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Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:
Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.



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The Winning Odd Couple of Journalism: The Storyteller and The Researcher

By Nicole M. Bouchard

I had been asked early on in 2011 to respond to a writing call for woman in publishing. There was to be an anthology entitled, *Women Writing on Family: Tips on Writing, Teaching and Publishing* with co-editors Suzann Holland and Carol Smallwood, both of whom are affiliated through their writings with the American Library Association (ALA). You were to write in with three article proposals; if accepted, you would send in the completed

article to the given specifications and wait for reply. Of the three concepts I pitched, the one they chose was the following:

A Storyteller's Art Marries Fact Along the Journey of Journalism

What makes a story, what makes a lasting impression and what makes for powerful communication through media involves not only presenting the facts, but presenting them in an engaging way to reach out and involve readers. The balance between the historic elements of storytelling and the modern orientation towards analytical thinking is a delicate one as we as a culture are predispositioned to think, receive and process information based on ancient theories of communication. Psychology, physiology, and how these are interwoven to develop compelling profiles, articles and interviews are highlighted in this piece.

It was interesting to me that this was the one they chose as the subject has struck a chord with me ever since I wrote my senior paper for Advanced English- a persuasive essay arguing the balance between fact and literary devices in journalism. I had rather enjoyed the controversy the essay stirred amongst the more conventional instructors who believed in extracting every distinguishing detail from a piece, bleaching it of a writer's voice in favor of the "just the facts, Mam" style. I dug out my old paper, my notes and binder full of observations from an old mentorship and the research I did on my own for hours in the majestic city library with its wrought-iron banisters, tile archways and marble floors.

The article for the anthology was well-received and placed amongst the finalists; in the end, due to length and spacing, another topic slid into my slot to fulfill the table of contents. The experience, however, brought back those initial theories I'd formed in my early youth (quite a rebel toting all those books around, particularly in tall-heeled designer boots) and I saw through my work experience and further hands-on education in the publishing world how those theories- practiced, studied through extensive reading and measured- had stood the test of time. With resources, tips, observations and examples of practical application right down to how we are physiologically and psychologically structured to receive information, rather than keep this on the back-burner, what follows is my foray into the marriage of a storyteller's 'art' and a journalist's 'science'.

Standing back to back, each with seemingly opposite purposes drawing their eyes to different horizons, the archetypes of The Storyteller and The Researcher are the synergistic book ends that hold the 'stuff' of memorable journalism between them. Psychologically and physically we are designed to be most receptive to information when these two components walk hand in hand, creating powerful tales of glory, triumph and tragedy in their wake.

Often thought to be mutually exclusive, they actually strengthen one another mixed in the right doses. If you're reading an article about casualties in the Iraq war, the numbers and the dates tell a part of the story- of the losses and what war can do but the description of the lovely middle-aged woman, typically reserved, throwing herself over her son's coffin, her hands pressing down the red roses to the stripes of the American flag makes the story heart-wrenchingly unforgettable. The Storyteller is emotive, asking you to feel, relate, empathize or even passionately disagree. The Researcher tells you how, what, why and when so that your reason and intellect expand. The Storyteller makes you understand while The Researcher makes you comprehend and in doing so they foster a deeper universal sense of the past, present and future on the page and in our minds.

Their relationship is an ancient one forged when our species first felt the need to share their stories, be understood or remembered. With respect to the physiological aspect of this soulful evolution, the formation of the cerebral cortex allowed for layers of intellect and reasoning (thinking and planning) while the temporal lobe gave birth to morals and religion; these capacities were far beyond the functions of the brainstem which is home to our most primal instincts (fight or flight). To better understand the world and explain our environment, our communication as a species became a mix of feeling- that which was dictated by our senses and emotions, fact- that which we discovered to be true, observation- that which we interpreted to be true and faith- that which we believed. Metaphor, theme and superstition were added to the entire equation now embedded in our cellular memory. In his non-fiction work entitled, *Reporting the Universe*,

E.L. Doctorow describes one of the canons of this philosophy:

"I have held to an idea ever since I heard it posited by one of my professors at Kenyon College in the Fifties- that there was an ancient time when no distinction was possible between fact and fiction, between religious perception and scientific discourse, between utilitarian communication and poetry—when all these functions of language... were indivisible" E.L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 24-25.

The theory goes on to compare this notion to a star where the points were the modern divisions of language and the core was the center of our minds, even when we are now seemingly ruled by facts and science, we return to that core as we are inherently "structured for storytelling."

Thus our predisposition, psychologically and physically, toward processing and expressing information through storytelling began and continues. Carl Jung theorized that our minds have not evolved nor changed a great deal over the centuries as we as a species are relatively young in comparison to the earth itself. Preceding recorded history, man sought to leave proof of his life and how he lived it through spoken word and imagery so that long after he became part of the environment that had sustained him, the impact of his existence would be imprinted upon collective memory for generations to come.

In this same spirit of preservation, the ancient Celts regarded their poets as second only to kings as they were the guardians of their history, progeny and culture. As storytelling took on form, evolving into the shapes of written words, its defining principle remained the same- to immortalize personal and societal legacies in a way that would convey a deep, timeless significance to its audience.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, in a letter to a confidant in 1934, spoke of a reporter's storytelling duty and the appeal of a publication as a result: "as an author's main purpose is to 'make you see', so a magazine's principal purpose is to be read" Larry Phillips, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald On Writing* (New York: Scribner's,1985), 10. Fitzgerald recommended "reporting the extreme things as if they where the average things" meaning to remove the distance with which a writer might place between themselves and a topic that to them seems extraordinary; to establish an intimacy and level of detail where the reader can step inside that world for the length of a book or an article. Removing the veil of distance between story and author opens up doors not only for in-depth profiles, articles, and interviews but also for the personal essay which even further demands a state of intimacy and art in its depiction.

An article about how an extremely personal event became a Newsweek essay was submitted for consideration in the Writers' Craft Box portion of the magazine last year. It was entitled "Sharing My Heart—When Private Writing Goes Public and Becomes a Newsweek Essay" by SuzAnne Cole. This piece, accepted and published in autumn of 2010, was a strong example of taking a personal history, in this instance the divorce of Cole's son, and turning it into a cathartic piece of storytelling that engaged a wide audience of readers who wrote in to Newsweek to respond with letters of their own and sparked a beautiful, continuing relationship for Cole with her former daughter-in-law.

Readers yearn for universal experiences and communication that both inspire and validate their individual experiences. In this respect, writers have the responsibility of generating these profound connections. The philosopher, referred to as "Pliny the Elder", wrote that "...true glory consists in doing what deserves to be written; in writing what deserves to read; and in doing so living as to make the world happier and better for our living in it."

Putting heart in hand to marry fact with literary devices to provoke a reader response reached immense popularity in the journalistic movement associated with the 1960s and the term "New Journalists". In her book *The Essential Feature*, Victoria Hay highlights the philosophy governing this style:

"It begins with a lead like a fictional opening and presents facts in a more flexible manner. The writer may take an obvious point-of-view, and the story may use fictional techniques to show rather than tell the reader

what is going on. In short, it is a hybrid that requires you to combine a reporter's skill with a storyteller's art" Victoria Hay, *The Essential Feature* (New York: Columbia Press, 1990), 8-9.

Of these "New Journalists", Hay describes how Tom Wolfe spoke of "...the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space... to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally" Hay, *Essential*, 9.

Donald M. Murray, a powerful contemporary of this school of thought, wrote of the revelation of having discovered it in the latter part of his journalistic career:

"And then one day, late in a life of writing, in answering a question after a public reading of an example of my non-fiction, I realized the obvious: Art is first a craft, and I could take pride in the practice of my craft. More than that, I recognized that all I had ever written in every genre- fiction, poetry, non-fiction... was built upon the secure foundation of the journalist's craft. I reviewed with a new pride, the assumptions of craft to which I had apprenticed myself so many years before and to which I am still- and now proudly- apprenticed" Donald M. Murray, *Writing to Deadline* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000), 1.

A further perspective of modern journalists comes what they feel are the "ills of journalism". Tom Rosentiel, an established contemporary journalist, feels that the solution lies in upholding historic standards of the craft and making them an integral part of the identity of writers in the field. "The news organization must make it clear to those who work there that [journalism] is part art, part literature and very little science; reporters are motivated by the values of the institution and by a sense of mission- they need to know what the mission is to thrive" Tom Rosentiel, "A Prescription for Journalist's Ills" *Boston Globe* (1998): 3-4.

In knowing that the mission of the journalist entails the greater responsibilities endowed upon them by history and the timeless purpose of creating heartfelt links individual to individual, we have a new relationship to words and how we use them. We address family, community and self with each broad stroke of the pen.

Tips on Tempering Fact with Storytelling to Write True:

- Within your first paragraph, engage the reader both intellectually and emotionally. A dynamic story begins with the beginning.
- Remove the 'distance' when focusing on description. Bring the reader "there" with you as if you are both eye witnesses of the story's circumstances.
- Remember to show as well as tell. Research and accuracy are of great importance yet without the writer instilling the significance of them by showing through example, the meaning is lost.
- Keep your audience and purpose in mind. Are you writing a profile of a prominent female artist for a high-brow art magazine whose readers are experts in their field looking for philosophy as opposed to method? Or is this same profile for a regional publication that wants a personal angle, description of the studio (physical locale) and details on method as most readers are in different professions?
- Don't fear getting personal. People want and need to hear other voices telling stories like theirs. When using one's own experiences for source material, there can be an element of hesitancy. Combat this by approaching the piece as though you are not the protagonist. Revisit a draft after a space of time to clear away thoughts or feelings that might have bubbled up out of immediacy and calmly reflect.
- Tell the untold story. Be it a person, place, thing or event you are writing about, chances are much of the details/themes have been said before. Go for that glimmer of something original while sifting through the bulk of the information. It can be as simple as taking a fact and presenting it with a new observation or personal input from someone associated with it.

□ Maintain trustworthiness and privacy with each story; not only is it the mark of a true professional and the moral responsibility of the writer but it also often encourages people to tell their stories properly without the reservations they might have with more invasive media. If working from your own experience and mentioning others involved ask permission or change names/locale.

□ Get creative. This is where the art comes into the story. Experiment with metaphor and visual imagery. It could be an unusual quote from literature, a reference to a painting, film, sculpture paired with subject matter of a different medium. For example, a piece on an inventive food fusion chef could compare the five tastes humans can sense to an artist palette of primary colors that the chef works from to mix as many variations as the color wheel has to offer. Perhaps this fits the chef's personality and ties the themes of the restaurant together in a unique way. If you look for the creative angle, you are bound to find it and sometimes even surprise yourself with what you come up with.

Resources for reading, learning and honing your craft:

□ *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing* by The New York Writers Workshop (Writers Digest Books 2006); the section on non-fiction covers nearly every different type of article and style element.

□ *Reporting the Universe* by E.L. Doctorow (Harvard University Press 2003).

□ *Vanity Fair, Newsweek, The New Yorker, Wall Street Journal, The New York Times*- for excellent features, varied writing styles

□ Tom Wolfe, Marguerite Higgins, Rebecca West, Ernest Hemingway, Victoria Hay, Joan Didion, E.B. White, Donald Murray, George Orwell, Joseph Mitchell, Charles Salzberg- for their journalistic prowess

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Noelle Sterne is a writer, writing coach, and spiritual counselor who has published over 250 pieces in print and online venues. Current pieces appear in The Writer, Writers' Journal, Working Writer, Children's Book Insider, Pen and Prosper, and Going Bonkers (a spiritual magazine with a sense of humor). Her memoir is part of the new anthology The Moment I Knew: Reflections

from Women on Life's Defining Moments (Sugati Publications, 2011). With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle has conducted an academic coaching and editing practice for over 28 years. Based on this consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). In Noelle's new book, Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams (Unity Books, 2011), she uses examples from her practice and many other aspects of life and applies practical spirituality to help readers let go of regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings.

Her radio interview about the book can be heard at:

<http://www.unity.fm/showdownload/>

[UnityVillage_081511/unityvillage_081511.mp3](http://www.unity.fm/showdownload/UnityVillage_081511/unityvillage_081511.mp3)

A YouTube review of the book can be found at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSVEkcoLilk&feature=channel_video_title

Visit Noelle's website at: www.trustyourlifefor.com

You Deserve A Self-Nurturing Date

by Noelle Sterne

If you're a writer like many of us and must write but can barely find the time, the idea of giving yourself a non-writing date may make you snort in disgust and curse out loud. You've probably absorbed the work-ethic of our culture that encourages and demands we pack into every moment as much as inhumanly possible.

But sometimes there's wisdom in slowing down, even stopping. A Zen saying counsels, "Slow is fast." And we're not required to chant five times a day or wear odd sandals to experience the rewards of this truth. What happens, for example, when you're late for work? Trying to get out, you bark instructions into the phone, gulp your coffee, force your eyes to scan the report due that morning, and squeeze into your shoes, all at the same time.

The next instant, you drop the phone, spill coffee on the report, and tear your slacks because your heel got caught in the hem. You manage to get out the door, but your jaw is tight, you're sweating through your deodorant, and your shoes are stained where the coffee cascaded. Slow is fast.

As with the rest of life, so with writing. Whether you have an overflowing deskful of assignments and projects or only a drawerful, whether you're a full-time professional writer or part-timer, whether you write for others or yourself or a combination, "Slow is fast." Believing we have to produce constantly and can never rack up enough words is the equivalent of spilling our coffee and tearing our slacks.

And moreover, if we push beyond a certain point because of the compulsion to produce, ironically our production suffers. When I've pressed like this, the writing is wordy, overblown, superficial, and stale. Worse, I lose the passion and excitement for the piece that kept me awake for three hours the night before last.

The cure? Get away from your writing. Go have some fun. Writers often talk about taking breaks, but they usually mean ten minutes wolfing down an energy bar or a quick check of online news. Not enough.

The Self-Nurturing Date

What you need is a nourishing and playful longer break. The wise, inspiring, and infinitely sane creativity counselor Julia Cameron calls this the "artist date."^[1] It's one of her methods for dissolving blocks to creative expression of any kind, but it's equally powerful—and required—if you're not blocked but deadened, annoyed at what you're writing, and feel it's worthless.

The artist date is a scheduled time alone with yourself in which you do anything you really want to other than the current writing project. It's probably something you've kept putting off or haven't let yourself do in years because you've labeled it silly, time-wasting, unproductive, childish, or any other sneering adjective. It's your private time, with no restrictions, demands or provisos from anyone else. The artist date is meant to help loosen creativity, however we choose to channel it, and, as important, help us break glue-like habits of lifelong constraints and self-denials.

The Prizes of Self-Denial

The writing staleness and depression comes from self-deprivation. Deprivation comes from not being good to ourselves. We'd never inflict it on our children, partners, pets, or even plants. Somehow we feel there's virtue in the self-denial of basic human pleasures, and even necessities. Maybe it worked for medieval monks and martyrs (and I wonder about that), but it doesn't work for most of us.

If we do manage to give ourselves that pleasurable something, we usually find ways to square it with ourselves, as if to pay it off. Some people take a day off or a vacation only after they've worked themselves to the edge of exploding blood pressure or a heart attack. Others take real breaks only when they can rationalize to family and friends (and themselves) that they haven't had any days off in nine months. And others never do it.

Do you think you'll get a prize for all this denial? You're right. Many prizes: resentment, depression, constant criticism of others, and a host of illnesses (so you can feel more martyred). Oh, yes, you can congratulate yourself on creating a rotten life. And there's a bonus: you can repeat your litany of life's "unfairness" and a chorus of "I tolja so's" to anyone who still has the patience to listen to you. Do you really want these prizes?

Think of some of the things you've wanted to do for ages and have never given yourself permission or time to do them. You know what they are. Maybe you've flirted with them before but quickly flicked them off. "Oh, I couldn't. That's for kids. Too much work. Too tired. Costs too much. Can't be away from XXXXX for that long. Should clean out the garage instead."

It's time to stop cleaning and start living. We all have these desires to do what we firmly think we shouldn't do. We may think they're self-indulgent or—that dread condemnation—selfish. But they're not. They're called balance.

Permission to Stop Denying Yourself

If you need some authoritative permission, here are the releasing words of Abraham, the collective Consciousness that has been voiced by Esther Hicks for the last 25 years:

If we were standing in your physical shoes, that would be our dominant quest: Entertaining Yourself, pleasing Yourself, connecting with Yourself, being Yourself, enjoying Yourself, loving Yourself.

Some say, "Well, Abraham, you teach selfishness." And we say, yes we do, yes we do, yes we do, because unless you are selfish enough to reach for that connection, you don't have anything to give anyone, anyway. And when you are selfish enough to make that connection—you have an enormous gift that you give everywhere you are.[2]

Now that you've got permission, maybe you need a little prompting in some really selfish things to do. Here's a short list of things other writers have confessed they've wanted to do, longed to do, and admitted their inner knowing persistently prodded them to do. Finally, when they felt strong enough, deserving enough, or exhausted enough, they listened and acted.

Some Ideas for Nurturing Yourself

- Wallowing in magazines (choose your junk) on an open-ended Sunday afternoon.
- Delving into the mysteries of your new Kindle, iPhone, iPad.
- Taking yourself to lunch at the restaurant you've always felt was too expensive.
- Watching the playoffs all day (choose your sport).
- Exploring the wildlife preserve ten minutes from your home.
- Working on your long-lost collection of poems.
- Poking around in the new crafts shop or hardware store in your neighborhood.
- Sitting quietly and thinking of how you'll express your affection to your partner, like you did when you first discovered each other.
- Attacking the overstuffed, chaotic closet shelves that have been bothering you for years (some of us do think this is fun).
- Writing a letter or email to a treasured friend you haven't had contact with for way too long.

- Starting a journal; writing in your journal.
- Playing your trumpet.
- Playing Frisbee in the park.
- Playing with your pet for more than 30 seconds between work and bill-paying.
- Going to the zoo.
- Taking a long walk down a road you've always wanted to explore.
- Getting the massage you've always craved.
- Buying seventeen sacks of candy you loved as a kid and eating as much as you want.
- Shopping (or browsing) for yourself alone.[3]

By now, your own mental list has probably started knocking, or you remember the one you once scribbled out and pushed way back in your desk drawer.

So go ahead. Dig out that list or write your own, and schedule your self-nurturing date. Give yourself at least an hour, preferably once a week. Put your date in your planner, as inviolate as a dentist's appointment. And remember, this date is for you alone.

Self-nurturing, as many spiritual mentors teach us (see, for example, Cheryl Richardson[4]), demonstrates and supports our self-esteem, self-respect, and sense of deserving. But we've got to approach the date with mindfulness, shutting out everything else. All the carefully planned private sessions of scented baths and candles, or center-ice seats at the hockey game, will do nothing if we don't bring a true sense of deserving to the activity.[5] If we're drawing the water and lowering the lights, sitting rink side on our warming cushion only because we're obeying the date prescription, or thinking of the million things we should be doing, we might as well go empty the dishwasher instead.

To get your feet wet, even if it seems forced or rote at first, take the first steps and act as if you deserve your date. Often the act itself will draw you into it. Ignore that three-page list of Unconditional To-Dos that's knocking heads with the single item on your self-nurturing list. Give yourself a little push. Shut off the phone and draw the bubble-bath water. Pull on your team t-shirt and get your buddy out of his garage. Borrow your kid's Frisbee. Your mind will gradually follow your body.

Warning: Self-Negation Ahead

I'd better warn you, though. As much as you may have wished for "the time" to really let yourself have this date, you may find countless brilliant and ingenious reasons to avoid it. You suddenly remember it's your turn to chauffeur your daughter's class to the science museum. Your eye lights on the crammed briefcase you brought home from work. You decide to get ahead on the laundry this week, so you jump up to gather the dirty piles from every room. You feel an inexplicable need to get the old radio fixed, even though it's been sitting in the garage for months and no one in the house cares about it anyway.

Realize that these rationales and supposed necessities are only your Inner Judge in disguise. You know the one—the malevolent anti-muse behind your right ear who derides your every writing attempt with disapproving eyebrows and withering grunts.

The more we succeed in listening inside and acting, the more the Judge tries to sabotage our growing self-respect. Those counterfeit absolute "musts," which you know you could forget, postpone, reschedule, or get someone else to do, are only the Judge pounding again, and maybe last-gasping, that old message that you really don't deserve to nourish yourself.

Cameron recognizes that the date with ourselves is one of the hardest things for most of us to keep. "There are as many ways to evade this commitment as there are days of your life . . . Watch how this sacred time gets easily encroached upon . . . Recognize this resistance as a fear of intimacy—self-intimacy." [6]

What have we to fear from being alone with ourselves and hearing what we have to say? When will we learn that we're really our own best friend? Exuberant life coach and spiritual teacher Tama Kieves advises us to trust our "own way. No one can give you this way. No one can take it away either." [7]

Remember this.

So make a list of your fondest self-nurturing dates. At the appointed hour, if you

need to, ask those who love and support you to push you out the door.

The date is one of the best things you can do for your writing and your artistic health. As a result of your date, you feel good, energized and refreshed, and your work goes better. Cameron tells us, "Always, when I return to the practice of Artist's Dates, my sense of well-being increases and my work deepens and enlarges."^[8]

Try a self-nurturing date and see how your work and outlook improve. Maybe even write about how you find it, resistances included. If you cut the date short or succumb to that advance load of laundry, forgive yourself. All you need to do is make a new date.

The date is for you. It can be as outrageous or mild as you like. Through it, you honor your real desires. You reconnect with yourself, come to trust yourself, and replenish and release your endless inner source of creativity. You do deserve a self-nurturing date.

ENDNOTES

[1]Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), p. 18.

[2]Esther Hicks and Jerry Hicks, passage excerpted from the workshop in San Antonio, TX, No. 280, April 21, 2001.

[3]See also Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, pp. 18-20, 100-102, for other ideas.

[4]Cheryl Richardson, *Stand Up for Your Life* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2010).

[5]See Wendy Kaufman, "Real Nurturing," *Miracle Journeys*, vol. 5, no.1 (2001), pp. 24-26.

[6]Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, pp. 19, 20.

[7]Tama Kieves, "You'll Find Your Real Career, When You Discover Your Real Self," *Tama Kieves' Trusting the Journey Times*, May 3, 2010.

[8]Julia Cameron, *Walking in This World: The Practical Art of Creativity* (New York: Putnam/Tarcher, 2002), p. 10.

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