

Anna Fells

Why writing is better than calling Saul

Just an hour ago, as I arose from bed, I was awash with delighted anticipation. It was almost time. All week, I'd been looking forward to my day off, my day to write. Such joy awaits me! Today, I'll get to finally stop and sit, be curious, discover, and ride the wave as truth steadily takes on form, like a clay sculpture, with each tap of the keyboard.

So why am I not typing a word? A steaming cup of Santa Fe Aroma Sumatra sits at my side as I wait for the chemically induced alertness to rise in me like a sun. I am settled in front of my computer but my fingers are limply still. There is something snake-like writhing in me. The hours and hours lie ahead of me, open, free, and terribly, terrifyingly empty.

The window before me frames a New Mexico summer sky, blue and crisp, abutting the undulating skyline of the Sandia mountains below. I notice the Knife Edge of the Shield, often the first rocky aspect of the peak to catch the dawn sun. More locally, hummingbirds hover around the cream-colored flowers of the Russian olive. Behind me, my aging Aussie-mix Poco breathes rhythmically and deeply in his post-breakfast sleep.

Time. Enough money. No pressing worries. My desk and a view. Writer heaven, you'd think.

But write what? I stare at the blank Word document in front of me.

The refrigerator calls. Even though I'm not hungry, I want a piece of sourdough toast with butter. I chastise myself. I need to lose weight. Instead, I check my email. A new episode of "Better Call Saul" is available. Why not? No negative consequences for the waistline there. I work hard as a psychiatrist. Don't I deserve a break? Why not just get up from my chair, go back to the bedroom, prop the pillows behind my back and pull the blanket over my legs? Why not indulge?



Sometimes when I fantasize about being a writer, I imagine myself living in a light-filled cabin in the mountains, spending my days quietly contemplating life and communicating my glorious insights. Without trying, I transform suffering into art, and I am fully content and fulfilled.

And sometimes writing *does* feel freeing, like travelling. The words flow out like a babbling brook, delightful and inspiring. It can feel like a roller coaster, exciting, or a train, carrying me into the great unknown. Blissful moments like these seem to happen most often when I'm journaling, or doing "morning pages", and just letting it flow out of me without edits, the words of Julia Cameron from *The Artist Way* and Natalie Goldberg from *Writing Down the Bones* urging me forward. Writing can make me mischievous, silly, playful and fearless, and shine a light on that which is unknown and mysterious in me. It can be quite therapeutic.

I lose time. I can do it all day.

But this only happens on the good days. Oftentimes the writing process just feels sluggish or painful. Or I dread it.

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So why *not* bail when it's hard? Isn't this whole writing thing for fun, and all for me? Why should I force myself to sit here, when I am anxious to get back to my show, to find out which path Better Call Saul's protagonist, Jimmy McGill, will choose: that of an upstanding citizen, or shady swindler?

Last season, Jimmy tried so hard to take the moral high-ground, even passing on a dirty 1.6 million dollars. But in the end, all attempts at legitimacy got him nowhere. Poor guy was repeatedly shot down, betrayed by his brother. In the last episode, Jimmy expressed his regret for not taking the money, stating "I know what stopped me and you know what, it's never stopping me again."

Where *will* he go next?

Why *not* follow my heart's desire and find out?



For one, I'm dying for a new job, something that doesn't involve seeing patients but is still meaningful, because I've hit full-on burnout from being a shrink. I've been hoping that creative writing might serve that purpose for me. According to Jordan Peterson from the *Twelve Rules for Life*: "Meaning is doing good for self and others and reducing suffering for as many people as possible." And doesn't writing, indeed, serve that goal?

I double click on the folder titled "Why Write" in my laptop, which contains quotes from various recently read books and essays, and my own reflections on them. These have been collected over the last couple years to argue back to that Midwestern work ethic voice in me that claims creative writing is frivolous, and that tempts me at times to get up from my chair on days like these.

As I peruse, I am reminded that writing entertains and diverts, and can give people joy and laughter. Writing sparks curiosity, stimulates intellectual thought, and inspires a sense of wonder. Take Better Call Saul. Vince Gilligan, its creator, is a genius, and he's made me love Jimmy like I might a wayward brother or child. Jimmy's part of my community, now, and I care.

I read a quote by Azar Nafisi, who says, in *Lolita in Tehran*: "Every individual has different dimensions to their personality...it is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless...if you understand their different dimensions you cannot easily murder them." Her quote reminds me that when we read, we can discover what it's like to be someone else. It facilitates connection and breaks down walls. I don't have to be a con-man to know how Jimmy became one, and to mourn for his disappointments like they were my own.

I stumble on "The Hotel Cadiz", an essay about a woman, unhappy in her marriage, describing her thoughts, feelings and actions leading up to the decision to have an affair, and during the aftermath. Reading this work changed me, moving me from being a harsh judger of infidelity to an empathizer.

And I remember how much I've adored books like *The Brave Cowboy*

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by Edward Abbey, or post-apocalyptic ones like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *Dog Stars* by Peter Heller that highlight the value of things that are on the brink of being lost, by showing us a world without them, punching us in the gut.

Victor Frankl, a man who lived years in a Nazi concentration camp, says in his incredible book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." My why is to become someone that helps create life-altering explosions of insights in others, in a similar way that these amazing writers have done in me.

Clearly, I have a why. All the reasons in the world to push through. And writing could even be *more* impactful than seeing patients if a product is read by multiple people! Let's do this thing.



So I do. I sit. I double click and rifle through folders. I try to make something of what I've written in the past. I try to come up with something new.

And then the loud music starts to play – and not the good kind. The grating heavy metal kind. It goes something like this:

You don't have a gift for words. You don't have a knack for writing. And this isn't just low self-esteem talking. It's truth. You excel in math and science, but writing is hard. You've never been able to finish a crossword puzzle. You called a sea-horse, a horseshoe, not once, not twice but three times, during neuropsychiatric testing. Disturbing, to say the least. You are lazy about describing stuff, rarely providing details, having to always force yourself to go back and do it later. Your spoken and written sentences are clunky. Your dialogue is atrocious.

You have little discernment, little taste, and no guiding compass. You're filled with ideas, but have no clarity about which to follow. This isn't just the case in writing: it's part of your character. You take hundreds of pictures with your iPhone on a vacation but don't edit any out, because you don't know which are worth keeping. You don't have the capacity to sift through the mess and find the pearls.

And I buy it, hook, line and sinker. Any reassurance from myself that with a little more learning and help I could improve (after all, I'm a novice), is absent.

I recall one of the quotes I just read, by Sigrid Nunez from *The Friend*: "You want to know what you should write about. You're afraid that whatever you write will be trivial or just another version of something that's already been said. But remember, there is at least one book in you that cannot be written by anyone else but you. My advice is to dig deep and find it." What if that doesn't exist? I think of the pages and pages of notes and stories in my computer about my glorious five-month trip in India fifteen years ago, the lines and lines of scribbled handwriting in my journals designing characters for a political thriller, and the dozens and dozens of fleeting ideas for self-help books. But maybe I'll ultimately discover they are all dead ends. Right now, none of them feel quite right.

The reality is I don't even know what *kind* of writing to do. I love fiction. I lose time. I love movies and TV and books. Like for Azar Nafizi,

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fiction has been “my only sanctuary” countless times. It makes sense, therefore, that I’ve imagined myself writing it. I’ve taken several classes over the decades, and written a handful of stories and plays that are now in various stages of completion. But, I don’t think any of them are all that great. Plus, I’m not like Abed in the TV show “Community” who has imaginary worlds running through his head all the time, or like the people in the writing classes I’ve taken, sparky dialogue emerging from them effortlessly. And so what about creative non-fiction, or memoir? I’m just not really all that interesting.

And look at my track record! Despite sinking hour after hour over the last couple years, cutting and pasting notes and musings and recollections from decades past in my computer, trying to make something of it all, and even submitting a few things, I still am not writing with any kind of seriousness, in terms of time spent. I have no finished, published, products. Clearly, I’m a person that is more than capable of setting goals and achieving them. I’ve completed medical school, two residencies and two fellowships, and published numerous research articles and...well the list goes on. I’m, embarrassingly, an overachiever. I value accomplishment, perhaps, in part, due to a fractured sense of self-esteem. To not follow through on finishing writing projects over the decades seems inconsistent and is undoubtedly a sign that this is simply not for me.

I decide, with conviction, that the part of me that wants to write is delusional and I should just give this writing thing up.



Fully convinced, now, I go. I get up from my chair, and walk from my office to the bedroom and arrange the pillows, just so. I turn on the TV, and watch Jimmy convince Kim to scam a despicable businessman to pay their very expensive bar tab by posing as potential investors. I revel in their elation with them, while also squirming. They are walking a fine line, and Kim is being sucked in. The show tickles some thoughts in me that life isn’t all fun and games. I don’t want Kim to go any further towards the dark-side. She’s got too much of that magic combination of kindness, likability, and smarts, and potential to live a meaningful, good life.

An hour later it’s over. No more new Better Call Sauls are in the queue. Nor are there any other shows that even close to as satisfying as this one.

And then guilt floods in. I’ve wasted the time I had set aside for writing. It’s 11 a.m., and it feels so late.



Shake it off, I say, and leash up Poco for a walk.

I start by giving serious air-time to the idea that I should just give writing up, never doing it again, and it feels utterly impossible.

I can’t give it up. Maybe I’m one of those people that Rilke talks about after all: “A person who feels he can live without writing shouldn’t be writing” and, “If there’s anything else they could do with their lives instead of becoming writers they should do it.”

It’s a mysterious yearning, this yearning to write.

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I wonder if it's about more than just doing something meaningful, or proving that writing can provide a service to the world. There's a deeper draw.

Why do I *really* want to write?

Poco pulls me roughly to the side of the trail, inspired by some invisible scent on a pile of twigs, yanking me out of my thoughts, and sucks in gulp after gulp of delicious air through his nostrils, rapidly, voraciously. I imagine the fireworks of color taking place in his brain, and wonder what he's feeling and learning. Writing gives me the same intense sensory experience, I think. Like the smells do for Poco, there are things in me that have the possibility to paint spectacular patterns in my own brain, if I only attend to them.

Like meditation, writing is a way to be with what *is*, and to see it clearly. Writing is a portal into the unknown, a place where I am untethered, containing no boundaries, at once vertiginous, but also with wondrous potential to enlighten. Unlike meditation though, it occurs in a communal space, and, when done well, bridges gaps between people.

Writing is unfinished business. And the more that I lose time to distractions, the longer things stay unresolved.



I look up at the Sandias and notice the sun now splashing on the northern aspect of the Knife Edge of the Shield. The day my fiancé and I climbed it for the first time was one of the top-20 days of my life, and I remember how great it felt to be alone, sitting comfortably on the rocky belay ledge, bathed in warm gentle breeze, the canyons yawning at me on 3 sides, looking out at the baby blue sky and hundreds of miles of Central New Mexico.

I think that my yearning to write is similar to my yearning to climb a mountain for those magical moments of solitude where everything can be seen. In both cases, I'm driven to discover and am compelled by the hope for that elusive "ah ha".

If the pull to write is like the pull to climb, I wonder if I've gotten it a little wrong: the writer's experience is not the one I've idealized, but it, like climbing, requires grit.

Climbing a mountain is hard. The backpack might be forty pounds, the wake-up is pre-dawn, and it often involves hours and hours of hiking in steep terrain on loose crappy rock, bushwhacking, and rock-hopping. Not to mention the oftentimes tedious pre-climbing training and knot practicing.

And maybe that struggle is just part of the game with writing, too.

Perhaps I've been misconceiving the desire to write as *an itch*, or a *craving*, and thinking that if I just created space, I'd naturally follow its call, moment to moment, and that if I did so I'd find myself at the other end of a novel, euphoric.

In fact, I'm thinking now that it might be a deeper, more gut-centered, pull.

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I'm reminded of when I quit drinking almost 20 years ago. At the time I *craved* alcohol, but I had a *yearning* for another life. I joined AA, did the work, followed directions, and trusted the wisdom of the "program" over the voice that told me that alcohol was my best friend. To really change, I needed to draw on commitment, humility, determination and dedication, instead of following the moment-to-moment call of my whims and desires. Like with recovery, perhaps with writing it's just about acting "as if", keeping my butt in the chair, ignoring the voices that pull me this way and that, like a little skiff on a stormy sea.



After the walk, now filled with resolve, I go back to my desk, to see what's there, again. I think, I'll just write, and I'll be curious. I'll just see.

Within minutes I quickly find myself lost in fantasy, this time, about the strawberry-rhubarb crisp I'm planning to make sometime this week and realize I'm still hungry. Exasperated with myself, I laugh out loud. Poco, who's fallen asleep already, lifts his head in surprise, but quickly settles down again.

I'm like Jimmy, such a victim of my own bad impulses. I cringe for myself like I cringed when Jimmy chose to scam the old ladies in the nursing home who love him like a son.

Next, I type, "Why *shouldn't* I let my Better-Call-Saul-lover take the reins?"

Because, simply, I owe it to myself.

And so, I begin again.