

A Garden of Thoughts

By Brooke Palmer



I am a great writer—that is, when I am lying in bed with no one to read or listen to my thoughts. As my husband sleeps soundly beside me, I can compose essays, research papers, talks for church, letters to the editor, anything I like, but as soon as I sit up to write it down, the vision blurs and sometimes vanishes all together. The next day, everything that I composed the night before is a faint dream. This very essay I have written several times in my mind. Each time I tried a different approach to explain my thoughts about my own writing.

I have two imaginary “collaborators” that shape my writing. Gail Godwin’s

essay “The Watcher at the Gates” and Murray’s “Teaching the Other Self: The Writer’s First Reader” helped me to understand that this kind of experience is somewhat natural for many writers. After reading these essays, I am better able to articulate my thoughts about my own writing process. The collaborator that I like, the Composer, as I now call her, is a bit eccentric. The Composer wears a straw gardening hat with an indigo blue ribbon tied around it. She is constantly tending to her garden—a garden of thoughts, that is. She weeds out wordy sentences, trims back unnecessary adjectives, replants sentences into different spots, and mulches strong

verbs. She also plants new thoughts, re-searches her flowering ideas, and tries to fertilize the wisdom that she has previously planted. Although the Composer leans toward a formal, tidy look, when she is done, her results are wonderful.

However, before the Composer is able to share her lovely work, the other collaborator, the Silencer, appears and the garden of thoughts *disappears*. The Silencer is a tricky consort. She appears to be friendly, but she is very two-faced and doesn't really want me to succeed. She goes around wearing a hat that shadows her face and a suit like a private investigator who is always watching and knows all my secret doubts and fears. Godwin says that she realized she also "had a restraining critic who lived inside [her] and sapped the juice from green inspirations" (174). Somewhere, between the Composer and the Silencer, there is me, the authentic me, in jeans and a t-shirt, and sunglasses—no hat. Occasionally, if I focus very intently, I can recall some of the composition, a phrase here, an allegory there—despite the Silencer's presence. Unfortunately no matter what I've tried, the composition that I eventually piece back together is never as good as the first rendition. I have often pondered why this sequence takes place, and what I could do to circumvent it. The answer to this very question came from Peter Elbow's essay "How to Get Power

through Voice." In this essay Elbow describes how people tend to lose their voice. He attributes this to the writer worrying too much about following the "rules" of writing instead of letting the creativity flow (1). Immediately I could apply his theory to my writing process. I could see how these implications caused me to develop the Silencer in my mind. I could also see that my voice wasn't completely lost, because it developed into the Composer; however, it was lost in that I rarely articulated the thousands of words that I had shaped, pruned, and tended in my mind. When Godwin quoted Schiller saying, "You are ashamed of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators...you reject too soon and discriminated too severely," I thought, "He is talking about me." I *am* ashamed of the madness that creating sometimes unleashes. I can see how I've let my inner critic take over and I need to put her back in her place. One way that I have sought to overcome my doubts in



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the past is to have my Composer lean toward formal garden designs. Formal gardens have set lines with less room for creative molding, but they seem safer to design. I have realized by following this standard I have come to believe that “good writing is correct writing.” I subscribe to this theory mainly because of the doubts that the Silencer has built up about my own creativity. I can follow rules, but I have a much more difficult time building something from scratch or trying something new. I have also realized that this way of writing isn’t very effective. Writing isn’t just about choosing the right words or using correct grammar, it’s also about the tone and voice that comes through with the words.

Following these rules has caused my writing to become dry and boring.

Elbow goes on to explain how a writer can regain his or her voice and lists several exercises that a writer can do to get the creative juices flowing. Some of his ideas are a bit scary for me to try. Free writing is like throwing a handful of seeds into the air and letting the wind plant them wherever they fall. It takes a less critical eye to see the beauty in an un-manicured field of wildflowers. Elbow also suggests writing an enormous quantity. However at this suggestion, the Silencer slips in beside me and whispers that I really don’t want to leave any tracks that someone might actually read. But Elbow comes to the rescue again



teaching writers to “make sure you also work on writing that doesn’t have to work and doesn’t have to be revised and polished for an audience” (2).



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Over time, by practicing these exercises, and the others he recommends, I will develop the mental muscles to keep the Silencer in check and regain my voice. Throughout this semester, I have learned that even though my essays sound perfectly good to me in my mind, by not expressing my thoughts, I have let my writing take on a one-dimensional aspect. My tools for expression have become rusty and they need to be sharpened and replaced. Now instead of relying completely on the Formalistic theory, I am going to learn more about the heuristic approach. According to Richard Young, “a heuristic is an explicit strategy for effective guessing” (179). I like this approach because while it provides some direction, it isn’t in an authoritative approach; it is not a “rule-governed procedure.” By using a heuristic the writer can explore and express ideas in his/her own voice without

the fear of making mistakes. A heuristic gives the student writer a framework to work in but still allows for imagination and personal expression. James Moffett of Phillips Exeter Academy says that “trial and error best develops judgment and taste” (248). This means that while my garden will continue to have some fixed shapes and areas, I will follow a heuristic to help me fill in the spaces. This will allow me the freedom to choose the colors and individual plants that I want to include, rather than having to stick closely to the planting guide. It was Emily Dickinson that said, “A word is dead/ When it is said,/ Some say./ I say it just/ Begins to live/ That day.” As both a writer and a gardener, I can see that life and growth only occur as new ideas are allowed to take root and are nourished by constant care and expression, but if over pruned, both garden and writer will wither and die.

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