

It's only words

Lessons learnt from a
year of writing

COLIN WALKER

It's Only Words

Colin Walker

Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Lesson 1 - What is writing?</i>	6
<i>Lesson 2 - Like any other habit</i>	12
<i>Lesson 3 - Our own inspiration</i>	15
<i>Lesson 4 - Big ideas, little ideas</i>	21
<i>Lesson 5 - Everything is derivative</i>	24
<i>Lesson 6 - Identity is fluid</i>	28
<i>Lesson 7 - What is authenticity?</i>	32
<i>Lesson 8 - Trigger and therapy</i>	35
<i>Lesson 9 - Writing and the truth</i>	39
<i>Lesson 10 - Balance and burnout</i>	43
<i>Lesson 11 - Writing changes people</i>	46
<i>Conclusion - We should all write</i>	49

Lessons learnt from a year of writing.

Preface

Ever since I can remember, I have always wanted to write, have always loved writing, but often had an unsatisfactory relationship with the written word. From the world's second shortest ghost story (there's a story behind that itself) to getting an 'A for audacity' for a crazy yarn in my early teens. From a brief sojourn into poetry and a failed sci-fi novel to items in various UK magazines before finally settling on the internet and blogging in particular.

It's all about words.

Without words, we are as nothing; we are mute and expressionless.

Without words, we have no genuine understanding, no way to describe. Without words, all we have is emotion and are unable to define even that.

Words enable everything, from expressing our base desires to communicating the beauty of a sunset.

"It's only words and words are all I have" - The Bee Gees

They say a picture paints a thousand words, that we cannot possibly do a beautiful or emotive image justice in mere language – to try is to sully the sheer perfection of what we have before us.

But, sometimes, one word is all it takes.

One word can be a catalyst and, in the right context, spawn a whole cascading torrent of thoughts, ideas and emotions.

One word can be the tiny crack that breaks the dam, releasing the pent up waters, pouring forth the contents of our mental reservoirs.

One word can miraculously encapsulate everything we feel or think.

Words have power, but one word, the right word at the right time, can be the most powerful of all.

There's no such thing as *only* words.

Introduction

It all started with a desire to create a habit; sounds reasonable doesn't it: wanting to be less sporadic, less inconsistent? What I didn't know, however, was that this desire would take me through joy, pain, burn out and depression.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Allow me to take you back to 2013. For five years, I had been blogging primarily about social media, initially to promote its use and continued growth, and later to look at the science and psychology behind it. I was trying to turn a personal interest into something it wasn't, trying to be a 'citizen journalist' rather than a blogger. I had been blogging for five years before this but lost my way, not that I had ever really found it.

I had always envisaged ways that social networks could be better, for new functionality to provide a better experience. While I was trying to sell them as "must-haves for all", I was actually projecting my personal wants onto whatever service I was discussing (usually Twitter) even though it came from a genuine love of "social" and the potential it held.

The problem was, treating blogging like journalism and always wanting to be proven right drove me on an unhealthy quest for perfection. I went for days, weeks, sometimes months without publishing anything. Don't get me wrong — I wrote regularly but nothing matched up to this crazy notion of a quality piece that I had in my head. This project also won't match up, but that's another story.

It's likely that I only ever hit publish on between 5 and 10% of what I wrote, most things were never finished. I wrote from impulse and emotion — if I couldn't finish something in one sitting it would probably be discarded; the moment was lost, the specific emotional state that spawned it dissipated, never to return.

The longer this continued, the worse it became: mounting frustration lead to ever-higher standards and an ever-increasing doubt that I could live up to them. I had taken breaks before, but 2013 saw me consider jacking it all in completely.

Something needed to change.

Starting something

From mid-2011, most of my time online was being spent at the now-defunct Google+ social network (also written as Google Plus)¹ because Twitter, with its 140 character limit at the time, felt restrictive and not conducive to good conversation. It still does, which is among the reasons I no longer have an account.

Seeing 2013 as a lost opportunity, I wanted to do something different so, on January 4th 2014 in a post called "*Stupid is as stupid does*" I made a vow: I would write something, anything,

¹ Google+ on Wikipedia - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google%2B>

every day for a year. Not only that, I would publish it, no matter what it was, so that I could be held accountable. As I wrote at the time:

"It is said that if you do something for 21 days it becomes habit. The actual time it takes for something to become second nature varies with the task but the concept is sound: whatever it is do it, even if you have to force yourself, until it becomes ingrained in your psyche, becoming as much a part of you as breathing and comes just as naturally."

The idea was to get away from the notion of perfection, to become comfortable with hitting publish on whatever came to mind. It wasn't specified at the time, this was just an idea that developed over time, but the goal evolved and became for me to write an average of 300 words per day. I mostly succeeded. Some days saw less, others considerably more still, setting the target as an average allowed for this fluctuation, reducing the pressure even further.

This vow morphed into the #Write365 project that became my life for just over a year — I missed five days due to illness, so moved them to the end for a total of 365 posts — and has haunted me ever since. Upon its completion, I always intended to do something with all of these words — over 110,000 of them all tapped solely into my phone — and my initial thought was some form of anthology but, for reasons I will go in to later, this never happened.

In that introductory post, I wrote that *"we don't find out who we really are and what we can achieve until we are willing to bare all (metaphorically speaking) and expose our vulnerabilities; until we make mistakes and learn from them."* Little did I know how prophetic this sentence was to become, what impact the Write365 project would have on me at the time and for years to come.

So here we are, six years later, and I feel that I have unfinished business with both the project itself and what it influenced, how it affected me and how that still impacts my thoughts and mental health to this day.

In one particular daily post, I wrote: *"I just wish that I could take all of these threads, these web-like strands and weave them into a whole — some kind of cohesive pattern."* Perhaps *this* is that whole.

This ... book, if we are going to call it that (and the lessons it contains) ... is built on the foundations of the project with much of it being extracts taken directly from, or inspired by, those daily posts. Any unattributed quotes will be from those posts. More recent blog posts combined with new thoughts and research serve to place flesh on the bones.

Lesson 1 - What is writing?

"If eyes are the window to the soul, then writing is the door to the mind."

What is writing? What is a writer? The two go hand in hand, one cannot be described, cannot exist without the other.

At its most basic, writing is just putting words on the page (physical or digital), but it goes so much further than that. Writing is communication with yourself or others; a tool, functional or expressive. It can be entertainment or punishment, and it can be the embodiment of self.

We can all write (a tweet, a shopping list, the greeting in a birthday card), but is it really *writing*? How long does something have to be for it to be considered writing? Do we need to separate the physical act from the more 'esoteric' pastime?

Writing itself can take many forms and be intended for mass consumption, the sight of a select few, an audience of one *other*, or just an audience of one — yourself. Writing can create novels, academic papers, news columns, letters to the editor, letters to a friend, blogs, and private journals. The ways we write, and the reasons for it, are many and varied: by hand in a notebook or on loose-leaf, typed using our computers, or tapped into our phones; those ever-present windows to the world and repositories for our thoughts. We can write in apps or straight to the web, based on our needs and desires.

Still, the question remains: what *is* writing, what do we mean by it and, consequently, by being a writer?

"Success or failure will depend on their capacity to distil the complex, the confusing, the intricate, the beautiful."

It certainly doesn't help that there are various definitions of what a writer is. Perhaps the most common is "*a person who writes books or articles to be published,*" or variations on that theme. It implies that a writer is a professional, synonymous with an author. And this is usually why imposter syndrome kicks in, at least for me.

There are other definitions, however, including:

- a person who writes or is able to write, and
- a person who commits his or her thoughts, ideas, etc. to writing.

The first is an obvious derivation from the verb, but the second is more meaningful. Indeed, the entry for 'writer' on Wikipedia begins:

"A writer is a person who uses written words in various styles and techniques to communicate ideas."

These last two descriptions sound much more like a blogger, or someone writing in a journal, regardless of whether it will be read by others. In fact, the entry lists blogger and diarist as types of writer. ²

As Austin Kleon says: *forget the noun, do the verb.* ³

The late author Richard Peck, an award-winning novelist for young readers, once said that writing "*is communication, not self-expression. Nobody in this world wants to read your diary except your mother.*"

I would disagree, and blogs are among the counterpoints to that argument. Most writers — and by that read professional writers, purists — would not, however, consider blogging to be writing, *proper* writing, that is.

Many bloggers put down thousands upon thousands of words; just because they are publishing to the web, does that mean they are not writers? What about the likes of Venkatesh Rao or Derek Sivers, who turn their posts into books? Does the translation from screen to page turn them into a writer? Does the fact their books were not conceived and written as a whole exclude them from being judged so?

Blogs are among the most personal of undertakings, inherently labours of love that frustrate and infuriate their authors who stick with them because they bring something out in them, a true reflection. They are the epitome of online self-expression and can find large audiences. This *is* writing, and nothing can persuade me otherwise.

The internet has forever changed writing.

"Technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories." — Laurie Anderson

And what of autobiographies?

There is a massive market in people's stories — their *life* stories. ⁴ Dozens of biographies and autobiographies are published each year. What could be more a means of self-expression than the story of your life? That is all they are — stories. That is, ultimately, all *anything* is in one fashion or another.

² Wikipedia definition of Writer - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writer>

³ We are nouns, not verbs - <https://austinkleon.com/2018/11/09/we-are-verbs-not-nouns/>

⁴ The Guardian - Top selling biographies and autobiographies since 2001 - The top-selling biographies and auto-biographies between 2001 & 2016 — 45 listed books — shifted almost 11 million units between them and generated over £80 million in revenue. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/feb/07/biographies-autobiography-nielsen-2001>

The 2013 film *Her* (starring Joaquin Phoenix and the voice of Scarlett Johansson) contains a line that expresses this beautifully. Samantha, the artificially intelligent operating system installed on Theodore's devices, exclaims: "*The past is just a story we tell ourselves.*"

All writing is storytelling of a sort.

Instructions tell the story of how to achieve the desired result. Ingredients tell the story of a food item while a news broadcast tells a story of the days' events. A sign tells a story, be it informational or a warning, with an implied back story — a reason for its existence — and a future of potential outcomes should we choose to either heed or ignore its message.

Even in literature, writing is putting yourself into the work. Despite Peck's protestations that he became a writer because he never "*had a teacher who said, 'Write what you know,'*"⁵ we cannot avoid doing so and express ourselves, one way or another, in *everything* we create. Our work is laden with our knowledge, experiences, influences and biases — it is a mirror to and an extension of ourselves, and no amount of arguing can change that.

The (in)famous quote, so often associated with Ernest Hemingway, says:

"There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed."

Whether this originated with Hemingway or has been falsely ascribed to him is largely irrelevant, its meaning is what is of importance. Quotes are often misattributed so as to grant them additional validity and gravitas. It may be that the idea originated with the American sportswriter 'Red' Smith who, when asked whether he had difficulty writing a daily column, was quoted as saying: "*You simply sit down at the typewriter, open your veins, and bleed.*"

Hemingway is *way* cooler than a sportswriter. Who wouldn't want such a quote attributed to him? The irony is that Smith may not even have said it. Instead, the originator *could* have been Paul Gallico, another sportswriter, who may have said something similar three years prior.

Irrespective of who said what, the point is that writing requires sacrifice, requires us to put our feelings and emotions, our very selves, into it. I put so much of myself into the original Write365 project that it drained me, I was left an emotional wreck come the end of the year. I was in no condition to continue working with the material. I am now taking much of that work, coupled with my experiences in the intervening years, and writing this.

⁵ New York Times obituary, May 2018 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/27/obituaries/richard-peck-acclaimed-author-for-young-readers-dies-at-84.html>

*"The moment that you feel that, just possibly, you're walking down the street naked exposing too much of your heart and your mind and what exists on the inside, showing too much of yourself, that's the moment you may be starting to get it right" — Neil Gaiman*⁶

Hard work

Writing is hard work — writing anything of substance. Search the internet and you will find endless quotes attesting to this. Mark Twain may have (allegedly) said that writing is easy, all you have to do is cross out the wrong words but therein lies the rub: *which* words are the wrong words or the right ones for that matter? How do we know?

Many will say that there is no magic involved, just the willingness to keep going no matter what, to keep slogging away even if you don't feel like it. Turn up and do the work. Indeed, as I write this, I have a habit tracker⁷ stuck to my wardrobe door to ensure exactly that: write some words, even if they are the wrong words, and cross the day off ready for tomorrow. Don't break the streak. It is the same approach, the Calendar Method, that has long been associated with the comedian Jerry Seinfeld: write a joke every day, good or bad, and put a big red 'X' through that day on the calendar. Come back again tomorrow and do the same. Do something often enough and you will get better.

"We are what we repeatedly do, excellence then, is not an act, but a habit." — Aristotle

As James Clear writes in his excellent book *Atomic Habits*:⁸

There is nothing magical about time passing with regard to habit formation. It doesn't matter if it's been twenty-one days or thirty days or three hundred days. What matters is the rate at which you perform the behaviour. You could do something twice in thirty days, or two hundred times. It's the frequency that makes the difference.

Others will denounce inspiration completely, arguing, instead, that ideas come purely from the result of hard graft. The notion that there is some mystical force out in the æther is anathema to them. This, of course, leads us down a very different path, one that we will tread later as we discuss the notion of inspiration, what it is and where it comes from.

Writing is an obsession, it has to be for it to be completed. Writing takes time, a good deal of effort, and a single-mindedness reserved for those who wish to excel in their chosen field, be that artist, musician or athlete. Author Ursula K. Le Guin expanded eloquently on this:

⁶ Neil Gaiman — *Make Good Art* 2012 commencement speech at The University of the Arts - <https://www.uarts.edu/neil-gaiman-keynote-address-2012>

⁷ The "Practice and suck less" 30-day challenge sheet from Austin Kleon - <https://austinkleon.com/2021/01/02/30-day-practice-and-suck-less-challenge/>

⁸ James Clear — *Atomic Habits*, P148 UK paperback edition, Lesson 11

*"A writer is a person who cares what words mean, what they say, how they say it. Writers know words are their way towards truth and freedom, and so they use them with care, with thought, with fear, with delight. By using words well they strengthen their souls. Story-tellers and poets spend their lives learning that skill and art of using words well. And their words make the souls of their readers stronger, brighter, deeper."*⁹

Thomas Mann — the German novelist and winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1929 — summed it up a little more abruptly with the sentence: "A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." You might expect the reverse to be true, but to be a writer is to agonise about each word, each sentence; everything must be *just so* until the creation is a direct translation of thought to page.

But that doesn't always have to be the case. Let us return to the less formal world of blogging for a moment.

Do you remember doing equations at school when you used to be awarded marks for showing your working out? Sometimes you didn't get the correct answer, but the teacher could see if and where you had made a stupid mistake or genuinely didn't understand how to solve it. Rather than just right or wrong, they marked you accordingly.

Sometimes writing feels like doing equations and that you are being rewarded for your working out, it's not just the final solution that matters but how you got there.

Novels (along with the likes of articles and research papers but in a different form) are that final solution, the result of extensive toil to get everything in place, beginning, middle and end with well-rounded characters and an engrossing story. Readers want right — they don't award marks for "I see what you were trying to do." Blogs are generally far less formal, blogs are the notes and ideas which get us there, the working out. They are where we experiment and are free to make mistakes and changes.

"blogging feels to me like a world of endless drafting, endless revisioning ... A much more forgiving medium." — Austin Kleon¹⁰

Understanding

I will agree with Richard Peck that writing is communication, but it is so much more than that. Writing means and gives many different things to different people.

"Writing is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you're going to get." (Apologies to Forrest Gump)

⁹ Ursula K. Le Guin - *A Few Words to a Young Writer* - <http://ursulaklequinarchive.com/WordsYoungWriter.html>

¹⁰ Austin Kleon — Blogging as a forgiving medium - <https://austinkleon.com/2021/02/09/blogging-as-a-forgiving-medium/>

Writing helps us communicate our thoughts, feelings, emotions, ideas, concepts and lessons whether that be in books, pamphlets, news columns or on the internet. Communication doesn't stop with facts and figures and we are not just communicating with others but also with ourselves, both current and future.

Lloyd Alexander — an American author of over forty books — said "*Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It's a way of understanding it.*" Replace 'fantasy' with 'writing' and you start to get to the truth that lies at the heart of all this. Just as everything is a story, all writing can be seen as a search to understand the world around us, and ourselves. The wildest fantasy will rely on metaphor and allegory but, regardless of the skill of the author, a creative work *must* be based in part, or refer heavily to, reality — it must be framed in recognisable terms that it be understood. That understanding goes two ways: we use reality to understand the fantasy but, also, the lives, feelings and emotions of 'made up' characters help us better comprehend ourselves and the world around us. We are often too close to or too invested in reality to see it for what it really is; the alternative viewpoint of "story" reconciles our worldview.

That is exactly how I felt about the Write365 project. The only problem was that understanding it was a double-edged sword.

Lesson 2 - Like any other habit

The intention behind the Write365 project was not to create a body of work but to create a habit — the habit of writing every day. While it may be a little more involved than other actions, writing is just like any other habit. But what, exactly, is a habit?

I will be referencing *Atomic Habits* by James Clear in this lesson but, let's start with a couple of definitions found using a quick web search — a habit is:

- A recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behaviour that is acquired through frequent repetition.
- An acquired mode of behaviour that has become nearly or completely involuntary.

Conventional wisdom, to use the term here in a derogatory manner, states that it takes twenty-one days to form a habit. We learnt, however, in Lesson 1, and as the first definition above denotes, that habit formation is not time-based but dependant on the regularity with which you act. Even then, something will only become an unconscious habit if it passes the tests of ease, obviousness, attractiveness and reward as laid out by Clear.

For an action to become a habit it should be:

- obvious, so that you cannot ignore it,
- attractive, so that you *want* to do it,
- easy, such that it can be performed with as little friction as possible, and
- provide sufficient reward that you will want to do it again.

My intention with the Write365 project was always to make it easy, having set out from the very beginning to reduce the burden of creation by employing a "*write something, anything*" mantra. Each day was supposed to be a fresh start; I would go where the words took me — not in search of perfection but in getting something down and building the habit, not breaking the streak.

While I largely succeeded (I only didn't post when I was sufficiently ill), there was no real routine evidenced by several daily posts lamenting how late it was and how tired I was. Although I was trying to make things easy, I fell down on making it obvious; I had set no reminders or other cues that I should be writing other than the knowledge I had to write. On busy days or days when I simply didn't feel like it '*just knowing*' wasn't enough to keep me on track, leaving me to scramble at the end of the day to get the words down — not an ideal situation by any means.

Get advice from anyone about building a habit and there will always be a key theme: turn up and do the work. I mentioned this in Lesson 1. Habits don't get formed if you only take action when you feel like it, they are built by showing up even when you *don't* feel like it. That is why I chose to conduct the project in public and on a social network, no less — for accountability. Commonly, advice on forming habits advocates make good use of accountability partners: trusted friends or mentors who will check in regularly and keep you honest. In effect, my entire

social following, potentially thousands of people, were my partners. Not only were they keeping watch on what I was doing, the feeling of not wanting to let them down, as well as myself, spurred me on. Day after day after day.

It's easy to lie to yourself, to say that you've done enough and don't need to bother — not today — but not so easy to convince an expectant audience. My attempts to build habits writing morning pages ¹¹ and gratitude logs have petered out because of such lies because I have been writing solely for self and not had that impetus to continue. Giving yourself permission *not* to do something because you don't want to is permitting yourself to fail. If it happens once you pick yourself up, move on and start again — twice or more and you start to have a problem. It's all too easy to fall off the wagon, especially if you are falling down on the easy and obvious.

"It's a lot easier to fall out of a habit than to form one."

Not doing something can become just as much of a habit as doing it, we get *used* to not doing it. Not doing it is far easier than doing it, especially after allowing that state to persist for any length of time. Once a habit is broken, it becomes harder to re-establish due to an underlying sense of failure.

All too often, we make a resolution, fail after a short while then think that's it! In our own minds, we have failed, *become* a failure, and that thing we resolved to do gets put aside. Just because we failed once we get into the mindset that the failure is permanent.

How messed up is that?

Such is the danger of linking success or failure to specific points in time. These aren't one time goals but ongoing processes that can begin whenever we want, can start again should we fall off the wagon, start the streak anew.

"You try, you fail, you try, you fail, but the only true failure is when you stop trying." — Madame Leota, Haunted Mansion.

Many tasks we undertake, habits that we build, are composed of constituent parts, each contributing in their own way towards the greater good — the whole is so much greater than the sum of its parts. And so it is with writing. The trick is in aligning those parts, in creating a workflow conducive to the repetition required. But a workflow isn't just about the tools or processes we use, it begins with our frame of mind and attitude.

¹¹ See Lesson 9 for a discussion on morning pages

Goals

In *Atomic Habits*, Clear writes "*Achieving a goal is only a momentary change*"¹² — a goal is separate from a habit.

Building a regular habit is not about achieving a specific end goal but about developing a system. To ensure a habit sticks, we should work to do the thing not as a means to an end but in order to do the process. An athlete does not train for a single event and stop once they have completed it. No, they keep the habit, keep training to get better.

On reflection, I couched the Write365 project in conflicting terms. On the one hand, I said I wanted to build a regular writing practice - every day, but on the other, I set a specific target: a year, 365 days of writing. By having such an explicitly defined target, everything was geared towards reaching it *without* any thought about what was to come after. I took a break and the habit died. By achieving my goal, I granted myself permission to stop. If I had established the project according to different rules, the writing habit might have continued rather than collapsing in such unceremonious fashion. What you are reading now might have been written years earlier.

Goals are necessary but need to be touchpoints along a longer path, not its terminus. Of course, goals are useful and motivational, though not the be-all and end-all, a means to an end rather than the end itself. There should be a plan in place for what happens *after* a goal is reached, where will you go next in to maintain the habit or use what you have learnt.

If the habit is eating more healthily, a target weight may be an initial motivation but stopping once you reach that goal will only cause you to put the weight back on. The goal may have been reached, but the habit needs to continue to at least maintain the status quo. And so it is with writing — something I learnt the hard way. Yes, there were mitigating factors, which we will investigate in a later lesson, but I should have worked harder to get past them.

Writing for 365 days was an end, not a means to an end — I had no plan for what I wanted to do afterwards. I was building a writing habit with no real reason or idea of why. Why did I want to write every day? For what purpose? What would I do with it?

¹² *Atomic Habits*, page 25.

Lesson 3 - Our own inspiration

"You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club." - Jack London

In Lesson 1, I wrote that some people denounce inspiration, arguing that ideas come purely from, and as a result of, hard graft. "*The notion that there is some mystical force out in the æther is anathema to them.*" I have my own ideas regarding inspiration and where it comes from.

Before we can continue, we need to establish exactly what we are talking about — what is inspiration? As is my wont, let's look at a couple of definitions:

- the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative
- a sudden brilliant or timely idea

Seems simple enough, doesn't it? But what *is* it, where does it come from, and how can we use it?

In one of the Write365 daily posts, somewhat predictably called *Inspiration*, I wrote:

Inspiration is like a strange, wild beast. It can hunt you, prowl in the shadows and taunt you for days, then pounce suddenly when your defences are down and you least expect it.

We can tame the beast, but it cannot be forced — it must be coaxed. We can't sit back and wait for it to strike; we must cajole it, tempt it and draw it to us like a cautious animal.

I likened inspiration to something *other*, something beyond ourselves, and this is the typical romantic vision — something wonderful, magical that we can draw upon to fuel our creative fires. Instead, it is my firm belief that we actually become our own inspiration. Inspiration is not something that happens *to* us but something that manifests *within* us, inspiration is a state of mind rather than an actual 'thing'.

In times of drought — be that creative, academic, athletic — we can look back on our previous accomplishments almost with awe and ask "how did I do that?" Questioning our current state, we wonder how we came up with the ideas or managed to perform as we did. We demand to know where the required skills came from and, perhaps, most importantly, we demand to know what changed.

We stopped!

That's right, we stopped — stopped doing whatever it was that got us to where we were. We stopped playing, writing, running, painting - no matter what it was, we stopped practising. We have returned to the realm of habits. Forget about the 10000-hour rule (or myth) of achieving mastery; as soon as we stop practising, our expertise starts to diminish until, if we stop for long enough, it is eventually lost. It doesn't matter how long we practise. After we have stopped and

the benefit has gone, we will look back in wonder at our achievements in precisely the same way after only 100 hours as after 1000 or 10000.

Being creative opens the flood gates — we get the mental wheels turning and give *ourselves* ideas by getting in the right mindset. The American author Philip José Farmer once said that *"Imagination is like a muscle. I found out that the more I wrote, the bigger it got."* For my own part, during my daily writing, I observed much the same on several different occasions:

"I subconsciously adhere to a certain style, and this style influences subsequent thoughts: a feedback loop."

"The more we create, the more creative we grow to be."

"Creation becomes habitual, and we find ourselves overwhelmed with thoughts and concepts"

Conduits

One theme that emerged from the project was being a messenger, someone who exists to pass things on rather than create them. There are moments when an idea seems to materialise spontaneously, fully formed, and transfer itself from mind to page. This never ceases to amaze and astound me. Such moments would appear to be as literal an experience of inspiration as one can get. They make me feel like little more than a conduit, a channel for these nuances of thought to share themselves with the world, and I have to wonder "why me?"

It is as though these ideas are physical manifestations. They exist in their own right and have just been looking for a way to get from A to B, seeking the path of least resistance, and I am no more than a lightning rod providing these wondrous sparks with the quickest route to ground.

Regardless of the activity undertaken, when we practise we open ourselves to the experience, train our bodies and minds to behave in a certain way such that they *know* how to act. For physical activities, we refer to this as muscle memory or motor learning — actions ingrained into memory through extensive repetition such that they become almost instinctual.

By being creative, by paying attention, we make ourselves more receptive to ideas and the connections between them — we get into the habit of *thinking*. What we like to call inspiration is actually an opening of the ways. We provide ourselves with a larger palette to choose from, to select what colours our thoughts. I would argue that inspiration is nothing more than a state of flow, but this is not some mystical occurrence but the result of putting in the work.

Barbara Gail Montero, former ballet dancer and now an associate professor of philosophy at CUNY, argues against the romantic notion that entering a state of flow allows one to perform at their best by getting out of the way and letting it take over.¹³ She refers to flow as "*that four-letter word*". Ballet is concerned with exacting standards and the endless pursuit of perfect form — any lapse in concentration means the dancer will not meet them. A slightly misplaced

¹³ <https://aeon.co/essays/the-true-expert-does-not-perform-in-a-state-of-effortless-flow>

arm here or incorrectly bent leg there can ruin a performance so the dancer must remain in control at all times and cannot allow themselves to become lost in the reverie of performing for fear of chastisement. It was this judgement that contributed to her leaving ballet.

Montero mentions the work of Swedish psychologist K. Anders Ericsson upon whose work Malcolm Gladwell popularised the 10000-hour rule. She states that:

"critical self-reflection is essential to the best training regimens. In contrast to mindlessly doing an action over and over again, Ericsson advocates deliberate practice — working on the most difficult aspects of a task, followed by an analysis of one's own successes and failures."

This is all so far removed from the idea of flow with which we are familiar, and how it is considered an ideal state in which to exist. The term, however, appears to have been misinterpreted, leading to the need for such a rebuttal.

The concept of flow was recognised and named by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a Hungarian-American psychologist and author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. He found that when people enter a particular mental state they feel "strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities."¹⁴ When you look at the language employed — effortless control, peak of their abilities — it is easy to see how this can be interpreted incorrectly. There is, however, one word above that is key: *feel*. People in a state of flow *feel* in control and at the peak of their abilities, they *feel* things are easy and effortless. That is the point of it. Flow concerns itself with how the activity is *experienced* and not with its excellence.

Deliberate practice is required to give our best performance or do our best work. However, on entering a state of flow, we will enjoy the activity more, we will be happier as a consequence. The two working in tandem: dedicated practice gets us to a point where we are more likely to experience the flow state. By reaching a certain level of skill or experience, we open ourselves to the possibility of it occurring. We must then take the result of that state and reapply the concentrated effort to improve it. Flow is not a happy accident. Flow is the result of that deliberate practice. Flow is the result of all that hard work despite, when it happens, it feels effortless and otherworldly. Flow may allow us to hammer away at the keys, blissfully unaware of the passage of time, seemingly acting as a conduit to create a first draft, but then the hard work of revision and editing must take its turn and perfect it.

I have long suggested that maybe flow is the alignment of the conscious and the subconscious — those rare moments when what is inside is able to manifest in the world beyond the constraints of the mind; the body acting as a conduit between the physical and mental realms. In *Atomic habits* James Clear outlines his theory of what happens when we achieve a state of flow:¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi/>

¹⁵ Atomic Habits, footnote on page 232

Psychologists commonly refer to the brain as operating in two modes System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast and instinctual. Generally speaking processes you can perform very quickly (like habits) are governed by System 1. Meanwhile, System 2 controls thinking processes that are more effortful and slow — like calculating the answer to a difficult math problem. With regard to flow, I like to imagine System 1 and System 2 as residing on opposite ends of the spectrum of thinking. The more automatic a cognitive process is the more it slides toward the System 1 side of the spectrum. The more effortful a task is, the more it slides toward System 2. Flow, I believe, resides on the razor's edge between System 1 and System 2. You are fully using all of your automatic and implicit knowledge related to the task while also working hard to rise to a challenge beyond your ability. Both brain modes are fully engaged. The conscious and nonconscious are working perfectly in sync.

That last line — “*The conscious and nonconscious are working perfectly in sync*” — ties in with my thoughts. Regardless of whatever is happening, there is a coming together of some sorts, an alignment of mental forces that make an action engrossing to the exclusion of all else — when nothing else matters or exists, not even time.

Flow is like being on autopilot; we are not obsessing over every detail, not holding ourselves back, just letting things happen and almost absolving ourselves of responsibility. That is why it *feels* so easy, so controlled, and why it *feels* we are at the peak of our abilities even if the performance is technically lacking. We imagine that this is how expertise *feels*.

The subconscious

There is a scene in the TV series *Extant* where Halle Berry's character, Molly, tries to explain the subconscious to her artificial son. She says it is “*the secret part of you*”:

“There's a part of you that's here with me right now, and there's another part of you that belongs just to you.”

The subconscious is part of us that exists at a level that it is, for all intents and purposes, *secret* to us, but as for belonging to us, I'm not so sure. I think it is more of a symbiotic relationship. There exists a great divide in opinion about the subconscious — some believe it is a tool for the conscious mind to utilise, a resource to draw upon. Then, there are those who feel the subconscious holds the upper hand in the fight for mental primacy.

Thoughts and ideas bubble up from our mental depths to the conscious mind, we are not always in control. These influence our behaviour, our personal beliefs and mental state - it can almost be a feedback loop. But, the subconscious can be programmed, can be persuaded to see things the way we want them to be seen — consider neuro-linguistic programming. Behaviour can be manipulated and modelled using language to trigger connections to neurological processes — we literally talk ourselves into becoming what we want.

And this is where the symbiotic relationship comes in to play. It is a two-way street: thoughts and ideas may arise from the subconscious, but we can also imprint them, send them back the other way. The conscious and subconscious are like two sides of the same coin — one cannot

exist without the other — and combined make us *us*. The iceberg analogy might be cliché but reflects that the mind has hidden depths, and we are not always able to see below the surface.

This connection between the conscious and subconscious (or nonconscious as Clear refers to it) has always fascinated me and, by extension, the relationship between sleep, dreaming and daydreaming.

An article by Michael J Breus, PhD on the Psychology Today website ¹⁶ outlines a number of possible reasons for why we dream, including:

- A component and form of memory processing, aiding in the consolidation of learning and short-term memory to long-term memory storage.
- An extension of waking consciousness, reflecting the experiences of waking life.
- A means by which the mind works through difficult, complicated, unsettling thoughts, emotions, and experiences, to achieve psychological and emotional balance.
- A form of consciousness that unites past, present and future in processing information from the first two, and preparing for the third.

Something I've often wondered is whether if we do not get enough sleep do we daydream more? Does the mind need to catch up on its processing and filing things away if there has not been sufficient rest? Daydreams are stigmatised, the daydreamer usually considered lazy or irresponsible, but studies show that our brains are incredibly active while we daydream, especially the areas that allow us to solve complex problems. Do we, therefore, sometimes just need to let the subconscious take over and for our mental librarians to do their jobs, file things away and find what we need?_ How many times are we told to 'sleep on it' to come up with a solution to a problem that's vexing us or before making an important decision? How many people keep notepads at their bedside to scribble down anything that comes to them during the night.

If dreaming *is* an extension of waking consciousness and memory processing, and assuming daydreaming is its waking counterpart, how much of our inspiration actually comes from the brain performing its normal processes? What we consider a sudden flash of inspiration could be nothing more than the brain sorting facts and memories during sleep and our recalling them upon waking.

The subconscious is a treasure trove holding riches of knowledge and ideas beyond our imagining if only we can access them. So much of what we see, hear and read we absorb but do not acknowledge, do not realise we *know*. Ideas emerge fully formed and we try to internalise what we write, have them become part of our conscious reasoning. These miniphanies seemingly arise from nowhere, not feeling like our own but are a part of us in the truest sense. We just help them on their path from thought to word to self-truth.

¹⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sleep-newzzz/201502/why-do-we-dream>

Lesson 4 - Big ideas, little ideas

"Ideas are our lifeblood, yet, alone, they are nothing but shadows of what might have been or reflections of possible futures. With only ideas I am just the thinker and not the doer. With only ideas I am just the ideas man and not the author or the entrepreneur. With only ideas I am but a single step down a very long road and can only dream of reaching the end."¹⁷

Over the years, on my social profiles (while I still had them), I described myself as an 'ideas man' but what does that mean? It sounds impressive and creative, self-aggrandising, but perhaps, in context, it was also self-deprecating. I used to have ideas about how something could be fixed, improved or built upon — always based on something *else* rather than on being original. As we shall see in the next lesson, everything is derivative, but it didn't *feel* like that.

It is an overgeneralisation, but there are two types of ideas: big ideas and little ideas — sometimes called 'big I' ideas and 'little i' ideas. I viewed big ideas as grand, sweeping things that can change the world; books or products, something complete, something whole. By comparison, little ideas were fragments, features, adjustments, notes. I always wanted to have big ideas and create something meaningful, to write a book, but those big ideas eluded me. I could never come up with the big ideas or, on the rare occasion I did, was unable to follow them through — hence the self-deprecating nature of ideas man.

Big ideas scared me — they were daunting, always beyond my grasp. I never had the tenacity to complete them. It was, however, psychological as much as about ability. What I felt I wanted, have felt for as long as I can recall, was sabotaged by my own mind and that nagging voice inside that says "*you can't do it, you're not good enough.*"

I had little ideas in spades, how to tweak this or fix that, why company X should buy product Y, how so-and-so could be better. Little ideas came freely but were always reliant on something else, something over which I had no control, so would never be realised. I told myself that I could only have little ideas so frequently that I believed it — that became my truth. I was never going to build something, never write that book.

Big ideas seemed more important, more valuable, more ... worthy.

*"I coulda been a contender. I could've been somebody"*¹⁸

Break it down

The internet is full of articles counselling the breaking up of big tasks or projects into small, manageable parts — sage advice yet advice we sometimes cannot take. Sometimes we just get hung up on the enormity of a thing, and this is all we can see. That is if we can see it at all.

¹⁷ <https://colinwalker.blog/ideas-creativity-and-scale/>

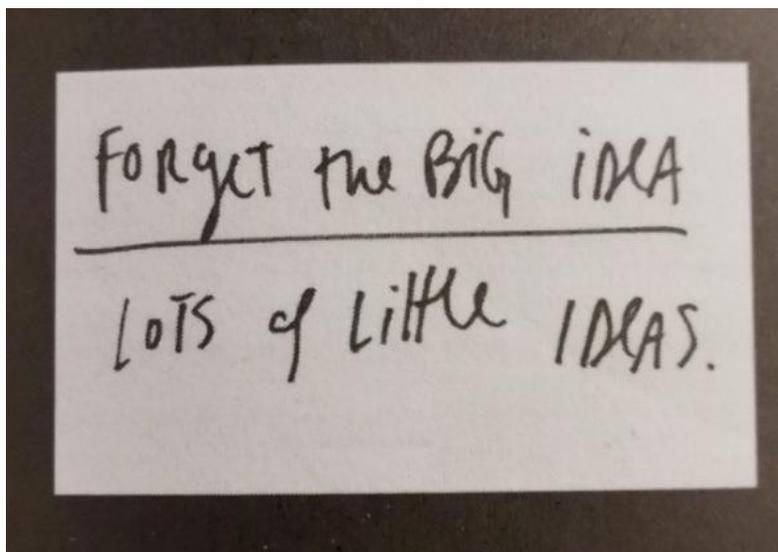
¹⁸ Marlon Brando as Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*

In his seminal comic book series *The Sandman*, Neil Gaiman writes "Some things are too big to be seen; some emotions are too huge to be felt." This might have been inspired by G.K. Chesterton's line in *The Superstition of Divorce*: "Men can always be blind to a thing so long as it is big enough." Indeed, when Gaiman blogged about writing his novel *American Gods* he said "As a writer, all I could do was to describe a small part of the whole. And it was too big to see."¹⁹ He was referring to the USA, a country too big to comprehend, but could have been writing about anything.

The Write365 project was a big idea — a grand sweeping thing to use the words above — a whole year's worth of writing that came to well over 100,000 words. That would have been an almost insurmountable task had I tried to achieve it all in one go but, by turning up each day and just committing to around 300 words, it happened.

The reality is that big ideas are simply the culmination of lots of little ideas, parts and sections that combine to create the whole. Even now, I keep telling myself that I'm a little ideas person, it has become ingrained in my psyche, but the project showed that I am indeed capable of bigger things — I just have to believe. I just have to break them down.

The project set the scene for me to understand that small does not mean insignificant, but it didn't sink in until years later when I read *Show Your Work* by Austin Kleon, the middle book in his *Steal Like an Artist* trilogy. I was struck by one particular idea, an image with two lines of text arranged one above the other: ²⁰



Forget the big Idea.

¹⁹ https://www.neilgaiman.com/Cool_Stuff/Essays/Essays_By_Neil/How_Dare_You

²⁰ *Show Your Work*, Austin Kleon

It isn't even in the book *per se*, but in the section at the end showing ideas that didn't make the cut. Still, this one image, this one idea that almost didn't get printed, had more of an impact on me than anything.

I have always written in one form or another, have always *wanted* to write but have almost always struggled. There are a lot of 'always' in that sentence. Blogging is what I know best, where I feel most comfortable, and where I have spent the most time. It is an ideal format in which I am not punished for having small ideas. The Write365 project was a continuation of this ideal — in essence, it was a big idea that didn't *feel* like one. Its nature meant there were enough little ideas that they started to show threads and connections, little ideas began to grow and compound — that is why I am writing this, again in small chunks a few hundred words at a time. Lessons were learnt *because* of those threads, because lots of little ideas started to show trends, build patterns and iterate on previous thoughts. The sum of the parts became more than the whole.

Emergence

Emergence is how the complex arises from a multiplicity of the simple: ideas, systems, behaviours. A habit such as daily writing on the internet demands that a number of individual actions are performed — multiple, distinct processes that exhibit a division of labour, steps on the journey from beginning to end. Writing is more than the singular act of putting words on the page; the resultant act is emergent from these collective smaller and simpler accomplishments.

No matter how closely those steps fall, or how short any one of them may be, they are still there:

- Ideation
- Creation
- Publication

I may have taken liberties with the nomenclature but they amount to the formulation of ideas, drafting those ideas into "works" and ensuring they are fit for publication (editing) before finally hitting the button and sharing them with the world.

But look at them.

They look so ugly and awkward when laid out like that, too rigid for such a beautiful process. Ideation is such a crappy word. It sounds made up in an "I'm trying to be smart" kind of way. The bastard lovechild, desperately seeking affection from resentful parents who both regret the illicit tryst that created it.

The fact remains we arrive at a destination by changing one thing at a time — small acts for a cumulative effect with each necessary, nay vital, for the final result to occur.

Lesson 5 - Everything is derivative

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. ²¹

There is nothing new under the sun so why do we bother? That quote, if you didn't already know, is from the Bible and if there was nothing new *then* what chance do we have now with millennia of recorded history before us? We bother because it is in our nature to seek the new and the alternative, to find ideas and stories that better reflect our world view. Times change and so do we.

We yearn to create, to have big ideas and for those ideas to be truly original, but this very yearning for originality causes so many problems, stops us dead in our tracks. It goes hand in hand with the quest for perfection — something else that is almost impossible to achieve, yet we hold ourselves to such standards. We wait for original, we wait for perfect, and so never get started; it is as though we would rather do nothing than demean ourselves with something derivative.

The bad news is that *everything* is derivative — there is no such thing as truly original thought. But that doesn't mean anything, doesn't mean that we can't build, improve, create. Some of the greatest minds throughout history have recognised this very fact but gone on to do wonderful, life-changing, groundbreaking work. What if *they* decided to give up purely because they were building on something else?

Isaac Newton, one of the most influential scientists ever who formulated the laws of motion and gravity, freely acknowledged those who came before him by saying in 1675 "*If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.*" To directly illustrate the point that very phrase is derivative — in 1159 John of Salisbury (author, philosopher and bishop of Chartres) wrote that Bernard of Chartres "*used to compare us to dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.*" And even that may not be its origin. ²²

In the previous lesson, I noted how Neil Gaiman's line "*Some things are too big to be seen*" likely has a similar passage from G.K. Chesterton as its inspiration. Maria Popova, the author and curator of the wonderful Brain Pickings, writes "*I'm a big believer in creativity as a combinatorial force — a great big puzzle you construct from existing pieces in your mental pool of resources.*" ²³ So why do we have such a mental block on originality?

²¹ Ecclesiastes 1:9, *The Bible* - New International Version

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standing_on_the_shoulders_of_giants

²³ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2010/10/13/nina-paley-creativity/>

Is it pride? Vanity? Or is it a realisation that nothing is truly ours? Maybe that scares us — that we are ultimately just repeating what someone else has already said or thought. We don't want to be seen as conformist, as rehashing the same old ideas as everyone else. We want to think that what we do, say or create actually matters.

"Exercising the right not to walk" - Dalton, Dead Poets Society

On a cultural level, our stories have been told for thousands upon thousands of years, since before we could ever write or build or type. They were handed down, one generation to the next, father to son and mother to daughter, elder and teacher to student. There has always been talk, always been conversation; and while there may be nothing new under the sun there are always new ways of doing it, new insights to be had. Reality is but a truth waiting to be deposed — life's operating system replaced with an upgrade, forever being patched and updated.

If our stories are so predictable, why do they keep getting retold? Is it because we enjoy the familiar tropes? Do we secretly long for the familiarity and do not want to be truly shocked or surprised? What about horror films? They shock us - yes, but usually according to reliable, predictable tropes. The late author Kurt Vonnegut, in his autobiography *Palm Sunday*, tells of his master's thesis in anthropology which was rejected for being *"so simple and looked like too much fun."* In this he theorised that there are 8 core story shapes and, in a succinct summing up, stated *"The fundamental idea is that stories have shapes which can be drawn on graph paper, and that the shape of a given society's stories is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads."*²⁴

We exist in a state of creative dichotomy, seeking to isolate ourselves from external influence on the one hand and acknowledging and embracing what has come before us on the other.

Sometimes I want nothing more than to read and research, link to resources and paste quotations — multiple strands woven together to fashion a coherent whole. But then there are those occasions when I will avoid everything, shut myself off from the world and the web. I want to capture thought as it comes to me without outside influence; I want it to remain pure and unadulterated as I know that exposing myself to the ideas of another will twist it, turn it away from its original path and meaning. Still, this is never really possible.

For the writer, reading is an occupational hazard. Look at any guide to becoming a better writer and it will suggest that one needs to read more, widely and deeply; read to understand how the greats constructed sentence, structure and story. How much of what we consume ends up influencing us, even if unintentionally? In a blog post entitled *"March to your own beat"* photographer Rebecca Toh writes *"The more we read, the easier it is for us to write or think*

²⁴ <https://www.openculture.com/2014/02/kurt-vonnegut-masters-thesis-rejected-by-u-chicago.html>

things we think are original but that are actually derived from other people's heads."²⁵ She gives the example of her father, a house builder, who would say "I don't look at other people's stuff" when she would try to show him examples of design, not wishing to be unduly influenced.

In the foreword to the second edition of the Lord of the Rings, Tolkien wrote of his influences:

*"An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous."*²⁶

There are times when influence is obvious, when we regale stories from our past or use people, situations and events as direct templates for what we create. But, as Tolkien suggests, the process is often far more subtle — everything we experience is taken deep into ourselves and we can never be exactly sure what effect it will have upon us in later life, personally or creatively. We absorb so much information from our environment, much of it subliminally, and can subconsciously process all this for years without ever realising. Much of it lies dormant, waiting — waiting for the right time to show itself, the right spark to light the creative fires upon which we burn away the slag to forge something new. But it's not, not really, not completely. We extrapolate from all of these experiences to form our own ideas and opinions.

There is a school of thought that says we are born with the entire knowledge of the universe but view it through our own filters as to have access to it all would be overwhelming. *Too big to see*. Deep inside we know all there is to know but just don't, *can't* remember it. We go through life not learning but remembering, constantly adjusting our filters to allow for different or more complex data as we grow and develop. Carl Jung defined the concept of the creative unconscious, the notion that parts of the deepest unconscious mind are genetically inherited and not shaped by our experience — we are born with certain parameters for life just as animals live by instinct. Nature not nurture.

We are all connected and part of something much bigger, living sequential samples of a universal experience.

Rather than sequester ourselves, seeking that all too elusive originality, perhaps we need the input of others. Perhaps we need their thoughts, ideas and contributions to reawaken what sleeps inside, to reignite the fires of imagination that smoulder within. Perhaps we need to be reminded of everything we once learnt but didn't realise, everything we need to complete our own trains of thought. And so we return to inspiration and how everything we need is already inside us but requires a nudge to rise to the surface.

Even when life or serendipity dictates that different people are simultaneously arriving at the same place, literally or figuratively, it doesn't mean they are travelling down the same road.

²⁵ Rebecca Toh, <https://rebeccatoh.co/beat/>

²⁶ JRR Tolkien, foreword to the second edition of Lord of the Rings

We take our own routes, see unique sights and explore different avenues. Rather than telling brand new tales, we are adding our individual colour and texture born of our experience. We want to make our own conclusions.

Frank D Evans, a data scientist and engineer, writes "*Everything is derivative. Take advantage of that. 'New' ideas are the next step in an extensive network of existing people and ideas.*"²⁷ By exploring this network, analysing it, we don't have to create new ideas as much as discover them. We can build on what is already there, rearrange it until, just maybe, we find new insights or new connections.

We just have to give ourselves permission to learn from what has come before, permission to be derivative because it is not a four-letter word.

²⁷ <https://www.exaptive.com/blog/if-every-new-idea-is-derivative-derive-them>

Lesson 6 - Identity is fluid

Life is a journey.

Not just from A to B, from start to finish, but a journey of discovery: discovery of the world around us and, perhaps more importantly, the discovery of self - the ongoing realisation of who we are and what we can become.

Spend long enough alone with your own thoughts, and things will invariably turn to the existential question: "who am I?" Three little words (no, not those three) that seem so simple, but the answer is almost impossible to pin down.

Why is this?

To come to some kind of conclusion, we should start with the absolute basics and ask what *is* identity? We can define it as:

- the condition of being a certain person or thing.

I am Colin, this is a chair. Is that it? Is it really that simple? Or are we just scratching the surface? I suppose it depends on how far we want to go down the rabbit hole.

In non-psychological terms, our identity is a literal representation of who we are - an identity provider, such as a government or council department, will give an absolute reference for this: a birth certificate or passport. That is who *you* are. Identity provision can also be nested: getting official documentation like a driving licence relies on the production of your birth certificate, for example, and providers rely on a chain of authority and trust like security certificates for web pages referring to a trusted root.

Do we identify ourselves purely on those terms or based on what we do? An accountant, a lawyer, a police officer, a writer — are our jobs and hobbies defining characteristics? What happens when we retire? Do we suddenly become something, someone else?

We talk of our identity as though it is something we own and control but, to the world, we are just *name, rank and serial number*. I am me, you are you, and our identities are what stops others from getting us confused. They are composed of pieces of information, objects described by attributes, that keep us as distinct individuals and prevent our mail from being delivered to the wrong house.

The title of this lesson isn't referring to our literal or legal identity, although we can officially change our names. Instead, I am talking about our 'personal identity' or the sense of self — a far more intimate representation, how we see ourselves — who we think we are and what we try to project to the world around us.

The now

A common theme that arose from the daily posts was the notion of change, how we are always a product of *now*. As the now is always different so must we be as we occupy our space within it. Our legal identity is fixed, an applied external property, whereas the sense of self is an

internal, developed one — far more nuanced, subject to growth and change. Society demands that we be a fixed entity, depends on it, but this is far from the truth within our own realities. It would be nice to think that we can provide a definitive 'us' when asked who we are — immutable and unchanging — it would make things considerably simpler, but that cannot happen.

Who we are is made up of our personality and behaviour, our thoughts, feelings and beliefs. It is our view of ourselves and our appreciation for where we sit in the world. We may think of, or even refer to, it as our identity, but it is an adaptation of who we are, and who we want to be seen to be, based on time and circumstance. We change and grow, our opinions morph over time based on life experiences — what held true for us a decade ago may no longer hold sway. A fixed version of ourselves is an unachievable ideal.

Just as we evolve so concepts, meanings and understandings evolve with us. We attribute new properties to even basic entities as we realise that they are part of a far wider interplay than we at first imagined. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus is quoted as saying: "*No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.*" Our passage through life alters us on a fundamental level. Just as we see things differently to others so we also see things differently to the past and future version of ourselves.

The TV character Dr Gil Grissom, from the drama series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, once said "*What we are never changes. Who we are never stops changing.*" Our literal, external identity is fixed, but the sense of self is impermanent — who we think ourselves to be, who we *want* to be and who we would like others to recognise us as.

Even then there is a disconnect, an uncertainty as to what or who we are. We seek surety — as much as society demands it we want consistency, we want to be able to say "this is me" and feel the truth of it. And so we begin to think of ourselves as that one notion of identity, a consistent projection or manifestation of who we are despite simultaneously growing and evolving as experiences contribute to that projection.

We see our lives as one story arc: birth > life > death — our stories as one giant novel comprised of different chapters, each event following on the last in perfect sequence: action > reaction > conclusion. We string together these events as though they have unequivocal temporal significance, as though their placement in our story affects everything that follows and, of course, the eventual outcome. We are, of course, the result of all that we have experienced but there is no logical sequence. As much as we attempt to fashion our narrative according to these rules, we have no one true story, no flowing autobiographical truth that serves us completely from beginning to end.

Instead, our own sense of identity or self is transient and evolving.

As experience changes us, we become new instances of ourselves, we are ephemeral, and the notion of a static identity goes out the window. Indeed, if we try to maintain one, we are deceiving ourselves, trying to play a consistent role that cannot possibly exist after enough

change. It would be like trying to recite a part in a play when the other actors have received new scripts or the *dramatis personae* has been altered.

We mean to be true to ourselves, but what does that actually mean when 'ourselves' is a moving target? Is it a contradiction? How can we be true to something that is constantly changing? Perhaps, what we mean is that we won't be false, won't try to be something we are not, won't try to play that role. Instead, we will just do what comes naturally, improvise with the rest of the cast — a different production every day.

We must accept this change or suffer. As Annie Mueller, content creator and blogger, writes:

*"to appreciate fully all you are and are not, all you have chosen, all you have to give, requires you to accept and appreciate the versions of self which have died to bring this You into being"*²⁸

Not so simple a task as it may seem. Accepting 'the now' requires us to sacrifice the past instances of ourselves at the altar of time, acknowledge that they are done, gone and have served their purpose. We can't go back to them just as we can't turn back the clock. As Mueller asks: *"Can you leave behind your past self? All the incarnations? All the You-versions that existed? They're not real anymore. They don't live, except when you give them permission."*

Still, society demands more, or maybe that should be less; society expects a degree of permanence — something to pin a label on. If our identity is the epitome of ephemerality, how do we accurately represent it? How do we accurately project an ongoing metamorphosis, especially when it is so gradual and not always apparent, even to ourselves?

We are as multi-faceted jewels ever morphing into new shapes yet forced to go against our transience, to pick a specific aspect, a single facet to polish and display over all others. And so we mould ourselves to situation, circumstance and environment — become creatures of context — only revealing a part of ourselves, albeit always a different part and of a different size, even to those closest to us.

By changing our context do we still feel we are truly 'us'?

In *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963* Susan Sontag, the American writer, philosopher and activist, declared *"I write to define myself — as an act of self-defence — part of the process of becoming."* This follows on from the realisation: *"I need the identity as a weapon, to match the*

²⁸ Annie Mueller, *How to accept yourself* — <https://anniemueller.com/how-to-accept-yourself/>

weapon that society has against me." which she wrote a few years earlier. Within her writing, she was constructing who she was, who she wanted to be seen as, creating a narrative for herself rather than have one imposed upon her. Interestingly, Sontag is also quoted as saying: *"I've never fancied the ideology of writing as therapy or self-expression"* — an intriguing contradiction. It strikes me that her self-creation was *exactly* that, an expression of self as she saw it, not how others imagined it.

"All those moments... will be lost in time, like tears... in rain." — Roy Batty, *Bladerunner*.

Many of the things we do in our lives just become part of us but, all too often, we cannot remember the where, how and why of them starting. They are pivotal moments, forks on our path — events or decisions that decidedly affect who we are, but they are lost in time, unable to be recalled. At the time, they might seem completely inconsequential, throwaway choices, even mere dalliances, but over time, maybe even years later, can lead to something significant.

History records that the 'tears in rain' monologue was ad-libbed by Rutger Hauer, that he just had an idea about cutting up the existing script and wanted to give it a try. In many ways, the speech became the film's defining moment.²⁹

This is largely how we live our lives — ad-libbed, on the fly, and those snap decisions ultimately become what defines us as individuals. Perhaps this is why some people like to write diaries or journals — to keep hold of those fleeting moments, to record them for posterity. Sontag demonstrates journals at their best.

Journals are not merely historic records but sounding boards, confidantes, receptacles for thoughts, feelings, emotions, tools for reflection and introspection. For all of this, however, one interesting aspect is that they are as much a product of their time as the events they are designed to record — they perfectly reflect our personal change and growth and that we are but evolving instances of ourselves.

When asked, many will say the diary is like a stranger they can tell anything without fear, without judgement but, upon reading them back, the analogy is curiously prophetic as the real stranger is their past self.

²⁹ Tears in rain monologue — https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tears_in_rain_monologue

Lesson 7 - What is authenticity?

"Our individuality is a contradiction: it defines us, gives us our place, but can also distort and isolate us if we persist in chasing it down ever more restrictive corridors, hoping that we might eventually find the centre of the maze."

The Write365 project was decidedly of the social era, a product of its time, and many of the daily posts were written in that vein. The trials and tribulations of social media were taxing then just as they are now.

"A man is known by the company he keeps." — Aesop

It is an old proverb with many variations from across the globe. Whether it is "a man is known by his friends" or "birds of a feather flock together" the meaning is always the same: the assumption is that you will be like or behave similarly to those with whom you associate. We cannot claim to be one thing then associate ourselves with those who are another.

After all, Aesop also wrote *"If you choose bad companions, no one will believe that you are anything but bad yourself."*

Our actions must be consistent with our identity, but it's not quite that simple.

"This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man." — Polonius, *Hamlet*³⁰

During 2014 I had repeatedly been going over an idea that I never quite got to grips with — until it suddenly coalesced for me typically when I wasn't focusing on it. Isn't that always the way?

I call it the identity paradox.

In our 21st century online lives we are told to be open, honest, authentic, genuine — the key to success is to "just be yourself."

I'm going to throw a couple of clichés at you now:

- dress for the job you want and not the job you have
- you can choose your friends but you can't choose your family

What do these have in common? They're both about being in situations you would prefer were different.

In life, we align ourselves with others who share our interests and (hopefully) don't annoy us; those who, crucially, we can disengage from relatively easily should things go south — they have no other connection to us than a now terminated friendship. It is human nature and herd mentality is a self-preservation mechanism But family will still be family. Our family, our work

³⁰ *Hamlet*, Act 1 Scene 3

colleagues, our friends, all will only share a certain subset of our interests. We may be extremely close to family members and have many things in common due to constant proximity but, at the same time, have completely different taste in films, books, music.

What I'm trying to say is that, in life, we might not always be able to be 'us'.

We might not be able to discuss the theological influences of the Matrix trilogy with fellow office workers or the finer points of Sartre's notion that man is "condemned to be free" across the dinner table.

In life, we are making constant compromises to fit in with those around us or the environment in which we find ourselves. Circumstance doesn't allow us to fully explore each of the avenues we would wish to walk down. Writing, however, allows us to be the version of ourselves we are rarely fortunate enough to be. And therein lies the paradox: to the observer, it appears that the self we manifest through our writing is inauthentic compared to that which inhabits life off the page.

Who are we really? Are we who the world perceives or the conundrum that can only exist on the page? What is authentic or true when, by necessity, we project different façades of ourselves to different people or groups? From the previous lesson, we saw that: "*We act in accordance with our nature but if that nature changes so do our words, actions, beliefs. This may be seen as inauthentic from the outside but is it? Not if we are being true to ourselves.*" What does that actually mean when 'ourselves' is a moving target? Is it a contradiction? How can we be true to something that is constantly changing? Perhaps, what we mean is that we won't be false, won't try to be something we are not — at least on the inside. To return to the metaphor from before, we won't try to play a fixed role when all about us has altered, we will just do what comes naturally and improvise with the rest of the cast — a different production every day.

Another concept that came to me around this time was the imposition of self — the idea that to attempt to bring our full selves to any situation, when it might be inappropriate to do so, is an imposition.

Our public filters and social protocols dictate how we should act and who we should 'be' in any given situation. For all the talk of authenticity, we are but components of the systems we inhabit. We must play our part within the parameters we are supplied, or the system collapses. We normally cannot imprint ourselves upon the system unless it is one we control.

We can only bring a part of us, an aspect of who we are, to the table — be it an idea or technique. In these scenarios, we seek ways to retain an essence of ourselves: a seemingly innocuous line in a report that is a disguised geeky quote; or cunningly hidden items of jewellery that don't quite adhere to uniform rules. Something to display a sense of individuality, to say "this is me, I'm different, this isn't all there is" to anyone who may be able to pick up on it. We want these tell-tale signs visible to those who might be looking for them, cultural or intellectual pointers to somehow indicate that we exist beyond and outside the present moment. Signposts along those interesting paths we may wish to walk if only we had the chance and had someone to walk them with.

In many situations, the rules dictated by the system only allow us to go so far without being noticed by the wrong people. We must be subtle.

"Exercising the right not to walk" - Dalton, Dead Poets Society.

Some, however, are lucky enough to exist outside of the systems; maybe they can be truly authentic or, perhaps, this is what we may see as being eccentric — different, at odds with what would be considered *normal*.

Philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty* "*the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained,*"³¹ but lamented "*That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time.*" He believed that "*exceptional individuals, instead of being deterred, should be encouraged in acting differently from the mass*" and that non-conformity was itself a service.

Think about it for a moment.

We hear talk of "*suffering their eccentricities*" or "*tolerating their quirks*" but what if eccentrics aren't *odd* at all, what if eccentrics are those who have abandoned all pretence, by whatever means, and are genuinely being themselves regardless of the situation, external influence or opinion? Indeed, the poet and critic Edith Sitwell suggested "*Eccentricity is not, as some would believe, a form of madness. It is often a kind of innocent pride, and the man of genius and the aristocrat are frequently regarded as eccentrics because genius and aristocrat are entirely unafraid of, and uninfluenced by, the opinions and vagaries of the crowd.*"

True, complete authenticity is the freedom not to care what others think as it does not matter within that moment. Unfortunately, the majority of us are not in this position. We rely on the systems for our survival, our jobs and livelihoods. We can only go as far as the systems allow us without being penalised. Despite what those running the systems may argue, we cannot bring our full selves to bear as they do not fit or are not deemed appropriate. To do so is an imposition.

The imposition of authenticity is the imposition of the self.

³¹ *On Liberty*, 2nd edition, pages 120-121,
<https://archive.org/details/onliberty03millgoog/page/n124/mode/2up>

Lesson 8 - Trigger and therapy

Writing has always been something that I wanted to do, at least since I was about nine or ten years old in middle school. There were a couple of specific instances I can remember that really made me think "yes, *this is who I want to be*": a short story about someone who travelled to the future only to find that nuclear war had left humanity threatened by giant ants; and the world's second shortest ghost story.³² Both derivative, but both woke something within me.

It wasn't until several years later, in my late teens and early twenties, that writing first became took on a whole new meaning and importance in my life, when poetry seemed to be the only way I felt I could express myself and my feelings. Lonely, lovesick, depressed, I needed an outlet — poetry became that for me.

Creativity during depression serves different purposes. Yes, it can be employed to curry false favour — that brief dopamine hit, that moment of adulation when others say "*very good, well done*". It is also, more importantly, a method of self-administered therapy. Indeed, art therapy is frequently prescribed to patients as a means of psychotherapy minus the social stigma of seeing a 'shrink'. Its goal is to allow the patient to effect change and growth on a personal level through the expression of their emotions and fears. It is a way of coming to an understanding and realisation. Writing therapy helps us to observe our thoughts and feelings from a safer distance, the detachment allows examination just as Buddhist meditation helps to observe thoughts unfold without judgement.

My depression inflicted upon me periods of insomnia yet, in my often sleep-deprived state, I would experience moments of intense lucidity. I would sit awake in the small hours writing free verse, using it to spew forth my innermost thoughts in an attempt to exorcise my demons. Other times I would walk the local area, maybe until dawn, and experience the most rapturous revelation, composing as I walked, hoping I could remember the lines such that I could frantically scribble them down when arriving home.

It was almost inevitable that a daily writing project would become both intensely personal and introspective as I scabbled for something to post each day — what better source material than yourself.

One relatively early reflection saw me write:

³² — In an English lesson our teacher read out what she described as the world's shortest ghost story: *The last man alive sat alone in his lounge when, suddenly, the door bell rang*. We were asked to write a short story of our own, mine was the world's *second* shortest ghost story: "*The last man alive sat alone in his lounge when, suddenly, the door bell rang and a voice said 'I'll get it!'*" The teacher wasn't amused.

"I have been far more introspective than at any other time in my life with the added pressure of staring long and hard in the mirror while an audience looks on ... What should feel incredibly scary has, perhaps, been very liberating thanks, in part, to the very presence of that audience. It's quite ironic that a shy introvert should be exposing themselves in this most public of ways."

Rather than just forming a daily habit, I felt the project became a voyage of self-discovery — an exploration of both conscious and subconscious thought. I wrote that it was *"an expression of a blossoming identity veiled in truths and emotions."* What was displayed in these introspective musings became the public manifestation of a "self" that was rarely, if at all, present in the physical (or waking) world, far more authentic than the drone society expected it to be.

This public therapy session started producing results, but there is an old joke that when you see a psychiatrist you need another session just to get over it. As the year progressed, this became more than a simple joke. As I delved deeper into thought and memory, seeking more and more personal material to feed the daily habit, I started drifting into realms that maybe should not have been explored in such a format. Digging that deep surfaced a number of things that probably should have remained buried or, at least, addressed under more controlled circumstances. I didn't realise it at the time but what started as therapy was to act as the trigger for a depression that would not properly manifest for a few years and become the worst I have had to live through since that experienced during those late teens and early twenties.

Sharing such introverted musings can be a difficult task. I was having to translate my chaotic thoughts into something more conducive to public consumption. Exposing the innermost thoughts and mental processes to an audience initiates an observer (Hawthorne) effect: knowing that my stories were going to be read by others changed how I told them. In one sense it caused me to sanitise them while simultaneously forcing me into a more performative mindset as I sought more tales with which to regale the viewing public.

The entire process became fraught with contradiction. At one stage, I joked that writing had become like a drug, an addiction. The truth of this jest was, sadly, quite close to the knuckle. While addictions are negative behaviours, I initially saw writing as a positive endeavour, a way to truly dive into who I was and face my personal demons on a daily basis. It was only later that the negative implications and fear kicked in.

Too much

Is too much introspection a dangerous thing? Can we go too deep and become lost along the way, causing more harm than good? Do we search for things and connections that aren't there and convince ourselves that they are? Do we become psychological hypochondriacs taking the slightest nuance of thought or behaviour and creating a syndrome? We know ourselves better than anyone else but have to be honest with that knowledge else we suffer at the hands of our own deceptions.

As the project progressed, history began to repeat itself — just as the depression in my earlier years became the catalyst for poetry³³ so the developing malaise became as fuel for the daily posts. While I began with everything serving as an inspiration, I became increasingly detached from the world around me — I was more insular, sought more from within than without. This continuous self-assessment led to an increase in self-awareness and self-consciousness.

The very act of introspection alters us in ways that we might not realise and, taking that into consideration, what we think we know may no longer be valid. So how far do we chase the white rabbit?

We all know of the fine lines that exist between genius and insanity or pleasure and pain but there is one that also sits between creativity and despair.

My eldest daughter once quoted that writers are, apparently, 121% more likely to be bipolar than non-creative types. My wife replied "*Yep, Dad writes.*" That says it all. I, however, feel that the statistic reads the wrong way: it is not that creative types become more unstable but that to be creative often requires a predisposition towards such instability. It requires a certain way of looking at the world and interpreting things. It requires being able to tap into emotional states, but this means that the individual will be susceptible to both the ups and the downs.

Edvard Munch, painter of *The Scream* wrote in his diary "*My fear of life is necessary to me, as is my illness. They are indistinguishable from me, and their destruction would destroy my art.*" He was prone to anxiety and hallucinations and wrote of his influence for *The Scream* itself "*The sun began to set — suddenly the sky turned blood red ... I stood there trembling with anxiety — and I sensed an endless scream passing through nature.*"³⁴

The suicide of Robin Williams in August 2014 affected me more than it should. I'm not trying to compare myself to such eminent creatives as these but perhaps, on some level, I felt I understood. There is something strangely hypnotic and energising about completely losing yourself to emotion, to being so consumed by it that it dominates your every thought — even if negative. I believe this state of mind is a part of what separates creatives from non-creatives — that and their ability to use it to feed their creativity.

We can't ever fully appreciate the highs if we've never had lows, and we can't understand the depths of despair if we haven't fallen — there needs to be a contrast. We can all feel happy or sad, we can all know when we're having a good time or feeling down and out, but it is the contrast that really tells us how extreme our position. That can fuel the creative process, and the more extreme it gets, the easier that process can sometimes become.

³³ — Much of that created in the few years of the dark period in my teens and twenties was angst ridden and self-derogatory, when my life changed and I emerged from that depression I was no longer able to write poetry, my mindset and focus had shifted such that the words no longer came to me.

³⁴ — *The dark side of creativity* — <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/22/world/the-dark-side-of-creativity-vincent-van-gogh/index.html>

The more I wrote, the more introspective I became; the deeper I went, the further I slipped towards depression. The strange thing about depression is that it is not always feared — it can feel comforting, forgiving, like slipping into the arms of a loved one after a long absence. Depression is an easy way out, a ready-made excuse, a reason for failure that doesn't demand you try.

The eponymous *they* say "*it's the hope that kills you,*" but that's not exactly true — it's the realisation. Hope gives you something to live for, gives you a reason to keep going. The realisation that you are sliding towards depression, and so often cannot do anything to stop it, is what's feared because it is never certain which way it is going to send you — up or down — until you ride that lift and the doors slide open leaving you to step out to your fate. It can be so easy to get lost in the mental wilderness this creates but it can be equally easy to give yourself to it and get utterly lost in any creative spark that should ignite. An escape within yourself that means you can deny the depression for that little while longer.

I quoted Lloyd Alexander in lesson one when he wrote "*Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It's a way of understanding it.*" That was *exactly* how I felt about the Write365 project — it was a way of discovering my true thoughts. The only problem was that it was a double-edged sword.

Lesson 9 - Writing and the truth

"There is only one truth: our own truth. There is only one meaning: that which we choose to take."

*"What we write, what we are willing to put into words and form sentences, is our personal philosophy, our own personal truth, whether we realise it or not."*³⁵

Putting one to paper or fingers to keys is a unique opportunity to explore the self, to externalise those inner thoughts and feelings that have remained hidden and locked away but, by writing, you can find that you are consistently at odds with yourself. In lesson 3 I suggested: *"[t]houghts and ideas bubble up from our mental depths to the conscious mind, we are not always in direct control."* — this is key.

Writing, especially in those times between sleep and being fully awake, when the mind is prone to wander, is more likely to reveal what is truly on the inside. That is the most honest writing — when the words just flow — free from even our own influence, from our attempts to craft them into something. At times like these, we forget to hide behind our words, we let things slip that might otherwise remain unwritten. That is likely why the practice of writing morning pages before the day has started works so well - we are unfettered by the demands of work, of others, of 24-hour news cycles, of opinions invading our senses, of everyone trying to sell us everything or attempting to get us to sell our souls

Morning pages (usually described as three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness) are frequently attributed to Julia Cameron from her book *The Artist's Way*, published in 1992. However, an earlier incarnation of the idea was published by Dorothea Brande in her 1934 book *Becoming a Writer*. Here she advises getting up early every day and, before doing anything else, just write:

The best way to do this is to rise half an hour, or a full hour, earlier than you customarily rise. Just as soon as you can—and without talking, without reading the morning's paper, without picking up the book you laid aside the night before—begin to write.

Brande's original purpose was a creative one where the *"excellence or ultimate worth of what you write is of no importance yet. As a matter of fact, you will find more value in this material than you expect"* — in her view *"what you are actually doing is training yourself, in the twilight zone between sleep and the full waking state, simply to write."*

Early morning writing, as Brande referred to it, is a place of feeling and emotion rather than logic or manufactured thoughts. There are no airs and graces, just a literal translation of what is on the inside. Cameron sowed the seeds for the more esoteric modern purpose: to unburden yourself from that which weighs you down before the day begins, to free your mind such that

³⁵ Blog post, <https://colinwalker.blog/20-12-2020-1038/>

you can focus on the duties of the day. When I started the Write365 project, I was unfamiliar with the concept of morning pages but expressed a similar sentiment:

"I want to reach the stage where I can just get a stream of unconscious thought onto the page, clearing the mind of all detritus until what's left is all the good stuff uncluttered by the flotsam and jetsam of daily life."

We are not restricted to early mornings. We can achieve the same result any time we allow the words to take over, revealing what they will. We don't find out who we really are and what we can achieve until we are willing to bare all — metaphorically speaking — and expose our vulnerabilities, until we make mistakes and learn from them. These lessons can be many and varied, and we may not be aware of their scope. To paraphrase the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: there are known knowns, known unknowns and, also, unknown unknowns.

The term 'unknown unknowns' is derived from the Johari Window³⁶ — a concept created by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham in 1955. The 'window' is a 2x2 grid upon which are plotted the way you see yourself and how someone else sees you:

- **open** — things known by both yourself and the other party
- **hidden/façade** — things known by yourself but not others
- **blind spot** — things known by others but not realised by yourself
- **unknown** — those things not known by either party

The balance between the four quadrants will change over time and, by sharing or receiving feedback, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of yourself. I found it interesting that examples of things that live in the 'unknown' space include:

- a fear or aversion you are not aware you have,
- repressed or subconscious feelings, and
- conditioned behaviour from childhood

It all starts to fit together.

Known unknowns as those instances where we are aware something is affecting us but not quite sure what. Unknown unknowns, however, are those things that we don't realise impact us but bubble away under the surface, like magma awaiting the eruption of a volcano. We may never be aware of them, but they can still eat us up from the inside. A significant period of self-reflection, perhaps by way of writing, or intense external factors, may leave us suddenly having to face up to a reality we didn't know existed.

Writing has a way of getting to the truth with or without your abettance. It doesn't care for niches, it doesn't give a damn about who you are or who might be reading. It just takes control

³⁶ Johari Window, Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johari_window

and you are unwittingly thrust through doors you might never have considered opening. You are forced to confront whatever lies behind.

In his journal, republished as *The Exegesis*, Philip K. Dick wrote "*The core of my writing is not art but truth. Thus what I tell is the truth, yet I can do nothing to alleviate it, either by deed or explanation.*" Even our wildest creations are windows onto reality, threads of truth woven through them. It is a common theme:

"*Fiction is the truth inside the lie.*" — Stephen King.

"*Art is a lie that helps us understand the truth.*" — Pablo Picasso

And, as we saw from Lloyd Alexander in Lesson 1, "*Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It's a way of understanding it.*"

Rather than try to understand reality, we can spend much of our time trying to avoid it — an attempt at denying its power over us. There are truths which we convince ourselves are falsehoods, denying their existence, telling ourselves that they are just figments of our imagination or the voice in our head. Writing them down makes them real — either by our own hand or someone else's.

I may have joked that writing was like an addiction but only by writing and allowing the past, the *real* past and not the story I told myself³⁷, did the truth of that become apparent. That is not to say that I would previously perpetrate a deliberate deception but that certain thoughts might not have been considered or even admitted. The old cliché that the first step to dealing with addiction is admitting you have a problem may not initially seem relevant. What could be wrong with wanting to write every day? But by writing things down and, over time, making connections between them, I came to see that my behaviour was indicative of a much wider sequence of events.

Only by digging deeper every day, with one post leading to another and the next, did I come to realise the pattern of needing constant approval throughout my life. From periods focusing on graffiti, poetry, DJing, making music on my computer and back to writing and social media — each period seemed distinct and separate, and I was perfectly happy telling myself this, but they were part of a chain of causation. When one behaviour ended I felt the need to fill my time with something else as if there was a void, an emptiness within me that required filling. With anything. Just so that I could feel whole and be praised by others for doing it.

The realisation arrived at by simply writing it all down and joining the dots was stark and eye-opening; that I was continually searching for love under the guise of pastimes that I just considered hobbies — love that I became to see was denied me as a child. The endeavour you

³⁷ As quoted in Lesson 1, Samantha, the artificially intelligent operating system voiced by Scarlett Johansson in the movie *Her* exclaims "*The past is just a story we tell ourselves*"

are currently reading is designed to close off unfinished business with something that began over seven years ago but there is likely still a similar undercurrent.

Displacement is the unconscious transference of emotion from one thing, or person, to another. As the project progressed, I became ever more aware that I had previously been hiding in plain sight, couching everything in terms of *we and our* instead of *me and my* — I still do. That awareness, and the consequent taking of ownership of my thoughts and feelings, became a truth that was hard to bear. I would not deny my faults, failings and issues by projecting them onto a wider audience; denying the personal by making it public. Unbeknownst to me, at least initially, the writing was forcing me to face this uncomfortable truth without the sugar coating that made it more palatable, that had meant I could ignore it.

This is the curse of the introspective introvert — living in here (taps head) and not being able to see what others see or how they perceive you. Not being able to live *out there*. Some call it being self-absorbed or in your own little world.

The truth of the matter is that it is not intentional — there is never a desire to withdraw or hurt or offend. You don't know you're doing it, don't realise how it affects others, how you leave them feeling shut out when you just consider it ... normal. Writing made me realise that the project was a cry for help — an attempt to reach out from inside my own head under the pretence of forming a habit whilst simultaneously retreating further inward. And no matter how badly we hurt, it is pain we cause others that does the most damage and the guilt we have to live with for doing so.

What should have been a period of revelation became one of suffering.

Lesson 10 - Balance and burnout

The Write365 project was born out of frustration with the state of my online writing. I had spent years trying to be a citizen journalist and gotten away from what blogging was supposed to be about; everything became an essay or a hot take — the fun had gone from writing. The personal blog I started in 2003 was no longer personal. Yes, it was solely mine and held several of my ideas (some I'm still very proud of) and opinions, but it was no longer about *me*.

Everything was written to be 'seen' — that sounds a bit obvious but there is a distinction between normal, casual blogging and writing for a specific audience with the strict intention of being noticed. Everything had to be *just so* and many things didn't get published because they didn't meet my high expectations. The desire for perfection became a damaging force.

By 2013, after numerous online hiatuses over the space of five years, and trying to become something I wasn't and likely would never become, I finally became disillusioned with the whole approach. I decided a change needed to occur hence the switch to write something, anything every day for a year, no matter what, no matter how good — just get it on the page and publish in spite of, or maybe because of, its flaws.

Healthy or adaptive perfectionism can be a good thing; it is a trait of someone who wants to do their best in everything, works hard and is hard on themselves, but knows where their strengths lie. Their standards may be high, but they are content on reaching them rather than setting ever more extreme goals.

Unhealthy or maladaptive perfection, however, is extreme and excessive, it goes too far. The person focuses on trying to be absolutely perfect in *everything* and sees the imperfections of actions or situations as a personal failing. Maladaptive perfectionism is rooted in fear and insecurity.

I have invariably fallen into the second category, and my writing has suffered for it so, the initial release experienced when I began the project was palpable. Just being able to write and post something, *anything*, regardless of skill or topic was unbelievably freeing. As I wrote nine days in:

There are different kinds of pressure: internal v external, unrealistic v reasonable, stressful v developmental.

Some we need, others we don't.

Although I have put myself under the pressure of writing something every day (I try to aim for at least 300 words) removing the pressure of perfection has been extremely liberating. I may still be under pressure but it is a shift from the unrealistic to the developmental, it is a goal-based conscious choice: an attempt to instill a creative habit that will be of long term benefit.

It's okay to be OK

Giving yourself permission to sometimes be just average, or fine, or OK is wonderful. Constantly striving for perfection is setting yourself up for failure. The trick is in

learning when OK is good enough, when “average” is just a starting point from which we can build, in realising that we are on a continual journey of improvement that we will never actually complete.

However, it didn't take long for introspection to creep in, both deliberate and subtle — some posts began to look inward for answers while others seemed to be speaking to an audience but were thinly veiled criticisms of myself, either knowingly or subconsciously.

There is an obvious irony to the self-applied pressure of trying to escape perfection, of setting out to write every day and constantly resist the temptation to double-check or second guess. As the project wore on, the siren call of perfectionism sang loud and I became unsatisfied with just writing anything. It was no longer enough just to publish a post. While finding something to write about was relatively easy at the start, the desire to make each item *worthwhile* grew exponentially. What began as a public demonstration of forming a habit, as a way of staying accountable, became a chore, almost an imposition. The project developed a regular audience, knowing this added additional layers of pressure — it became everything I set out to leave behind.

At one point, I remarked upon my *"frustration at the inability to conjure more than a meandering stream of words"* but *that* was always the intent — merely to write whatever came to mind, not some misguided notion of perfection. I frequently tried to counter this cancer spreading through my approach by telling myself that *"not every moment will be life-changing, not every idea will be groundbreaking,"* but it was often in vain. Consider the following post I will quote in its entirety:

This isn't the post I was going to write.

For all the talk of honesty and not self-censoring there are times when you just have to say **no!**

No to yourself, no to the situation, no to the direction you find yourself travelling.

Sometimes you run the risk of going too far, of dragging yourself along a road you don't wish to go down - self-induced, self-inflicted, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So this is me refusing to succumb, refusing to be dragged down, dragged under, refusing to drown.

Finding any sort of balance became almost impossible, I obsessed over finding more things to examine, needing to go ever deeper. One topic led to another, threads developed and I re-examined them from multiple angles.

It wasn't writing every day that was the problem, it was what I was writing *about* and the emotional toll it was taking — a public therapy session lead by someone who didn't know what they were doing or how to handle the feelings that roiled inside. The project became a burden. and by its end, I was counting down the days. I couldn't wait for it to run its course so that I could take a break. When I wasn't explicitly delving into my past, I was voicing dissatisfaction with the present. At the turn of the new year, moving from 2014 to 2015, I remarked *"Winter turns to spring, to summer and round again back to winter — back to the beginning and I think this*

is what scares us into making resolutions: we don't want to turn full circle and end up exactly where we started. We want to change, to progress, to develop and evolve." The worry that I could not move on, could not let go of the past, was deeply instilled and would go on to affect me for years to come. I couldn't accept that I was a work in progress or believe myself when I wrote more positive pieces. The lack of balance wasn't just in what I wrote but in what I accepted as truth.

The positivity with which I began the experiment evaporated, replaced with nagging low self-esteem and feelings of abandonment. Despite all that I had accomplished, I could not allow myself to be proud of what I had achieved. I hadn't foreseen the dangers this undertaking could bring, had set no ground rules and gone in blind expecting it to be a way to pass the time, the joyful exploration of language I experienced in my younger years.

That couldn't have been much further from the truth.

Lesson 11 - Writing changes people

If there is one thing we have seen over the previous pages, it is that writing changes people, both positively and negatively, depending on the subject. By logical extension, reading changes people — we are all impacted by the sharing of truths, the cross-pollination of ideas from one mind to another.

We must acknowledge and accept that not every moment will be life-changing, not every idea will be groundbreaking, but everything is an accumulation of what has gone before, so we can and must sow seeds for the future. Even the smallest of actions can have considerable consequences down the line.

It's like the butterfly effect.

By writing, by allowing ourselves to become more expressive, as we saw in Lesson 3, we open ourselves to new ideas both external and, perhaps more importantly, internal. By becoming our own inspiration, we don't need to seek out our muse as it is always within us, working tirelessly to provide our creative endeavours with the material they need.

Through the act of writing, we can change ourselves: our opinions and perspectives, our understanding and tolerances — this can change us as people. I wrote in a blog post that it sounds like an arrogant thing to say about your own work, but it is the truth, no matter how much we might doubt it. In response to one such period of doubt a commenter wrote:

"It changed you, it changed me and it changed some others. If the point isn't to change someone, then what is it? You need to know you made a difference to someone. That shit MATTERS!"

It may have been short but that comment changed me. It made me realise that it was all worth it. I may have been writing for myself and been deeply introspective but, in my self-absorption, forgot that we see ourselves in other people's stories. We can identify with the events they describe, the joy and pain, the memories we cherish and the things we would rather forget.

Our stories do not happen in isolation — I am part of yours just as you are part of mine. Our realities are woven together into "life's rich tapestry" and, like it or not, our fates are ultimately entwined.

The term co-creation traditionally refers to a design process in which input from customers is used to determine the direction and functionality of a product or service. It is an act of collaboration that benefits the provider through having a freely available, crowd-sourced pool of ideas, and the customer by having an end product that better meets their wants and needs. The process improves the relationship between the parties and ensures that the customers are invested in the outcome by maintaining a sense of ownership.

The Write365 project became, in parts, an act of co-creation between myself and those reading it, a common occurrence in an online environment. The primary (in this instance the author) is impacted by an observer effect, the very fact that the words are read by others changes

behaviour. The knowledge that something is not happening in isolation alters its context and shifts the mindset in which it is created.

Consciously or unwittingly, we are part of the evolution of those around us, of all those we might ever come into contact with, those who might read our words or be indirectly exposed to our ideas through second-hand sources. Influence, impact, sway — call it what you will but it is a multidirectional force that binds us in ways that we cannot immediately fathom. Our actions cause little ripples of change, tiny adjustments in attitude or opinion, moderation of behaviour or, maybe, deliberate outlandishness. We all cast our stones into the pond of life, and our ripples create such complex interference patterns. We cannot necessarily trace the impact of a single stone but, once its ripples have merged with many others, eventually feel its effect. It has always been this way, but the internet vastly expands our potential spheres of influence, vastly extends our reach.

We have to be storytellers but also an audience. We have to be authoritative when required but admit when we know nothing. We have to be outgoing but stay restrained. We must be leaders but know when to follow.

We co-create each other's lives by simply living our own.

Writing, especially in public, increases that impact.

Writing helps us think differently and approach problems in a different way than were we merely to ruminate on them. Something in the physical act of putting words on the page, by pen or keyboard, helps us to take different viewpoints to thought alone. At different times, writing helps to clear the mind, put things in perspective and grant us a sense of accomplishment, but we must be careful. I would like to say that writing only changes us for the better, but that is not so. During the project, I found that writing, at least some of it, took me to dark places that I am still trying to claw my way out of years later. Indeed, studies have demonstrated³⁸ that writing about traumatic events can initially increase distress and negative mood:

"The immediate impact of expressive writing is usually a short-term increase in distress, negative mood and physical symptoms, and a decrease in positive mood compared with controls. Expressive writing participants also rate their writing as significantly more personal, meaningful and emotional. However, at longer-term follow-up, many studies have continued to find evidence of health benefits in terms of objectively assessed outcomes, self-reported physical health outcomes and self-reported emotional health outcomes"

³⁸ Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing — <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/emotional-and-physical-health-benefits-of-expressive-writing/ED2976A61F5DE56B46F07A1CE9EA9F9F>

My own experiences would indicate that writing alone is not always enough and that it should often be considered alongside other therapies or guidance. Getting lost within your thoughts, existing within negative feedback loops is no way to resolve deep-set issues without some form of guiding hand to help you through the maze of emotion.

Similarly, the old cliché states that the very act of writing makes you a better writer. The more a person practices the craft of writing, the more proficient they become, the better their use of language and sentence construction — it is a question of persistence. Still, writing alone and in isolation can only take them so far. Engagement with others, seeing other viewpoints, not just reading but studying their words, flexes the mental muscles way beyond the simple act of writing. Just as additional therapy, guidance or even just talking about a problem can aid in its resolution so interacting with the words of others helps to define our skills and hone the voice.

Conclusion - We should all write

While volunteering at the Whitechapel Mission ³⁹ through a work initiative several years ago, offering assistance with anything computer related to the homeless who used the drop-in facilities, I found myself assisting an elderly gentleman who couldn't remember the password to his Yahoo email account. He was also unable to remember what he chose as his security questions. So, with a shrug of the shoulders, he pragmatically opted to create an alternative address and just use that instead.

The above isn't that important, just preamble, setting the scene.

For the next hour, I sat transfixed as this man who couldn't remember a simple password spoke an autobiography on the fly. We sometimes jest about the elderly being lonely and just wanting to have a chat, which was more than apparent, but there was so much more. I sat in awe as he regaled me with endless tales of life as a youth, in the army, as a delivery driver, as a drop-out on the streets with severe mental health issues and his phoenix-like rise back to sanity.

The glint in his eye was captivating, as was the genuine emotion when speaking of his father — a man he so obviously idolised and appeared to have been a major factor in many of his life choices and education beyond school. He painted a different world, a picture in my mind of days gone by, places that I had visited but now transformed by the passage of time and man's unforgiving hand. He recalled how he had become a writer by chance and of his contributions to various newsletters and publications. He described his accidental dalliance with poetry and recited three complete poems he no longer had copies of but had committed to memory. He spoke of a creative writing course he had started but never completed and of the lectures that had been given by writers, published authors and poets.

And, mostly, he marvelled at how anyone could *ever* experience writer's block.

For him, there was always something to write, a man who mixed religious metaphor from Christian to Muslim to Buddhist with greater dexterity than a spider spinning its web. His life was truly his story. He took inspiration from everything around him, past or present. He wrote what was there, interpreted it so that others could see the world anew through his eyes.

In that brief hour, he demonstrated most eloquently that we should never be stuck for something to say or write if only we told our stories.

These pages have described my own experiences and recollections from writing (almost) every day for a year. These experiences have entwined with further reaction from the past six years

³⁹ <https://whitechapel.org.uk>

since the Write365 project was completed. What is true for me may not be so for everyone, but I believe that many of the points will be recognisable by anyone who has spent at least some time writing.

I firmly believe that everyone should write in some capacity. It doesn't matter what: book, essay, letter, journal, whatever — as long as it causes them to slow down and think. Writing, especially without the burden of an audience, unleashes the inner mind and gets the creative juices flowing, allows us to see paths and connections where before there was only a tangle of mental undergrowth. It helps us become more expressive, form coherent arguments, and helps us tell our stories.

There is something deeply primal about diving into your own mind via the written word, something far more tangible than thought alone. Putting words onto the page makes them more *real*, whether by pen and paper or keyboard and screen. Being able to see your words and thoughts gives them a realness and weight that would not otherwise be possible.

Writing is a starting point, the first step on a much longer path.

It doesn't matter whether or not we are great wordsmiths. It doesn't matter if we know the difference between adverbs and adjectives. It doesn't matter about the extent of our vocabulary. What *does* matter is that we communicate and share, that we express ourselves so that others can understand. What *does* matter is that we don't isolate ourselves behind a wall of silence.

We should share our ideas, passions and beliefs. As with habits, we should make them obvious and easy to grasp so reduce the likelihood of them being misinterpreted. As a counterpoint, writing helps us tackle our assumptions by making us face our words, re-evaluate them. As I wrote in one of the daily posts:

*"Whatever we take for granted we cannot presume others do also. We cannot presume that our knowledge, meanings and interpretations are shared. But, most importantly, we cannot look down upon them if our **obvious** is their **oblivious**."*

We are not mind-readers, we don't know what others are thinking. Heck, we're not sure what we are thinking much of the time. It may sound a bit twee but, through expressive writing — if we allow it to flow and do not constraint it — we can learn more of who we really are, what excites and what scares us. Writing helps us educate ourselves about ourselves and, once we start down that road, we will want to educate ourselves about others. Rather than being so self-centred, we might begin to read, to learn and appreciate the ideas, passions and beliefs of others. If we all spent just a fraction of our time on such noble pursuits, the world might be a bit more of a forgiving place, more tolerating, less divided.

One particular comment I received during the Write365 project has stuck with me ever since, guided me:

"Above all, write for the love of it."

That single sentence reminded me why I chose to put up a “closed until further notice” sign, switch off the lights and lock the door to my blog — why I chose daily writing via the project. It reminded me why I have published content on the Internet for years without ever trying to monetise it. It reminded me why I like to put words together in a way that is hopefully entertaining, interesting or thought-provoking. Especially the latter.

It is purely *for the love of it*.

I didn't love what I was doing for a while but still wanted to write, knew I *had* to write, so changed the format and the purpose so that I *could* love it again. That's the key! It's the key to writing, to playing an instrument, to anything: if you love it and enjoy what you are doing then that makes life all seem worth it. The love of it is stronger than the trials and hardships. If you truly love what you are doing then, no matter how hard you have to try or how long you have to practice, it isn't work. That's not to say it isn't hard; writing can be one of the most difficult things you can do, one of the most frustrating, but it can also be one of the most satisfying — truly a labour of love.

Writing, especially in public, isn't about receiving plaudits or praise (although they are always welcome) but about the challenge, the pride, and the sense of achievement.

It is being able to say “I did that. Me!”