



TRUST THE PROCESS! Writing at the Center

Introduction

“What is this place?” Students ask who happen by the airy, open room with large windows, round tables and book shelves lined with Webster’s dictionaries, archaic novels and dusty writing guides.

It’s a quiet place where soft music plays in the background and a candle burns somewhere giving off a fragrance that lingers even in the hallway. It is an inviting space, a welcoming space.

“It is the Writing Center.”

As the director of the Writing Center, I have the privilege of working with writers every day. Some saunter in, bewildered by a mandate from their professor. Others stroll by because somebody said we could help. Then there are those who rush in, breathless and impatient, thrusting their paper at us because it’s due in an hour!

Their problems are a complex web of contradictions:

- They are either frustrated by what seems to be a senseless detour on their path to the professor’s dropbox... or have long ago thrown up their hands at this enigma called *writing*...
- They are bound by an obligation to come here, yet “kick against the goads” in defiance for being here...

- They doubt their own skills and our ability to help them... yet come anyway, hoping for help and a quick fix (“I need an A!”)

Then, glancing at their watches, they become restless as we walk them through the process. No one is interested in process. “What even is that?”

So, it’s my job to slow them down. It is exactly because they have bypassed the process that they are having so many problems, so I do my best to calm them and convince them to settle in to the Center and *trust the process*.

But process is painful. It takes time. It’s uncomfortable and it always involves more work than writers care to put in. After 20 years of studying the writing process, working with writers of every skill level and working at writing myself, I’ve come to see the writing process as a perfect metaphor, not only for creative but also spiritual development. I believe that the very act of writing is a marvelous tool for developing critical thinking skills, improving emotional stability, attaining spiritual enlightenment and achieving practical success!

What I also hope to demonstrate in this book is that while the writing process is an important work for the development of writing, it is also important for the development of writers, meaning *people*—even those who don’t consider themselves to be “writers”—but who recognize the value of putting writing at the center of their process of self-discovery.

The process of self-discovery requires critical thinking—what Gerald Nositch defines as “thinking about our thinking in order to make our thinking better,” which is a uniquely human ability. People spend millions of dollars each year on self-help books and therapy sessions in order to better understand themselves, yet one simple way to self-awareness is already at your fingertips! Writing is just externalized thoughts. By placing our thoughts on the page we give ourselves permission to reflect on them and this act of thoughtful reflection has the potential to open new neural pathways and improve our cognitive ability.

What I am suggesting is that we (1) slow down and (2) put writing at the **center** of our daily practice, then (3) *trust the process*. In this book, I’ll show you how!

The Writing Center

I love sitting in the empty Writing Center. Empty tables and chairs hold the promise and possibility of what could be...

Writing has three phases: invention, composition and revision. The **invention** phase is where we assess the rhetorical situation: purpose, audience, genre and style. The **composing** phase is where writers conduct research, narrow their topic, develop a thesis and begin writing, and during the **revision** phase we take a step back from what has been written and reconsider the rhetorical situation. By looking

again at where we are, we can make decisions about what should be added or cut. (To be fair, **composing** is really an endless cycle of writing and revising, but we'll get to that later!)

If we continue with the metaphor of the writing process we can see how it aligns with our personal development as well.

Invention

In Psalm 139:13 it says that God “created my inmost being; [He] knit me together in my mother’s womb” and, Ephesians 2:10 says I am His “handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance” for me to do.”

God created us for a purpose. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding our conception, birth and upbringing, He has a plan for us. Thus, the first step in our creative and spiritual development is to assess our rhetorical situation. What have we been created to do? What is the significance of this moment in history? In what ways are we unique? Who are the people within our circle of influence? What is our style and what is our story? This is where we begin.

Composition

As we set out to pursue the plan, we have to research the best strategies for success. If I'm going to be a writer what will I write? Books or blogs? Magazine articles or social media posts? Whichever direction I choose, I'll need to

establish a theme—or thesis—that guides each choice or else I'll be like a dog chasing its tail, lots of movement, but no forward motion. If I'm not writing to publish, composition is simply writing about the parts that comprise the whole of daily life. At this stage, it's just putting everything on the table.

Revision

Once it's all there, we can examine it and assess the next steps. As writers, getting words on the page is the hardest part. After that comes the refiner's fire! Revision, like character-building is the ongoing recursive work of thinking about what we do (or what we're writing) in light of where and who we are, periodically re-visiting our goals and our progress towards them and reassessing whether the direction we're going in is right or whether the rhetorical situation has shifted so that we need to make a change.

What does it mean to put writing at the Center?

As you can see, then, each stage of the writing process offers a lesson in our life processes too. When students settle into the Center they have to take a few steps back before they can move forward. The Center is that liminal space—physically and mentally—where they have to sit for a while—not where they started, but not yet where they want to be. Together—the tutor and the writer—work through the difficulties, discuss the rough patches, sometimes disagree about the best way forward. For writers, time spent in the Center is time spent in a process of

becoming, a process that develops both the writer and the writing.

“In this life you will have trouble.” (John 16:33)

Sometimes our tasks, our goals and our achievements align perfectly, like those glorious writing days that every writer lives for, when words flow like the rivers of life and your fingers fly across your keyboard barely keeping pace with the flood of ideas. But, then there are those other days... when hardships hit and you sit at your desk and none of the words make sense. But that’s okay—write anyway.

In this book we make writing the center and discover important questions about life:

- What is my calling?
- If writing is my calling, can I do it well?
- What will people think?

If you feel like you’ve been called to be a writer, but also have uncertainties about your ability to write, this book will help you move from a stuck and discouraged writer to a hopeful, even thriving writer!

However, this is not just a book about writing to publish, it’s also about writing for practice and for self-discovery. I believe writing is a tool that can help you delve deeper into your understanding of God’s purpose for your life, regardless of what you do.

If you’re a student who is compelled to write for school, this book will help you hone your skills...

If you’re looking for a daily devotional that will lead to a deeper understanding of self and God’s calling on your life, this book is also for you...

We’re not just *talking* about writing; we are also writing! Each chapter includes a short inspirational thought and a brief writing exercise that builds on the one before. Exercises are both reflective (for journaling) and generative—at times the same exercise may serve dual purposes. The goal is to write something each day and trust the process.

Writers, if you follow the steps and exercises in this book, by the end you could have one or more completed drafts of your work, depending on the genre you choose. Then all that remains is revision and publication. Speaking of publication, there is also a bonus section at the end called “The Writers’ Workbook.” There you’ll find resources for writers and information on how artists and creative types can, indeed, earn a living wage!

Each of us must follow a process to achieve our goals and walk out the customized plan that God has designed. My hope is that this book will be both an inspiration and aid in exploration as the exercises are as much about writing for self as they are about writing for others.

As we put writing at the center of our daily practice, let's also challenge ourselves to think deeply about our use of the talents He's given and consider how we can invest those talents to bring Him a high return!



PART I: INVENTION

Is This What I Was Meant to Do?

1

SO, GOD GAVE YOU TALENT... NOW WHAT?

¹⁴ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. ¹⁵ And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. ¹⁶ Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. ¹⁷ And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. ¹⁸ But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. (Matthew 25:14-19)

William Paul Young was the servant with one talent. When he wrote *The Shack* he had no intention of publishing it beyond the 15 copies he made at the *Office Depot*. His wife had asked him to write something for the kids, but neither of them expected the finished product would be a 250pg. novel! Neither did they anticipate a multi-million-dollar motion picture deal.

Young was perfectly content with his job as a janitor scrubbing toilets, but, **unlike** the servant with one talent, he decided against burying what the Master had entrusted him with. Instead, he used his gift to work out existential questions he had struggled with throughout his life. He did not write in order to be famous. He wrote in order to find

God and through the writing process he learned to trust God completely.

Young’s success with *The Shack* flowed naturally from a place of peace rather than from any striving or effort on his part, and it occurred long before his novel made it to the top of best seller lists. For him, writing was about finding answers to his questions about God and settling into a loving relationship with Him, his family and his community.

Who are you before you sit down to write?

Notice, in the story of the man who was traveling to a far country, the Bible says that he “delivered his goods to them.” Apart from the master, the servants did not have any goods. All they had was potential and they were called to bring that potential to bear on the goods that the master had given. It’s like God was an NBA scout and the servants were high school players. The question was, what would they do with the opportunity God offered?

Who are you before you sit down to write? Are you already an NBA star or do you merely have potential? Regardless of the level of success you’ve garnered, if God has not been central to your career, you have not yet reached your fullest potential. Perhaps you mistake your gifts and your creative work to be your own and you just want God to put his stamp of approval on it. Is your whole identity wrapped up in your profession, in your craft, in your possessions, rather than in your God whose goods you’ve been given? If so, you will never find that perfect peace that William Paul Young did. His secret was in securing “success” before his success.

Being in right relationship with His Creator positioned him to accomplish what he was created to do.

God invites us to be a part of His divine plan, but too often we are more reliant on personal effort than actual dependence on Him. Success is not about executing our plan, it's about joining the plan that's already in place.

In the parable of the talents, the servant who buried his gift was afraid because all he could see was his own lack. He never considered himself to be in partnership with the Master. Maybe you have one talent, maybe you have ten. Each and every talent is needed—all players—not just the starting five.

As writers, our focus should be less on where our work will go, who will read it, even where or whether it will ever be published. It should be on what we will do with the goods we've been given.

JOURNALING EXERCISE
CHAPTER ONE INVENTION PRACTICE
Centering Prayer, pt 1

If we believe that God has given us talents, why wouldn't we seek Him to find out how best to use them? Before we write a single word, let's look to the Word for direction.

1. Take your Bible and your journal to a quiet spot where you won't be interrupted for at least 10-15 minutes.

2. Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed
3. Take 3 deep breaths allowing your body to completely relax
4. Clear your mind of all the clutter. Concentrate only on each breath.
5. Don't rush. Breathe slowly.
6. Whisper a quiet prayer: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3:9)
7. Now, turn to Proverbs 1:1-7
8. Read it out loud, slowly
9. Repeat this once or twice more: whisper your prayer, read the verse out loud, slowly, then wait.
10. Sit quietly for a minute or two and think about what you read. What words stand out? What words do you still hear even after you've finished reading?
11. Write these words in your journal
12. Respond to the words that stayed with you by writing out a prayer incorporating those words.

When you've finished writing your prayer, close your journal and go on to your next task! It's important to give yourself space to reflect on each writing session. When you return, you will be able to re-read what you wrote with fresh eyes and a fresh perspective.