The Emotional Challenges of Writing

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What I am talking about today is not so much the techniques of writing but more the intangible issues of the emotions of writing and challenges of what writing throws up, these are not so often spoken about as it is often assumed that we all know how to write and we can all manage, if you can right a sentence then you can write a book or indeed a thesis. So why is writing so challenging even if you can manage the technical side of it, well first of all there is so much at stake when we are writing as an academics, at the very core it's all about how good are we, are we actually able to do this, so we feel whenever we're writing that we're really putting ourselves on the line and that is really quite a testing feature. Another we worry about, or I do, is having written something, having gotten in published, maybe finished your thesis, is can you do it again, okay you did it in the past but does that count now for this new project, so there's a sense in which each time you start writing you are starting anew with a new same set of insecurities. Then you've got the issue of what will your peers think about it, everything we write these days for publication is peer reviewed or looked at by various people, what are they thinking about you when they're reading that stuff and of course, finally, that feeling you have yourself of are you are good as your peers, are you able to hack it as some people obviously can, and especially as soon people seem to produce reams of publications so seamlessly.

So, what I want to talk about is some of these challenges and maybe how to deal with them, this isn't of course a handbook of what to do exactly, it's more me drawing on my personal experiences about how I've overcome some of the difficulties and, hopefully, getting people to talk about some of these issues because I do think we hide away from these problems rather more than we need to. So the first thing to think about is the emotion of writing, we shouldn't be surprised when we're starting on a new project, whether it's an article or a bigger project that emotions get involved, that there are huge fluctuations and that you need to be able to deal with those emotions, know that there are times when you are going to find it depressing, overwhelming as well as other times, which are the times we tend to remember, when it goes really well and we feel good at the end of the day. You need to find your rhythms of writing, my rhythms are completely peculiar, I start fairly early in the morning and I look at what I've done the day before and I faff around with it, modify it, do various things with it and then I'm hungry at eleven o clock so I have my lunch, I then wander around the house somewhat aimlessly trying to gear myself up for the fact that I've got the write something afresh but I often don't get going until three o clock in the afternoon, and I used to think to myself, if only I'd used those hours more productively I could have written ten more books by now but I've given up on that, I've come to learn that one has a rhythm and you just have to, having discovered it, stick with it.

The third point is that you need to lighten up, the way I managed to lighten up was to say to myself writing isn't setting things down on tablets of stone, writing is actually a conversation, a conversation with oneself and a conversation with ones peers, so one

stops thinking oh I'm going to judged by others and starts thinking I've got ideas here that I want to share with other people, and I often feel, particularly if like me you're getting research income, that it's really important to put ideas back out there, it is after all what we do, there's no point sitting on them, waiting till they're perfect, but we need in a sense to start the conversation and not have everything that ever needs to be said on a topic in the book, the article or the thesis.

What do you do though when you get really stuck, because that does happen, you can get into a downward spiral, nothing seems to be working and what you wrote yesterday appears to be rubbish or it's taking you down a cul-de-sac and you can't get out of that cul-de-sac, so what do you do then? Well what I do, although I know that this wouldn't be appropriate for everybody is that I just keep writing, I write any old rubbish at all, don't care how rubbish it is I just write it, because I have this little mantra, that progression actually operates against depression, and progression is really important in this field, because albeit that it's always slow in writing, it takes sometimes more than a year to write a book, that sense of moving forward even if it's a tiny bit on a daily basis is so important and can you help you feel a little more up at the end of the day. Again it's that lifting the burden off and just saying I'll just write anything, you know vaguely want you are wanting to say so just get something down and then you can do something with it the next day or the next week.

And, finally, although there are different forms of writing for different audiences, very often when I'm writing with ideas that derive from data, where there isn't necessarily a clear end point, I start in the middle, I start with a key idea, key sets of data, something that's come out of interviews that I might have done and I build outwards from it and sometimes that might take you down cul-de-sacs of course but other times it's quite exciting, what this means for me though is that ideas ignite on the page, I don't necessarily have them before hand in my head and just put them down, they come about through the process of writing, now that makes writing quite difficult and you don't always know where you are going to go and you do have to have some anchor points on that because you can end up sort of nowhere at all, but it's also the case that that for me is the key element of the creativity, it's perhaps almost why writing can be risky and quite difficult and problematic but I think ultimately it's worth it, or I suppose I must think it's worth it or I wouldn't keep doing it, not withstanding some of the difficulties I've just outlined.