. She is happy. For a brief moment time stands still. Everything is simple. Nothing is lost. All around me is the answer. I live this moment while it lasts. I smile. And from across the years my six-year old self smiles back at me.

~~THE END~~

A BEGINNING

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