



Photo: Charlota Blunarova

FREEFORM REFLECTIONS

This month I thought I would try something different. I want to give you all a window into how these newsletters come together. I've been experimenting with a technique—essentially a kind of freeform rapid writing—and it's producing the most interesting results. Not only does the practice help me churn out all of this writing, it also helps me discover truths about myself.

You see, when I sit down to write each month, I often have no idea what I'm going to write about. This phenomenon is something I've heard from a lot of regular writers. It's kind of scary at times because I get to this point in the month where I just cannot imagine how I'm going to put together the newsletter again. This is a real psychological problem because I've committed to myself to publish something no matter what!

So, to get myself going I'll pull out a piece of paper or open a blank document on the computer and just start writing. What I tell myself is that I can write about absolutely

anything I want and I mean anything. And let me tell you, some crazy stuff has come out of this. I don't have to even write full sentences or follow the rules of grammar. I just have to write and write as fast as I can. What I've found is that this practice works like magic. It has a way of rapidly unleashing the creative forces in my mind—often the entire structure of the newsletter will take shape in my head within an hour or so of doing this. I'll know what I want to write about and interestingly as I'm working on something else or walking or doing something around the house topic sentences will start coming into my mind, sometimes even whole paragraphs. And once I'm properly started the newsletter writing just flows.

This, in and of itself, makes the practice worth trying for any aspiring writer. However, there's more! Sometimes, the practice itself will produce some writing worthy of attention. Today I'm sharing with you some short pieces that came out of this practice of rapid, freeform, reflective writing. I hope you enjoy!

There's a journal-like passage with some thoughts on how I think about time:

On Time

Your relationship with time is perhaps your most important one. It's a question of who is going to rule. Will it be you? Or will it be time? And it's a serious question, for left alone time will use you up, whether you want it to or not. Remember, time is the "Destroyer of all Things."

But time itself can be mastered. Its power harnessed and channeled. And instead of time just flowing into you tearing you apart second-by-second, you can train yourself to redirect the destructive energy of time in you. You can train yourself to recognize and accept the flow of time and push it into the channel of creative force. That's the incredible beauty of this mind-body instrument.

There are a bunch of passages like these two where I'm thinking about and trying to reconcile the impulse for creative expression with the problem of the ego:

The Ego and the Conscience

There is a fine line indeed between the true confidence of a man established completely in himself and that of the egoist. And if there is anything clear from the great teachings of history it's that you want to avoid at all cost the life of the egoist. That being said, you also don't want to make the mistake, for it has equally negative ramifications on your soul, of denying the calls of your conscience. All spiritual training is designed to teach you to know the difference.

When you deny the calls of your conscience, you are refusing the calls of God. Remember what Maslow said, "What a man can be, he must be." The full, authentic expression of your soul is what is required in each moment. If you shrink behind a mask of false humility not only do you harm yourself but also you leave the world that much more vulnerable to the erratic cravings of the egoists. This is a great sin against the sacred trust.

What to Do with Understanding

Understanding comes with such a price, it seems. To make any progress you have to toil away for years at living, reading, writing, praying, meditating, exercising, giving, forgiving... But as it comes upon you, you realize what a bargain this exchange is.

Then there's the question of what to do with this understanding. You'll have the urge to share it and pass it along. This is a good urge. But how can you possibly even begin? Where would you even start? You know the breadth and the depth of the prerequisites. You know that the process itself is basically untranslatable with mere words. Even if you could figure out how to start someone off, you'd end up quickly at "let's talk in a few years!"



Photo: Nathan Dumlao

Maybe the thing to do is come at it obliquely. Socrates asked his questions. Homer wrote his poems. Shakespeare wrote plays. Da Vinci painted. Michelangelo sculpted... That is, rather than being proscriptive, you suggest, you hint, you try to inspire. Whatever you do, at all costs you don't tell anyone what to do!

For some time now, I've been working with this spiritual idea that the thing to do in life is dedicate yourself to selfless service. In this piece, I'm trying to reconcile the time I'm spending on this project with that ideal.

Doing Good with Words

Here's an idea: You can do good with words.

When you think about selfless service, writing isn't one of the things that first comes to mind. I guess for all of us the idea brings forth different first associations. For me, I always think of the obvious, the helpers—the doctors, nurses, teachers, psychologists, those who feed and take care of the poor, the disabled and the outcasts. And those are all great avenues for selfless service, no doubt.

But think of the kind of impact a writer can have! Words can speak across all of time. Though the physical acts of the writer are far removed in space and time from what feels like service to us the living, they can serve just a great a purpose and, perhaps, even greater. For everything we need to know almost we can find in the stories we tell. Unlike the more normal acts of service, which are limited by the constraints of physicality, words, once written, can spread and spread and spread, almost with no cost. What the writer lacks for in intimacy and immediacy, she makes up for in raw scale.

The writer must embrace the suffering of the creative process not through the channels of the ego but instead through the channels of the selfless soul. Psychologically, practically this is a very difficult thing to do. The discomforts of the ego

are less uncomfortable than the unknowns of the selfless soul. Even though the ego is a cruel bastard, at least we know what we are getting there. As we grow older in life we can sort of figure out how to use the ego to help us get what we want. We can use it to challenge our will to ever greater feats of discipline and it can help us construct an edifice of confidence—a fragile one indeed! But something nonetheless—through which we can engage creatively with the world. But then we end-up creating only for ourselves instead of for others.

I suspect why suicide is common among great writers is that psychologically this is a dangerous path to take. The ego, built as it is, can find brutal fault with even the most beloved and successful writer. Writing is too much of an ephemeral thing. The standards are too inadequately defined. Praise isn't a strong enough or sturdy enough counter-balance to hold the mad cravings of the ego in check.

To write selflessly, you must reorient your practice of life completely. It is not enough to sit down to write and try thinking to yourself “this is to help others!” That's a good start but not enough. You have to wear down your ego enough, through assimilation, to know the ego's presence in all its subtle forms. You will have to have learned how to go beyond it and its petty co-options.

Regular readers will find this next one familiar. There's a lot of passages like this one where I'm exploring the idea of civic responsibility and the moral obligations of democratic citizens.

Civic Passion

The notion that we can safely ignore our civic duties rests upon a false and dangerous assumption. It's not true that we can just pursue our self-interests. It's never been true. The Invisible Hand can only take society so far. Government must play an important role in even the most laissez-faire capitalistic systems. And the government isn't some anonymous force. It doesn't just function on its own. It is run by people.

What happens to a society if the best and brightest ignore government and refuse to contribute and participate? Who steps in to fill the void?

Times of prolonged peace seem to make people forget the

truth about government: that it is by far the most important source in society. It should be obvious given that it holds the incredible powers of the state. But when times are good, when there is peace and prosperity, the government moves into the background of our collective consciousness. We ignore it. We take it for granted. We complain about its annoying administrative intrusions into our private lives. Then something happens—war or Covid-19—and we realize at once how terribly dependent we all are on our government and people in it.



Photo: Tim Oun

The revitalization of our great democracy requires nothing less than the complete re-transformation of our values. We must find again that spirit which makes civic leadership the most revered, sought after position in our society, where the people who are pursuing elected offices are the celebrities of the day, where the best and the brightest are compelled not into private industry but into service.

Government, above all, must be a force for good. For the alternative is unthinkable. It turns out that freedom is a really big deal. If you care at all about your life, you would absolutely not want to wake-up and find yourself in Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany. The inherent powers of the state present the opportunity for the worst evil. To prevent this kind of catastrophe good people have to be willing to lead and to serve. It's the only way.

I'll end with a kind of a crazy one. I decided one day to write a letter to Abraham Lincoln. And as I was writing I tried to keep the feeling in my mind that this was a real letter that might someday be read. Here's what came out:

Dear Abraham

Forgive me if you prefer President Lincoln. I mean no disrespect. For some reason, I thought you wouldn't mind this salutation. As you may know, sitting up there with God, I think about you a lot, about what you did, what you said, what you stood for. Every time I see your image or hear your name my mind wanders down inspiring halls and pathways.

I've been meaning to ask you somethings; I just hadn't the courage until now to do so:

When you were a younger man—say in your early 40's before all this President stuff—did you know what you had inside you? Did you already know what kind of man you



Photo: Claudio Schwartz

would become? I've wondered what it was like for you during those years when you were working as a lawyer and raising your family in that quiet then-Western town. What were you thinking about? Did the fires of fate burn in you? Did you feel like Caesar did passing through that village? I keep thinking to myself that you just had to have know something. There must have been some feeling inside you, perhaps like a calling. What was that like?

You see, I've been wrestling with this question of how to live life and really thinking about just what I should do or not. I've always felt like I was born to fulfill some great mission. I try to write this feeling off as the result of reading too many books, hero tales and history, as the product of unrealized childhood fantasy, or as just another ego-obsession. But not

matter what I do, it's always just there. I cannot shake it. I wonder whether you might have felt something like that?

Anyway, observing you as best as I can, separated in time as we are, I cannot help but think that you must have been called by God somehow. What was that like? Did it come to you in a dream? Or maybe it came through conscience as one of those instincts that feel more like commands, those things you feel that you just have to do?

I imagine you get a lot of these letters, maybe not written down formally like this, but instead sounding inside the hearts of all those your story has inspired. I don't want to engage in too much flattery here but I really believe you are the greatest of all our Presidents and the best American. □