

The Write Place At the Write Time

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<http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/writerscraftbox.html>

Come in...and be captivated...

We have **Writers' Craft Box** which is a section dedicated to giving writers hints, tools, essays and advice. Think of it as an arts and crafts box full of colors and inspiration... or an old toy chest discovered in the attic on a rainy day... This time we feature an excerpt from Naomi Epel's *Observation Deck- A Tool Kit for Writers* in celebration of its reprinting, a poem on advice for the young poet and an intriguing article about embracing the vocation of a writer and "Reversing Writer's Guilt".

Writers' Craft Box



*Writer, writing coach, and spiritual counselor, Noelle Sterne has published over 250 pieces in print and online venues. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle has conducted an academic coaching and editing practice for over 28 years. Based on this consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). In Noelle's new book, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, Summer 2011), she uses examples*

from her practice and many other aspects of life. In this book, she applies practical spirituality to help readers let go of regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings. Visit the website: www.trustyourlifeflow.com

REVERSING WRITER'S GUILT

by Noelle Sterne

Almost every writer I know, including myself, feels guilty. When the talk inevitably turns to guilt, at least one of us quotes a line from a song by Tori Amos, and we chuckle and squirm at its truth: "Got enough guilt to start my own religion." [1]

Twin Guilts

Most of us feel guilty at the "not enough" syndrome. We feel guilty for not writing enough—not devoting enough hours, not producing enough pages, not circulating enough pieces. But some of us feel guilty because we are writing. As a friend burst out, 'Why do we always feel so guilty? If it's not for hating our work, it's for loving it. If it's not for avoiding our work, it's for making it first. If it's not for giving it too little time, it's for giving it too much.'

Preoccupied as we are most of the time with pulverizing our blocks and eking out a few precious minutes to write, most of us don't mention this latter type of guilt. But I've found that many writers experience it, often during their most productive times. This shadowy guilt whispers incessantly, "I'm writing too much," or its first cousin, "I should be doing something more socially useful."

In *The Artist's Way*, the wonderful creativity expert Julia Cameron calls this guilt the "virtue trap." Even today in our age of unlocking traditional gender roles, the virtue trap is especially applicable to women:

We strive to be good, to be nice, to be helpful, to be unselfish. We want to be generous, of service, of the world.

Cameron quotes Leslie M. McIntyre's wry observation on society's view of creative women:

Nobody objects to a woman being a good writer or sculptor or geneticist if at the same time she manages to be a good wife, good mother, good-looking, good-tempered, well-groomed, and unaggressive. [2]

Consummate writer Erica Jong admits:

Every book has been written with guilt, powered by pain. Every book has been a baby I did not bear, 10,000 meals I did not cook, 10,000 beds I did not make. [3]

The Guilt of Denying Ourselves

Many writers of both genders succumb to or fight against such guilt-making constraints. "Afraid to appear selfish," Cameron continues, "we lose our self. We become self-destructive." [4] She asks pointedly, "Are you destructive of your true nature?" [5]

Her questions spark others. Do you put everyone else before yourself? Do you put everything else before your writing? Do you put most of your time, energy, and attention into the ultra-clean-neat-organized house, the from-scratch meals that have never seen the inside of a microwave, the endless ironing? Do you accede to the perpetual hovering over open car hoods, automatic popping of too many peanuts at your neighbor's playoff bashes, vying for the top conquest (real or imagined) stories? Are you the always-willing ear for others' troubles, concerns, laments? Does your head automatically bob 'Yes' to every request for community and charitable events?

Do you ever give the same precious resources to yourself?

These questions connect to a startling and profound passage in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, which I've found increasingly meaningful. It applies to writers and anyone else with a strong, undeniable, and unquenchable sense of purpose:

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you. [6]

Translation for writers: When we allow time for writing in our chosen mode, our productions will "save" us. But when we keep our drive to write bottled up, when we try to deny it by convincing ourselves we don't have it or don't need it, and when we deprive ourselves of even a little writing time, we stop ourselves from writing.

As we do these things, much as we try to ignore our feelings, we know something is very wrong. We're harming ourselves by slowly killing our creative drive. Instead of writing, we express ourselves in other ways—we grow depressed, get sick, overeat, overspend, oversleep, overtube, and snap at everyone within mouthshot.

The Guilt of Honoring Ourselves

But when we do give ourselves writing time, as writers have reported, we can feel a new kind of guilt. Other people react, often fueling our guilt. One writer finally decided to let her answering machine take over during her writing sessions. When she did pick up the phone, her best friend fumed, "What's the matter with you? You used to be there all the time. Now it's like you're hiding from me."

Another formerly frustrated writer could never seem to stick to his self-

promised schedule of writing after work three nights a week. To give himself more options in time, he decided to resign as a coach from his church-sponsored athletic program. When he did so, the other coaches accused him of everything from heartlessness to selfishness to ungodliness. But because he stood tall, he was able to sit regularly at his computer.

Why is honoring ourselves so hard? Why does it cause such guilt? As these two writers' experiences show, we're doing nothing less than bucking the entire social order. We're weathering the accusations and attacks of our friends, family, and anyone else we say No to.

Even when we take our stand, as psychologists Jean and Veryl Rosenbaum observe, we may feel "unconscious guilt." [7] This can block us even when we've devised our best writing schedule. A writer was scolded in childhood by her parents for "wasting time" daydreaming. As an adult, she knew consciously that her "daydreaming" was a vital part of her writing. Ruminating, reflecting, and imagining helped her plot a story, spin out possibilities, picture a character responding in various scenes, and engage in any number of mental actions not generally judged physically productive or practical.

But the writer felt blocked in these indispensable activities. Because she had been constantly reprimanded to "do something constructive," she felt worthwhile only if she was outwardly busy. When writing or thinking creatively, she felt guilty for being "unproductive." [8]

I recall agonizing for weeks with a block the size of a hi-rise concrete foundation. I'd gone to great lengths to carve out two hours in the evenings for writing, but when I sat down, my thoughts focused entirely on what staples were missing from the refrigerator and which day I should go to the cleaner's.

I chronicled my struggles to a friend. "How can I sit here and scribble? I should be doing something useful, like being a social worker!"

My friend laughed out loud. At first, I felt insulted but then, hearing myself, I began to laugh with her. The first fissures appeared in my concrete.

She asked, "Do you know how useful words are? Do you know their power?"

I looked at her.

"Ever hear of the Bible," she asked, "or the Declaration of Independence, or Hamlet?"

Her words about words cracked open my block. Then it shattered for good by the Rosenbaums' words about writers:

Visionaries, we predict the future, presenting readers with a glimpse of what is to come by interpreting social trends, human nature, and historical patterns, punching holes in our readers' complacency, revealing unpleasant

truths, exposing possibilities and destroying our pretenses.[9]

These inspiring words helped me get back to writing. But to truly vanquish my guilty feelings, I needed continuous vigilance. Practicing the four imperatives here has helped me overcome conscious and unconscious writer's guilt.

1. Believe

Despite our lingering guilt that writing is not socially useful, we must have faith in ourselves and our unremitting desire to write. Blocks may roll into our path because we think of our writing desires and dreams as silly, bad, ridiculous. Beyond this, we may secretly think it's not "God's Will" for us to write. But in fact, our work, and the drive for it, do come from God.

Many spiritual teachers and mentors concur. The first century A.D. Greek philosopher Epictetus counsels us not to "assume an arrogant air" about our special desire, "but hold to that which seems to you the best, with the conviction that the divinity has assigned you to this post." [10] In a present-day update, Julia Cameron tells us, "Our creative dreams and yearnings come from a divine source." [11]

The metaphysical teacher Eric Butterworth explains, "The will of God is the ceaseless longing of the Spirit in you to completely fulfill in the outer the potential within you." [12] Minister and prolific writer J Douglas Bottorff summarizes concisely: "To pursue your dreams is to do God's will." [13]

With even greater reassurance of our writing desires, spiritual counselor and author Catherine Ponder writes:

Remind yourself often that if it were not God's good will for you to experience fulfillment of the deep desires of your heart, you would not desire them in the first place . . . [14]

So, believe in yourself. Believe that your dream of writing is given you from a divine source, and, despite conscious or unconscious guilt, you are being nothing less than "obedient" by following it.

2. Accept

To accept the source of your writing desire is the first step. The second is to recognize that this yearning is far from frivolous, meaningless, or groundless. Rather, it carries within it the seeds of your ability to accomplish your dream. Yes, you likely need training, practice, and experience, as we all do, but the very strength of your writing desire means you will succeed.

So if you're questioning your calling, don't. Accept it and the inevitability of success. Take heart from motivational writer Peter McWilliams: "a deep desire . . . also comes with an inborn ability to achieve that desire." [15]

When you accept this principle, you'll realize, especially in the face of self-doubts and deprecation, that your "job," as McWilliams declares, "is to fulfill your Dream." [16] In more "socially useful" terms, Bottorff states unequivocally:

You can render no greater service to God, to yourself, or to your world than to be true to your Self and to follow your dreams. [17]

3. Decline

To be consistently true to ourselves takes mental watchfulness. Every time we let our fledgling self-confidence peak out, the negatives swoop in like preying crows. We can swat them away by exercising the discipline of discerning and declining.

First, recognize the negatives that are constantly weaving through your consciousness. Observe your thoughts for a minute or so. You'll be amazed at how many reek of pessimism and dire anticipations. You know the ones:

- I'll never become a real writer.

- I should have stayed in school to get another degree.

- I'm really very selfish.

- No one thinks I'm any good.

- I'll never get published.

- Might as well stop now and write my name only when I have to send a birthday card.

Thoughts like these are prevalent, and we may think they're natural, especially because most of us are surrounded by few people who think optimistically.

We've learned to assume that a negative outlook is to be expected and "realistic." It's not.

Second, we need to learn to decline the wishes, requests, requirements, and demands of others at judicious times and in judicious ways. The earlier quote from Leslie McIntyre exemplifies what a lot of women face, but there's more. All of us have family, friends, jobs, necessities, opportunities, and unexpected events that demand attention. These all have their right times and places, but you too deserve the right times and places for yourself.

Some of us spend our entire lives for others and become spent, used. We live by the law of "Someday": "Someday, when we throw out all that stuff, I'll make the

spare room into a writing studio.” “Someday, when the kids are grown, I’ll make one of their rooms into a writing studio.” “Someday, when I retire, I’ll convert the guest bedroom into a writing studio.”

Someday comes, all right, but so do other things. That Someday room always gets filled with something else—more stuff, a kid returning, an actual guest. And your writing studio door gets slammed out of the picture.

That is, if you don’t stop the Someday chorus. This too takes discipline. You need to start thinking “I write now,” with or without a writing studio or your Someday equivalent. Like many other writers, you can find plenty of other places to write—the kitchen table, the bed, the car, the library, the park, the mall, a restaurant, a coffee shop.[18]

Once you start to practice declining, as we noticed before, other people may immediately react. After all, you’re not only changing the status quo but also what they’ve always counted on you for. When you change your behavior, they may counter with shock, disappointment, hurt, dismay, anger, tears, indignation, or outrage.

Your refusal doesn’t mean you’ll never do anything for them again. It does mean, though, that now you control the decisions if, when, and in what amount to do what you did before.

Instead of taking you seriously, they may continue to ask, plead, or demand the same things at the same times. You don’t have to respond irately. With kindness and firmness, set your limits. For example, you’re sorry, but you can’t chair the community car washing committee (which takes weeks of phone and meeting time), but you’ll be glad to wash cars on the day of the event (which takes one day).

You may feel pulled to explain (“I have to get in my self-sworn three hours of writing time.” “I’ve got to get through the crucial pivotal scene in my novel.” “I must meet a 48-hour deadline.”). My strong advice is—Don’t. Most people don’t comprehend why you’re declining and don’t care. Your explanation won’t help them understand, and you’ll feel stronger for not giving it.

So stick to your guns. If you do, the others in your life will eventually accept your new disciplined self. The car-washing committee will feel privileged that you’ve shown up on the big day and will value your scrubbing and hosing. Eventually, your family and friends may get used to your conviction and surprise you. One stand-taking author overheard his wife on the phone: “Oh, he’s a writer. He needs a lot of time alone. You know how they are.”

Sometimes others may grudgingly admire you. A writer friend finally mustered the courage to refuse to take her father shopping more than once a week. She told him it was because she wanted to devote an afternoon to writing (an explanation that worked). With a sad shake of his head, he admitted, “I wish I had your discipline. I’ve always wanted to paint but my buddies kept asking me

to do so many other things I thought I had to. Never wanted to disappoint the guys.” Julia Cameron’s “virtue trap” is unisex.

If others persist in their demands, remind yourself whose life you’re living. You don’t want or need their acceptance, negativity, or refusal to allow you to be who you are. A few people may leave in a huff, but most will still like you. They may even gain courage from your determination and take a step to act on their own secret desires.

4. Declare

No matter how many spiritual mentors we’ve read or how often we’ve put our writing first, to fully accept our deservingness can still be difficult. Acceptance can be bolstered by repeated affirmative declarations. Some of the most successful writers have cultivated the daily habit of five quiet minutes, morning and evening, for one or more affirmations such as these:

- I deserve to write.
- My writing desire is God’s gift to me.
- No one stands in my way.
- I don’t stand in my way.
- I have enough time, money, energy, interest, and cooperation from everyone around me to write consistently.
- Being a writer is my natural state.
- Being a writer harms no one.
- Being a writer makes me feel good and keeps me healthy.
- Being a writer blesses me and everyone I know and meet.

During your sessions, other similar words or phrases may float into your mind. Listen and use them. They’re your wiser Self talking to you. Before every writing session, you can also repeat some of these affirmations. They’ll quiet you and allow your creative mind to flower more easily.

Once you’ve accepted your God-given gift of writing, and you’re regularly declining to participate in former self-defeating behaviors, use of more practically focused affirmations will help you keep to your purpose. Here are some contributed by writers in a recent group:

- Writing is my profession.
- It is an honorable profession.
- It is a socially useful activity.
- I write constantly, easily, and effortlessly.
- I know which publications to send to.
- I sell my work.
- I earn a good living at it.

As you practice the principles and affirmations here, and others that emerge, you'll agonize less over writing too little or writing too much, and you'll write regularly with reduced effort. You'll come to know deeply that you deserve to write, appreciate it, enjoy it, and profit from it. And that load of guilt to start your own religion will get buried under your mounting stack of completed works.

Adapted from Noelle Sterne, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, 2011). www.trustyourlifenow.com

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ENDNOTES

1. "Crucify" by Tori Amos (2001). At <http://www.elyrics.net/read/t/tori-amos-lyrics/crucify-lyrics-18.html>. The lyrics of the entire song are very powerful.
2. Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (New York, Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), p. 99.
3. Erica Jong, quoted in *The Web's Most Humongous Collection of Writing Quotes*, <http://home.earthlink.net/~wallinger/quotes.html>.
4. Cameron, p. 98.
5. Cameron, p. 99.
6. This is from the Gospel of Thomas, number 70. Quoted by Elaine Pagels, WPBS, *Frontline* (1998), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/thomas.html>. See also *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, translated by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (New York: Polebridge Press, 1993), p. 513; Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).
7. Jean Rosenbaum and Veryl Rosenbaum, *The Writer's Survival Guide* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1982), p. 89.
8. Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum, p. 90.
9. Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum, p. 93.
10. Epictetus, *Virtue and Happiness: The Manual of Epictetus*, translated by Sherab Chodzin Kohn (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), p. 20.
11. Cameron, p. 3.
12. Eric Butterworth, *Discover the Power Within You* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 143.
13. J Douglas Bottorff, *A Practical Guide to Prosperous Living* (Unity Village, MO: Unity Books, 1998), p. 2.
14. Catherine Ponder, *Pray and Grow Rich* (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing, 1982), p. 103.
15. Peter McWilliams, *Do It! Let's Get off Our Buts* (Los Angeles: Prelude Press, 1994), p. 65.
16. McWilliams, p. 419.
17. Bottorff, pp. 11-12.
18. Natalie Goldberg chronicled her personal odyssey of coffee houses and diners in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986). And do I need to mention J. K. Rowling's habitual residence

at a certain local Edinburgh café with Harry Potter and his chums? For all such locales, I always pack a clipboard and a handful of pens, described in my essay "In Praise of Clipboards," *The Write Place At the Write Time*, Summer 2009, <http://www.thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org/writerscraftbox.html>

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Announcements

Our Writers:

~Noelle Sterne's forthcoming articles and essays appear in Unity Magazine, The Writer, Writers' Journal, 11.11, and The Moment I Knew: Reflections from Women on Life's Defining Moments. Book 2, Reflections on Women Series.

We've begun a new blog devoted to the business aspects of writing, featuring exercises, articles and interviews as well as being the new home for our Professional Services offerings such as substantive manuscript editing, manuscript evaluations, online creative writing courses and our monthly newsletter service that includes e-mail consulting (blog includes PayPal for quick, secure purchase of service offerings). Visit <http://inscribingindustry.blogspot.com> and become a follower!

Check out the interview series on the new blog with our own Noelle Sterne who gives great insight into non-fiction markets and managing submissions- (<http://inscribingindustry.blogspot.com/2011/06/part-i-question-i-of-interview-series.html>).