

SESSION 2: UNBLOCK YOUR POWER

Part 1: Writing Lesson:

UNDERSTAND THE WRITER'S BLOCK BOGEY

AND FREE UP YOUR FLOW FOREVER

"A writer must use both sides of her brain, right and left, equally.

It's as if one half writes emotive poetry, the other, diagnostic criticism."

– Robert McKee

Have you ever started writing something – an email, a story, an article, a report... anything at all – and then wound up stuck because either your ideas had abandoned you or you couldn't figure out how to organise all the information you wanted to impart?



You might have begun optimistically – perhaps you were even *brimming* with ideas – only to find that they evaporated in the presence of a clean page/screen, or that they headed off in other directions than you had

intended. The old story of the story hijacking the story...

I can relate! I was a prolific writer as a child, a little more cramped in my teens, and then dried up and blocked in my twenties. In fact, I struck a period of

about seven years during which every story trailed to a miserable dead end, even when it seemed that I had started with a good idea. I couldn't finish anything. For someone with designs on being a published writer, this was both frustrating and debilitating.

But I wasn't prepared to remain stuck in that wasteland; my creative drought sent me hunting for answers and I discovered them in the writings of many others, and in my own experiences when I turned within. I found out what causes writer's block and how to unblock, and I am going to share with you an approach that absolutely works – if you apply it.

Knowing how to keep your writing moving is so important to the business of successful writing that Overcoming Writer's Block is the second thing I tackle in my Writing Mastery course (after the 'Busting the Talent Myth' lesson).

As I said in the previous session:

- * While many (even professional) writers may not understand how to overcome writer's block, most successful writers intuitively know what to do, and their writing flows easily.
- * Studies into human performance indicate that all behaviour is the expression of conscious *and* unconscious strategies.
- * Successful writers use strategies that are often unconscious, to produce great results.
- * By observing how successful writers overcome writer's block – in other words, by discovering their strategies for writing easily – you, too, can get into the flow of easy writing.

“If it’s possible in the world, it’s possible for me; it’s only a question of HOW... and ‘hows’ can be learned.” – Presupposition from the science of neuro-linguistic programming.

THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH TO WRITING

How were you taught to express yourself in writing? I daresay that your memories will take you back to a schoolroom when you were eight to ten years old. (I’m not talking about handwriting or ABCs now, but about your first lessons in expressing yourself through words.)



If your experience was anything like mine, you were sitting in a classroom at a desk with lined paper and a blue or black pen (or a pencil). You were given a topic, like ‘What I did during the school holidays’ or ‘My favourite food’ or ‘Pets’, and told to write in response to the topic. There was some instruction about ‘Beginnings’ and ‘Middles’ and ‘Ends’ and paragraphing and topic sentences... and you were given a

time period – perhaps this piece of writing was due in half an hour or maybe it was set for homework.

Either way, whether you sat sweating over it in the classroom or at home, you were on your own. No-one sat beside you explaining the subtler principles of writing. You were left to figure that out by yourself – and then to hand in the result of your efforts for assessment.

When you next saw your story or essay, it probably had red corrections and comments scattered throughout it from your teacher. And a mark, a teacher's evaluation of your writing ability that may well have decided your attitude to writing from then on.

How did I do? Does that description ring true for you? For many, this is how they are taught to express themselves through writing.

Now let me fill in some of the gaps. Let's look at the subtle side of writing that is less widely understood.

THE 'HOW' ELEMENT

Our teachers typically set a writing task and then 'disappeared on us'. They provided English rules but they didn't provide guidance as to how to carry out the subtle aspects of that task. If you've ever tried to follow a recipe and ended up with a disaster, you know what I mean. *How* dough is kneaded can make all the difference to the end result; *how* thoroughly an egg is beaten can be the difference between the success or failure of a dish. It's all very well to be told, "Climb onto the horse's back," but *how* you climb up can make all the difference between staying on and falling off.

The ‘how’ of writing is critical, but these subtle distinctions are rarely taught. The fact is that when you sit down to write, you are engaged in an ongoing process, an event; writing is something that absorbs ALL of you – your thoughts and feelings and your body. And sometimes a subtle distinction determines whether you have a productive writing experience – or give up in disgust.

Here’s a ‘how’ that will be obvious to you.

*** *How do you sit when you are preparing to write?*** Do you sit up, straight-backed, or do you slouch?

Our bodies betray our thinking. Slouching translates as: “This is boring, I can’t do this, I don’t want to be here...” Sitting up straight and alert translates as: “I’m here, I’m present, I’m ready, I’m keen, I’m open.” I once took a student I was tutoring from a D to an A in one session, just by coaching him to change his physical posture. The mind-body connection can be that important.

I came across another stunning example of this principle when reading *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell¹. It seems that our face is not just a signal of what is going on in



our minds, it *is* what is going on in our minds.

Researchers, Ekman and Friesen, made a complete inventory of all possible facial expressions, muscle by muscle, and then conducted a number of studies. They found, for example, that emotion can start in the face – just putting our face into the position of anger will generate feelings of anger. In one experiment, subjects

¹ Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp206- 209

who were asked to look at a cartoon with a pen clenched between their teeth, which forces the face into a kind of smile, found the cartoon funnier than those who had to clench the pen between their lips. Pretty interesting... So next time you want to feel a certain way, organise your body first!

Now here's the really important 'how' question that relates to Overcoming Writer's Block:

*** *How do you deal with the ebb and flow of your ideas?*** And, more specifically, ***what are you saying to yourself?*** The conversation you are having with yourself is critical.

Most of us approach writing in a half-brained way – that isn't meant as an insult! Read on and I'll explain exactly what I mean.

A WHOLE-BRAIN APPROACH TO WRITING

The first thing we need to recognise is that there are two parts to the writing process: (i) Writing and (ii) Rewriting. That might seem so obvious as to be banal, but we can get a wealth of information from this fact.

Part One, Writing, is the creative part of the process. The purpose here is to generate and express original ideas; to imagine something into form. When you first sit down to write you are taking on the role of a Creator, someone who brings forth something out of nothing. (There you go: not banal after all; it's actually quite mystical...)

Part Two, Rewriting, is the evaluative part of the process. The purpose here is to make decisions, to pursue excellence, to improve, to refine. When you're in

‘rewriting mode’ you are taking on the role of an Editor, someone who is endeavouring to improve a piece of writing.²

Think about you, the Creator, for a moment: When you are sitting in the role of Creator, your function is to generate and express original ideas. In order to do so, you require the ability to dream and imagine and observe. You are calling upon the wild, free, unpredictable part of you that is often associated with childhood. *And this part of you can’t make judgements about quality.*



Think about you, the Editor, for a moment: When you are sitting in the role of



Editor, your function is to make decisions in the pursuit of excellence, to be objective. *And this part of you can’t generate material.*

So we see that writing calls for two different styles of thinking: a creative, colourful, imaginative, intuitive, fresh, spontaneous, aware, sensitive, honest state of mind – *the mind of a precocious child*; and also a discriminating, selective, objective, orderly state of mind – *the mind of a disciplined decision-maker.*

² I’d like to acknowledge American writer and teacher Natalie Goldberg for delineating these differences so well. Read her book, *Writing Down the Bones* if you want to know more. Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boston, Massachusetts, 1986.

In support of this claim, let's consider two models of the mind/brain that are now quite widely understood: the model of the Left & Right Brain and the model of the Conscious & Unconscious/Superconscious Mind.

(i) *The Left and Right Brain Model.*

The Left hemisphere of the brain is the part that deals with language, linearity and logic. The Right hemisphere of the brain relates to abstract stuff like art, music, symbols, colour, shapes...

In our model of a Whole-Brain Approach to Writing, the Creator part relates to your Right Brain and the Editor part relates to your Left Brain.

(ii) *Conscious & Unconscious/Superconscious³ Mind Model.*

The Conscious Mind is our thinking mind, the part of us that is consciously aware – of course! The Unconscious and Superconscious Minds are outside of our conscious awareness; as well as taking care of our autonomic physiological functions, they connect us to the realms of memory, dreams, intuition, etc.

In this model, the Creator part of you is tuned into your Unconscious Mind. It draws in those ideas that seem to 'come from nowhere' and often uses the language of symbology. The Editor part of you is tuned into your Conscious Mind: the awareness of form and style, of language rules, and of what sells!

The crucial thing to recognise is that these two aspects of your mind don't understand each other.

Why not? Because they literally represent different styles of thinking, different states of mind. They function differently. *They speak different languages.*

³ Some people refer to the Unconscious Mind as the source of our wisdom/intuition, others refer to the Superconscious Mind. I'll leave the choice of name to you. And some use the term 'subconscious' while others use 'unconscious'. You can adapt these terms to suit your preferences.

Asking them to communicate directly would be like asking a Spaniard to have a detailed conversation with a Japanese without a translator to help. Impossible.

THE CAUSE OF WRITER'S BLOCK

Writer's Block occurs when we attempt to *create* and we impose an *Editor's* thinking on a creative process. Doubts in one's ability come when we consult the Editor when it's the Creator's turn. Instead of allowing the Creator to finish its job, we let the Editor intervene and overrule.

Evaluations of quality belong in the editing process, not the creative process.

You see...

*** The Creator CAN generate material, it can produce 'out of nothing'⁴, but it CAN'T make judgements or discriminate about the quality of the writing.**

*** The Editor CAN discriminate but it CAN'T generate material.**

But there's another point to note. The reason we experience Writer's Block is not just that we give our Editor rein when it's the Creator's turn, but because we have given our Editor permission to be a *critic* rather than a guide.

Some of us have become so expert at criticising ourselves that we criticise our writing without even noticing... "That's not good enough. I can't write." *Delete, delete...* Sound familiar?

⁴ Creativity is not really creating something from nothing. Universal Laws, and particularly the Law of Conservation, tell us that nothing is created or destroyed; actually, what we are doing is taking elements that already exist and changing them around/transforming them. This is why we can experience new insights and learnings in the absence of any new information. Where creativity is concerned, we are picking up on snippets of things heard or read or imagined, and building from there.

The chances are that if you find yourself struggling with Writer’s Block, you’ve been criticising your attempts and trying to improve your writing *before it’s even fully emerged*. Imagine a baby being born and its parents peering at it and saying, “You didn’t come out of there very elegantly. Why are you crying? And look, there’s blood on your nose!”

As writers, we become blocked because of the internal question: “Is this good enough?” When we assess our writing too soon, we dam the creative flow.

Is it about sacking the Editor? Not at all. We need that eye for detail and standards, but we need it *at the right time* in the writing process. As a writer, your outcome is to have a positive, co-operative, working relationship between the Creator and the Editor because you need both. It's a partnership. The writer's challenge is to get these two roles into balance, to combine their aspects into one integrated character.

How do you develop that partnership?

THE SOLUTION

Paradoxically, by separating them. And this is the mark of the successful writer. He or she tackles these two parts separately.

The Creator goes first, of course, because it’s connected to your source of ideas. The key to a writing flow is to stay in the Creator’s mindset, and you do that by accepting your writing rather than trying to improve it. You must learn to recognise, accept, and receive the ideas that are occurring naturally. (And they are – more on this soon.) It’s simply not appropriate to try to learn how to improve your

writing before learning how to receive and record your own genius. (I did say 'genius'...)

So, forget about *quality* when you're starting on a piece of writing; go for *quantity*. After you've produced some material, you can go back over it with your Editor's mindset and improve it, but if you've been so busy criticising, or even just improving your first few sentences, you're either unlikely to produce very much or likely to get caught up in circles as you try to fix what's only partly-emerged.

The Creator enables you to **'tune in'** to your inner wisdom and creativity; the Editor can *later* guide you to **'fine tune'** what you've written.

Here's the key to Overcoming Writer's Block and Generating Easily Flowing Writing in three easy steps:

- 1. You separate the two roles.**
- 2. You give the Creator full rein first, and ask the Editor to wait its turn.**
- 3. You make an AGREEMENT with yourself to ACCEPT ANYTHING in order to get started because acceptance is the 'juice' the Creator feeds on. An attitude of acceptance, trust, allowance, is the key to Creative Expression.**

Trust your ideas and how you're expressing them. Trust your writing. Trust your Creative self. Trust all of this even if what you're generating isn't up to your standards. Once it's written you can always go back and rewrite to your heart's content.

I only came through the seven-year writer's block I experienced in my twenties when I made an agreement with myself to accept whatever I wrote, no matter how bad it was. Once I understood the importance of acceptance, I changed the way I spoke to myself while I was writing. Instead of criticising myself, I began to encourage myself. I developed patience. And the reward was that the more I trusted myself, the more trustworthy my writing became.

Your job is to speak kindly and patiently to yourself and to encourage yourself through the writing process. When you can firmly but gently keep your Editor on the sidelines until the Creator has completed its first 'wave' of expression, you are on your way to that excellent working relationship.

APPLICATION: TOOLS & TECHNIQUES

Okay. Now you understand both the *cause* of Writer's Block and the *solution*. It's time to put what you've learned into practice.

Suppose that you are sitting at your desk ready to start writing. One of three things will happen:

1. You start. You trust the Creator and let it speak.
2. You have too many thoughts at once.
3. You experience a blank mind.

1. YOU START: If you've launched straight into your writing, more power to you!
Have fun.

2. What if you have TOO MANY THOUGHTS AT ONCE?

This issue is simply a question of how to organise your ideas in a creator-friendly way. If you are brimming with ideas and they are bursting through in ‘the wrong order’, don’t try to sort them out as they are emerging. Instead, throw away the lined paper and black pen, walk away from your keyboard, and sit down with a sheet of unlined paper and some coloured pens.

The right hemisphere of the brain, which is the Creator-friendly side, loves colour, shapes and symbols. It doesn’t function in a linear manner; it’s much more comfortable with creative chaos!

So instead of forcing it into an uncomfortable form of expression, try Clustering or Mind Mapping.

Clustering is a right-brain approach to generating ideas in which you put your topic in the centre of the page in a circle, and then you allow yourself to jot all your associations as branches leading off from that central circle. The idea is to TRUST yourself and just follow your instinct as you build branches until you feel drawn to follow a particular theme. Once your initial ideas have been gathered, you can transfer these ‘clusterings’ into a piece of prose. You’re not committed to using all of your notes because this is simply a brainstorming tool. You choose the bits that leap out at you.

Gabriele Lusser Rico has written a terrific book about this method – it’s called *Writing the Natural Way*.⁵

⁵ J.P. Tarcher Inc., LA, 1983.



Mind Mapping is another very similar approach. Invented by learning expert, Tony Buzan, Mind Mapping has become a well-known brainstorming strategy that is now commonly used in study skills classes. In fact, Mind Mapping is considered to be the most powerful ‘thinking tool’ of our time. Tony Buzan has written many books, eg. *The Mind Map Book – How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*.⁶

Once again, you write the topic in the centre of an unlined page and then use colours and symbols and non-linear space to help your Creator express itself. There are subtle differences between the two approaches, but the essence here is what matters: Instead of trying to give birth to your ideas in perfect ‘Beginning, Middle and End’ linear sequence, allow them to emerge in a natural, organic manner – the way your brain actually works.

Both strategies are useful for a range of writing tasks, from planning a piece of writing through to planning your next holiday!

⁶ Penguin Group, USA, 1996.

Have a go.

EXERCISE: Clustering

Choose any topic – ‘Home’ or ‘Grandmothers’ or ‘Teeth’ or ‘Cars’ – and jot your associations to it in branches that radiate away from that central word. Keep adding associations until you find your themes emerging...

3. Now let’s look at what happens when your MIND GOES BLANK.

To begin with, most people associate the word ‘blank’ with the state of ‘having temporarily no knowledge or understanding’; of being ‘bare, empty, plain’⁷ - in other words, betraying an attitude that ‘blank is a problem’. You could just as easily tell yourself that actually it’s a useful state, since having a blank mind means that you have a clean slate; you are open and receptive.

In fact, it's a trick. The brain cannot stay blank. (If you’ve ever sat down to meditate, you know that for sure!) Our brains are continually associating ideas. Your mind *always* responds to a topic. You cannot *not* respond!

If you feel that your mind is blank, that is simply because a very fast editing process is happening. You’ve allowed your Editor to step into the process too soon. You’re asking ‘Is this good enough?’ and answering “No!” You’ve become busy cutting, deleting, and altering before your Creator has time to fully present its offerings. It’s important to learn to recognise, accept, and *receive* the ideas that are occurring naturally. You have a wealth of experience and knowledge stored in your Unconscious Mind (and your Creator knows where to go to find the relevant

⁷ Websters Dictionary

information.) And you have your imagination, a gift from the Divine in you; it communicates with you via your Superconscious Mind (and your Creator knows where to go to find *those* ideas).

So... make that agreement with yourself! Accept *anything* in order to get started. Ideas are like flies – there are plenty of them buzzing around! Grab one as it goes by and don't bother yourself with examining the fly for the length of its legs or its wing span. Just write your idea down and keep moving.

A great exercise to practise this skill is **Free Writing** (also known as **Automatic Writing**) in which you write on a topic without stopping. The idea is to keep your hand moving and your pen in contact with the paper (or your fingers rattling across that keyboard) because this sensory connection keeps you in the Creator's mindset. You literally write down every thought that crosses your mind, whether it relates to the subject or not.

For example, you might be intending to write about your trip to Alaska and instead find yourself thinking about the shopping list and what you're going to have for dinner. Well, write those things down! Incorporate all of your mental wanderings and physical sensations and distractions.

Does this seem like a waste of time? Australian writer and teacher, Carmel Bird, says that if you are unable to let through the content of a current project, let something else through. Write about your fear of failure or your fear of success. Write about the very thing that gets in the way of your writing. One of her students who was blocked happened to be obsessed with cleaning the bath. Carmel Bird advised her to write about cleaning the bath. She did, and cleared the block.



Julie Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, says that this Free Writing exercise 'gets the whiny stuff out of the way'. And the 'whiny stuff' is 'like a plug sitting on top of the good stuff'. Julie Cameron recommends Free Writing three pages as soon as you wake up every morning. When

you're still dreamy you are more connected to your unconscious and superconscious minds. (Remember that the root of genius is not in the conscious mind; those random bits and pieces that emerge are coming from your unconscious / superconscious minds, which is allied to the sleep state.)

EXERCISE: Free Writing

The Free Writing topic I use in my Creative Writing Classes is 'I remember' because you can keep returning to this phrase when you've run aground. The memories don't need to have any sequential or thematic relationship – just allow yourself to buzz around through your memories and write whatever comes. The only rule is that you must keep writing without stopping, and how you do that is by incorporating ALL of your thoughts AND distractions.

NB For this exercise, use whichever of keyboard or writing by hand allows you to best keep up with your thinking process.

SUMMARY

Let's draw a few things together:

- * **Writer's Block occurs when** we impose an Editor's thinking on a Creative process.
- * **The way to free your creative voice** is to give your Creator full rein. Ask that Editor to wait!
- * **Acceptance and Trust are the keys to the vault.** An attitude of acceptance is the magic key that will allow your ideas to flow. To begin with, your ideas may appear to be coming out badly, but just trust them anyway.
- * **How you speak to yourself is critical.** Use a patient, gentle, appreciative tone of voice and your writing will begin to relax and unfold beautifully.
- * **Once you've got your ideas out** you can bring the Editor onto the job to clean them up.
- * **Remember the outcome:** it's a partnership, a working relationship between your Creator and your Editor.

The 'steak knives' that come with mastering this Attitude of Acceptance is that you will no longer have to wait for the muse, or inspiration, when you want to write or create. That attitude will create an environment that is conducive to creative expression, and you'll find that your ideas flow on demand.

DEACTIVATE SELF-CRITICISM

Not having time to think is actually a critical element in ‘creativity success’. A study led by Charles Limb of the NIH and Johns Hopkins University, compared the brain activity of jazz musicians as they played scales and a simple blues tune they’d memorised in advance with a piece they had to improvise on the spot. The researchers found that before a single note of the jazz improv was played, the pianists exhibited a deactivation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), a brain area associated with planned actions and self-control. In other words, they were inhibiting their inhibitions, which allowed them to create without worrying about what they were creating.

The fMRI machine also recorded a spike in activity in the medial prefrontal cortex, a fold of frontal lobe just behind the eyes that is often linked with self-expression – it lights up, for instance, whenever people tell a story in which they’re the main character, perhaps because the musicians were channelling their artistic identity, searching for the notes that best summarize their style. “Jazz is often described as being an extremely individualistic art form,” Limb says. “What we think is happening is when you’re telling your own musical story, you’re shutting down impulses that might impede the flow of novel ideas.”⁸

⁸ From *Jackson Pollock to John Coltrane — how creativity springs from a choreographed set of mental events* by Jonah Lehrer, May 6, 2009. Another book to explore on this topic is *The Inner Game of Music* by Barry Green with Timothy Gallwey.

SELF-AS-TEAM

Your Creator and Editor are your Internal Writing Team, and as you establish a respectful and harmonious working relationship with them (trusting the Creator and asking the Editor to wait its turn before sharing its distinctions), you are allowing each of those parts of you to shine in its perfect way at the right time, and you are simultaneously raising your self-esteem.

Practising a simple thing like this Creator/Editor relationship will pay volumes in all sorts of other qualitative ways in your life. When we resolve inner conflict, we always feel better about ourselves. When your Creator and Editor are working as a co-operative partnership – as a team – YOU are more relaxed, confident and successful both as a writer, and in general in your life.

And when it comes to the business of writing, ultimately you will be able to edit *as* you write – a truly successful writer can do both functions at the same time, but this is because he or she has learned how to respect the flow of Creative Genius by providing timely and useful suggestions rather than damming that flow through inappropriate criticism. (I've taught enough writing classes over the years to know that everyone has moments of genius. Cultivating that genius requires patience, trust and persistence.)

Once you've 'got it out', it's the Editor's turn to help you 'get it right.' and to master the writing process so that you will impact the reader. The Creator's part of the process is empowered by an Attitude of Acceptance and the Editor's part is aided by Strategies and Techniques, and they will be the business of Session Five.

EXERCISE: Practising acceptance

Give yourself a topic – anything. Pick a line from a book and keep going. Choose any word, perhaps ‘spice’ or ‘rabbit’ or ‘fear’, and either cluster it or do a piece of free writing about that topic. Or do both. 😊

If you’re really struggling with this ‘trust and acceptance’ thing, then set yourself the task of writing a bad story, the worst piece of writing you can possibly produce. I gave that task to my daughters who seemed to have decided that mum was the writer in the family and they couldn’t do it. After resisting any kind of writing for ages, when I gave them the ‘bad story’ assignment they spent three days writing almost constantly. Needless to say, what they wrote wasn’t bad at all...

“Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it’s the only way you can do anything really good.” – William Faulkner

SESSION 2: UNBLOCK YOUR POWER

Part 2: Life Story Work:

FACING YOUR LIFE STORY

“Look, all my work’s autobiographical and I don’t think there’s any denying it. I mean, where else can I draw from, someone else’s ideas? ... my best experience of life has been my own. I think every artist has to draw from their own experience. I think someone smart could probably look at all my work and know a hell of a lot more than I would like them to about me.”

– Graeme Murphy, Dumbo feather, pass it on. Issue 2, p 103

MY STORY

As a child I loved babies. I played with my childhood doll until I was twelve years old. When I carried her, I felt like a real mother. I watched my aunts with their babies, hovering at their elbows until I could ‘have a hold’. Pooley nappies didn’t faze me. I watched everything. When I was twelve, a favourite older cousin took my sisters and me out for lunch and a gift; I choose a baby bottle warmer. (I think my cousin was a little surprised.) I even read books on baby care. When asked how many children I was going to have, I declared: “Six”. At school, I was drawn to the littlies. When I was barely fourteen years old, I began babysitting. At eighteen I worked as a nanny, and that summer I fell in love for the first time. There was no doubt that I would soon be a mother.

Life had other ideas. That relationship hit a snag and I found myself alone again. I rebounded into another relationship, which promptly fell apart. So there I was, jilted twice before the grand old age of twenty-one. I swore off men and began attending various personal development programs.

When I allowed myself to date again, I did it almost indiscriminately, driven by the belief that I needed to be less needy; that it would do me good to ‘love and let go’. I had been too attached to men, too attached to being somebody’s wife; it was time to *be* somebody. I changed my surname by deed poll – ‘marrying myself’. I was footloose and fancy-free. Thoughts of parenthood and babies receded...

And then I attended a personal development program that was to change my life. One of the other attendees was an older man who was teetering on the edge of a midlife crisis. He was looking for change and growth; I was looking for love and growth. Our paths crossed, with significant ramifications for all concerned. He was married with children. I was definitely *not* a marriage-breaker... but he was pretty definitely going to be separating. Things weren’t working out well for them; he was moving on.

I stood back for a while, but things came to a head. He reminded me that he had children – was I okay with that? Yes, the mother in me said (rolling her sleeves up, putting her apron on...).

And so he left his partner and moved in with me. I told myself that he was leaving her anyway. I told myself that they were finished anyway. I told myself that with me he would want children and be a devoted father. I deafened myself to the social and familial messages that were coming my way; I knew better.

Within a few months of our relationship beginning my partner became depressed. He didn't talk about it. I guessed that he was feeling guilty... or something. I was feeling anxious and edgy. We continued to have a lot of great, close moments but they were interspersed with periods when we felt flat and disconnected.

People adjust. When something isn't quite working and one lacks the skills or insight to create change, one simply adjusts and carries on. We shared spiritual values to do with care for the earth and personal development (it's amazing how much personal development one can do without doing any). We joined a group dedicated to exploring sustainable lifestyles. Clearly, it wouldn't be appropriate to have children, what with the population explosion. (Perhaps we would adopt? I secretly played with images of me caring for other people's unloved children; my partner was relieved that having children was not on the agenda.)

We carried on... until I became pregnant. Whoah! Should I terminate? But I



couldn't! Would he leave? He didn't... at least, not physically. But he left me emotionally, and there began a period of intense difficulty. I felt that I couldn't show my joy at being pregnant or having a baby because that would be 'in his face'. My skin erupted in violent rashes, expressing physically what I could not express verbally. The natural birth we were going to have resulted in a thirty-two-hour labour,

foetal distress, a rush to hospital, and an epidural and forceps delivery. The blissful

mothering journey I had anticipated was beset with problems: our son didn't sleep, my partner was withdrawn and cool, I began to become more conscious of my suppressed guilt at having contributed to the breakdown of his marriage.

When our son was five months old, my youngest sister was hit by a car and died. Two weeks later we were due to move to the country to share a house with other like-minded (earth-caring, sustainable-living) people. Besides, a communal household would be a great environment for our child...

Two weeks after moving in, I twisted my ankle. So, there I was with an injury, a baby, immeasurable grief, and virtually no support. The other members of the household were very caring and well-intentioned, but they were all quite a bit older than me and there were no other children. I felt very alone. Besides, it was a big house and my partner would either be off working on the property somewhere or out for long walks or at the other end of the house watching TV with the others while I tried to put our baby to sleep, which is not an easy task when you're feeling resentful, knotted, guilty, confused...

I struggled on in that environment until our son was eighteen months old, when a very honest conversation with a visiting friend resulted in my decision to leave. I still remember this friend looking me in the eye and saying very directly, "You'll have to be the one to leave; he will never do it." I was immediately flooded with a sense of joy and freedom: *You mean I can be free? I can feel good again?*

That night I dreamt that a jet plane was cruising through the scrub around our house, looking for me, and the following day I made an appointment with a counsellor. The ensuing session confirmed my instincts; I moved back to Melbourne with our toddler. And I began to enjoy life again.

Within a few months my partner wanted to reconnect. I was wary, but he was loving, and I wanted to be loved. He moved back in with us. We were happy. Almost immediately I became pregnant again. The shit hit the fan again. This time it was twins. (So, ironically, with my three and his three, I had the six children I had dreamed about... not that we saw much of his children.)

The years dragged on. I felt inadequate, resentful, frustrated, sad, despairing. I alternated between psyching myself up to leave again and talking myself into staying. Every time I arrived at the conclusion that I should definitely leave (after all, he could see the children as often as he wanted to without having to be a full-time father, and I would be free of this angst and anxiety), he would become more helpful, even tender towards me, or light-hearted and playful, and then there seemed to be no point in leaving – after all, now he was being the person/father I wanted him to be. Besides, he was a magnificent lover, and there were many times when we were very close, very aligned, in love.

But I was still trying to be ‘Somebody’s wife’. I was still not valuing what I wanted, my gifts, my interests, myself. I was either tiptoeing around his values or trashing them. As Dr John Demartini, author of *The Breakthrough Experience*⁹ says, we are ‘careful’ when we value the other more than ourselves, ‘careless’ when we value ourselves more than the other, and ‘caring’ when we value both equally. An angry person is easily careless, and someone who feels inadequate automatically walks on eggshells, so, lacking the stability of self-worth, I rocked from one to the other.

⁹ *The Breakthrough Experience – A Revolutionary New Approach to Personal Transformation*, Hay House California, 2002. You’ll come across Dr Demartini’s name quite often in this book. I give no apologies! I find his work profoundly useful.

They say that what you resist, persists. While I was unable to value myself, I attracted more and more criticism from my partner, defiance from my children, and self-deprecation from myself. My guilt had deepened significantly because now I had a pre-teen who, in my perception, had had an unhappy childhood and whose angry outbursts were controlling the whole family. Everyone was tense. One day, one of the eight-year-old twins refused to leave the park to go home. Already stretched to breaking point, I snapped and left her there. Halfway home I realised what I'd done in horror, swung the car around and drove back to the park to retrieve her. That afternoon I rang a counsellor.

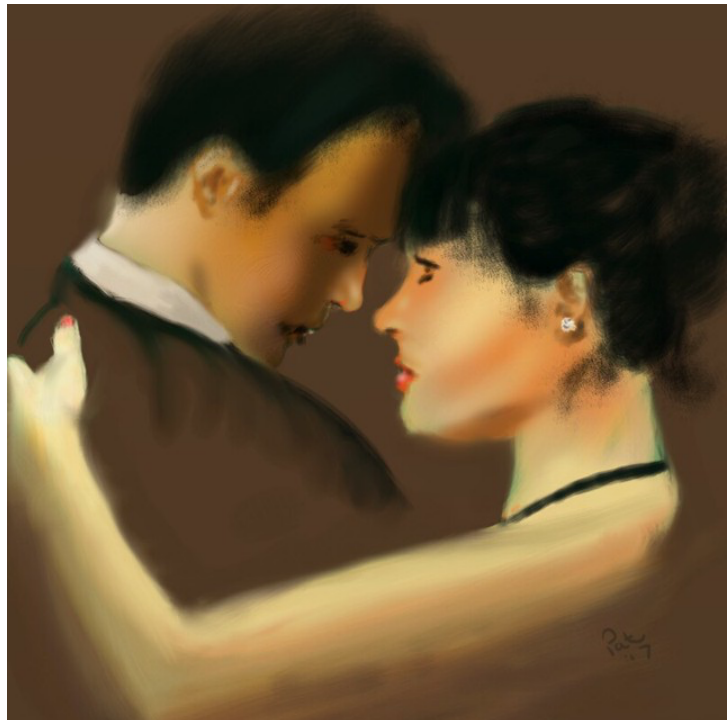
My first session gave way to in-depth couples counselling in a last-ditch effort by both my partner and I to save our (by then, fifteen-year-old) limping relationship, and the very wise and intuitive man who worked with us assisted me in finally beginning to value myself. By the end of that year of counselling, I was very clear that I was not prepared to tolerate my partner's depression any more. I deserved better.

Like magic, he changed.

There's an old adage, 'For things to change, first I must change': we can't create real change in your external circumstances unless we change inside. (Ironically, I first encountered this motto at the program where I met him.) It is as if our relationships are like chemical reactions: if one person's chemical nature, and thus contribution to the relationship, changes, the product of the union *must change*. This is a law of relationships that is as firm and inviolable as any law of chemistry.

Over the years, my frustration had reached explosion point and now I had finally built enough energy to break free. I told myself that I had given this relationship a fair go, and I now deserved to live without tension and to move forward in my life. The children would be fine. I told my partner that I valued my growth as a person more than our stuck relationship. I established a boundary inside myself. I began to truly value myself.

When I began to change, he could either leave or change. He chose to change. He shook off the depression that had dogged him for years and began reading books about spiritual and personal growth again. He took the children away for a week by himself. He declared to everyone at my fortieth birthday party how much he loved and appreciated me. He



even danced with me in front of everyone – ballroom and Latin dancing had always been my passion and something he had avoided. Friends and family commented on how much he had changed during the months that followed. He seemed lighter, more contented.

From his point of view, this has been a very gritty story to share. His courage, his willingness to be vulnerable, to allow me to be so open with the details of our lives, is worthy of much respect. Most importantly, I want to make the point that his

unavailability through the years, whether emotional or physical, his criticisms, coolness and distance had served me all the way. That unavailability, whether emotional or physical, the criticisms, coolness, distance etc. were what it took for me to get furious enough, to enable me to generate enough energy to be able to break through *my self-criticism* into valuing myself and knowing that I deserved a partner who genuinely cared for me and the children. To me, the purpose of life (and relationships) is to grow into a greater capacity for love and expression.

A long time ago I wrote an article that was published in the Australian magazine *The Whole Person*. The article was entitled ‘The Perfect Partner – *Perfect for What?*¹⁰ It was written in a moment of enlightenment during those difficult years, when I saw that there was no point seeking out a ‘perfect partner’ (read: handsome, wealthy, loving, kind...). The partner who would most serve me in my life would be the man who would stimulate (provoke) me into growing... (in that case, someone who was unavailable, cool, distant, critical...). The perfect partner delivers what we *need* at a deep, soul level.

Life gave me that man, and I am grateful for him for many, many reasons. While we did eventually part ways (after twenty-nine years together), I can say in absolute truthfulness that I transformed my feelings from not even liking him at times to being deeply in love again. I dissolved my resentment. The restlessness melted away. The guilt I carried for years ebbed away. We still argued at times, of course, and we still went through flat spells, but we experienced more harmony in our relationship, more expressed appreciation, and more teamwork.

¹⁰ See my website/articles

If I had valued myself enough to reject his depression and remoteness earlier, perhaps we would not have trudged through all of that sludge for so long. But that is neither here nor there. When my son was handed to me after that thirty-two-hour labour and epidural/forceps delivery, none of the pain or distress mattered anymore; likewise, when my partner and I were finally able to connect again after years of feeling critical and resentful of each other, old love was rekindled, appreciation flowered, animosity was forgotten. As soon as you view your circumstances with love, any apparent loss or discomfort is consigned to oblivion. You are left with Love.

*“We are healed to the extent that we
love ourselves as we are right now –
blemishes, vulnerabilities and all –
not as we wish we will be at some time
in the distant future.”*

– Marsha Sinetar

YOUR STORY

There is something significant about putting thoughts and feelings down on paper (or screen!). Seeing them there in black and white ‘grounds’ them. Instead of allowing yourself to be battered by a whirl of half-formed thoughts and feelings, writing pins those thoughts and feelings down into something tangible and objective. You honour yourself when you take the time to scribe the impressions and beliefs and emotions that are flowing through you.

WRITING EXERCISES:

1. Life Story Journal Exercise:

Write your life story. You don’t have to write an entire book; a few pages is plenty – although if you want to write a book, go ahead!

Write about what/who you are resisting, resenting, judging, condemning in your life right now. Also write about what you love, appreciate, enjoy and feel grateful for. Record the experiences. Describe the situations. Identify the themes of your life.

OR:

2. Tell Your Story:

Do it orally.

Years ago, I was invited to tell my life story to a virtual stranger. As the mess of my life unwound in the telling, I began to see patterns and connections; isolated chunks became meaningful sequences. There is one philosophy from psychotherapy that says “Know *why* you are *who* you are”. It’s not about drowning in the past; it’s

about recognising and acknowledging the lesson and skills and gifts and insights that we gather as we go through this journey; it's about finding the gold in our life experiences.

Find someone loyal with good listening skills and tell them your unadulterated story. As you acknowledge the challenges you have faced, you will grow in dignity and appreciation of yourself.

OR:

3. Write a Fairy tale version of your life story

Make it up in 'once upon a time' format: "Once upon a time there lived an accountant and his wife. They had always wanted a son, but..."

Or "Once upon a time there was a family of squirrels..."

Play with it. Give yourself as much space and freedom as you need to be able to relax into the telling of your story. Sometimes the unexpectedness of this format can reveal insights and meaning you had never previously realised.

"To tell stories you must tell your own. Go back to the caves of your life, chart the past that goes on making the future. Tell and invent the story; listen as you speak. ... To make stories end you tell them over and over. That's when they rest at your feet like good, tired children."

– Janine Burke, Summer Sight