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Comfort in the Uncomfortable

While many writers often find solace at their desks, armed with a warm cup of coffee, basking in the gentle embrace of natural light. I, on the other hand, find myself unable to write unless I'm steeped in discomfort. It's a peculiar affliction, you might say, but for me, the more uncomfortable the setting, the better the words flow. Unlike those prolific writers who thrive in their cozy writing sanctuaries, I seem to have forged an unusual bond with my discomfort, and it is this uneasy alliance that has birthed some of my most profound work.

One particular instance stands out vividly in my memory. It was a chilly Thursday morning at three AM, and I had been in psychiatric treatment for four long weeks. Each passing week brought a new project assigned by my primary therapist, Nick. This was my fourth project, and I was gearing up to present it during our psychotherapy sessions, among a group of fellow men who also had Nick as their therapist. However, this project was unlike any I had encountered before in my treatment journey. It was ominously titled "Story of Life," and its demands weighed heavily on my core insecurities - the fear of unveiling my creations to others.

This project was the perfect recipe for my discomfort. But when it was initially assigned, I had a whole week to complete it, which I saw as an opportunity to intensify my misery. First, I restricted my brainstorming sessions to the confines of the shower, ensuring that I couldn't jot down any ideas. Next, I decided to transform the narrative into a screenplay format, complete

with hand-drawn illustrations, a decision that significantly increased the workload. Finally, I added the crowning jewel: I would start working on the stories at the unholy hour of two AM, with the presentation looming at 10:15. This meticulous orchestration was my way of concocting the perfect cocktail of stress and anxiety, all in the hope of summoning the muse Calliope to whisper inspiration in my ear.

The result of this peculiar creative process was nothing short of astounding. The screenplay chronicling my life from ages zero to fourteen moved me to tears on multiple occasions as I read it. It was riddled with symbolism- some apparent and some deeply concealed- yet most of it went unnoticed by both my therapist and my fellow patients. Remarkably, this lack of recognition didn't perturb me in the least. Their feedback resembled the critiques of modern art, filled with interpretations that often missed the mark, but it didn't bother me. I was seeking "a permanent home for feeling and image, a habitation where they can live together in harmony" (Hampl 99); and that home for feeling and image was found on the script in front of me.

My second story, while lacking the depth of childhood trauma of the first, served as a conduit for me to communicate my struggles with gender identity, my journey toward self-love, and the primary emotions of fear and sadness that usually stay veiled beneath my secondary emotion of anger. All these struggles lay ahead if I am to overcome and metamorphose into my ideal version of myself.

Now this sort of maximizing how much shame I feel is probably not what Roland Barthes meant when he said, "That is why it seems so important to me to ask a writer about his writing habits" (Barthes 177). However, it is my belief that the best way to get inspiration and write compelling narratives is to maximize your emotions. In *Atlas of the Heart*, Brene Brown wrote that she believed she could predict others actions based on knowing their shame as a child because

people will do anything to not confront their shame (Brown XVI). I, however, use it to look into my past to harness the powerful emotions they hold. Writing about my shame is easy, since I have had a deep history of shame being connected to the written word.

A prime example of how such humiliation/mortification/indignity has been forever tied to the written word. For me, the source of this humiliation is uncovered in my foundation of reading itself. As I didn't start reading at all until I was in first grade. It was an unusual journey into the world of words, one marked by a mixture of determination, deception, and ultimately, redemption.

My earliest memories are filled with the echo of my mother's voice, reading stories from her collection of books. Long before I even stepped foot in Pre-K, she made it her mission to introduce me to the magic of reading. She patiently sat with me, pointing at words, trying to teach me to decipher them. But there was a problem—I couldn't grasp it as quickly as I thought I should, or at least as quickly as I believed others did. Frustrated by my inability to keep up, I concocted a plan to save face. I decided to memorize every word my mother read aloud. Now you may be thinking, “That *is* learning how to read,” but I beg to differ. I could not attach any of those words said aloud to the squiggles on the page. I adopted a process more akin to memorizing song lyrics than learning to read. I had to ensure that I kept pace with her, for if I faltered, I would lose my place and forget what came next.

This charade continued until first grade, when our teacher organized small group readings. It was here that my secret was uncovered. My teacher realized that I was, in fact, illiterate, despite having successfully fooled my Pre-k and kindergarten teachers the years before. The shame was overwhelming. There was a glimmer of hope, however, that I would find motivation outside of failure to learn how to read. At the end of each day, if we behaved, our

teacher would read a chapter from the *Magic Tree House* series. I yearned to understand those stories better, to immerse myself in the adventures of Jack and Annie. So, in secret, I toiled for months, attempting to decode the written word.

One day, it happened. I read a whole sentence from one of the *Magic Tree House* books. Ecstatic, I rushed to share my triumph with my grandmother, who I happened to be visiting at the time. But her response shattered my newfound pride. In a disinterested tone, she simply said, "And?"

I was flooded with a renewed sense of shame. I had hidden my inability to read for so long that when I finally made progress, the world had moved on. The expectations were now higher, and my achievements, though monumental to me, seemed minuscule to everyone else. This experience left me feeling inadequate and embarrassed, and I continued to avoid recreational reading, believing it was beyond my grasp. It wasn't until fourth grade that I found the strength to confront my past and read recreationally at all.

This shame is still with me today;, but it allowed me to turn my early struggles into a source of motivation and determination. I am able to harness deep and powerful emotions through intensifying anxiety and stress to greater access my shame, and become the best writer I can. Is it as healthy as an almost obsession like Roland Barthe posits? Probably not, but it has allowed me to learn more about myself and inspire endless creativity within me.

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