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Treating love, joy, anxiety, anger and pain as scholarly allies*

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I love to write, mostly. Life goes better if I manage more of it (as with yoga practice) but I also believe in writing as a precious agent or builder of the 'between' in the world. I have just finished a second major book, finally. It took five years (thanks to a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship for the first three). I have emerged from the process feeling like a writer. The difference between the 'first' book (*Prisons and their Moral Performance*)[1] and this one (*Aristotle's Prison: A Search for Humanity in Tragic Places*)[2] is that I let go a little more this time: the text developed its own narrative and it has more of my soul in it. I allowed those initially just-out-of-reach threads that were longing to be connected up to lead me, breaking out of disciplinary boundaries in ways that were a bit scary ('Can *I* write about moral philosophy, or the history of science?'). I trusted the somewhat creative process, read like a demon (I had gathered and organised hundreds of books in the years leading up to the fellowship), and plunged myself back into decades of fieldwork notes from observational and other work in prisons. It was all there, waiting to be discovered, synthesised, or drawn out. As someone thoughtful said to me during the blissfully slowed-down process, those fieldwork notes (120 volumes) and my pen are 'part of my brain'. Such are the mysteries of thinking and handwriting. My energy rose as I talked about those notebooks, professional friends told me. I will never write the 'old way' again. The old way was conscientious and somewhat rule-bound: aiming for neutrality, authority and yet due deference to others. Good scholarship, I now believe, does not have to be quite so disinterested, or *masculine*.

My new book is essentially about what kinds of environments favour rather than destroy life, and why. It is anchored in data, gathered throughout a professional lifetime in prisons research, but the account has developed from wide reading in moral and political philosophy

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1 Alison Liebling, *Prisons and their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life* (Oxford University Press 2004).

2 Alison Liebling, *Aristotle's Prison: A Search for Humanity in Tragic Places* (Oxford University Press 2026).

and literature: I have gone back to my roots. I have cared about this writing project more than any other I have attempted and have loved living in it. It has two narratives: it is about prisons and it is about being treated as human.

I revere the craft or alchemy of writing: something develops out of 'nothing' – inside ourselves are thoughts, memories, and skills we are barely aware of until we invite them to appear. We often need the words of others to coax them out. We barely know how much feeling and experience we store inside that can be drawn on to help us appreciate the lives of others. I have found writing to be a kind of discovering and returning that has made it especially meaningful this time. I love the feeling of a mind in action, or the form of thinking that writing requires. The form is a kind of mastery and a kind of surrender, simultaneously. It involves finding a narrative or shape for describing experience, making new connections, and a feeling of being able to articulate ideas and unravel knots, however painful and solitary this process can be at times. But it also requires giving in to powerful, sublimated feelings, and trusting the process without knowing where it might lead. It becomes a kind of absorbed, nuanced alchemy.

Maria Popova advised in her journal, *The Marginalian*:

> The best ideas come to us when we stop actively trying to coax the muse into manifesting and let the fragments of experience float around our unconscious mind in order to click into new combinations. Without this essential stage of unconscious processing, the entire flow of the creative process is broken.[3]

I find this description to be very close to my experience.

Graham Wallas outlined four stages of the creative process — preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (1926).[4] These four stages can all go on inside what I will call 'the zone': a place of utter presence, as well as outside of it (whilst we are doing other, sometimes physical, things). At the preparation stage, we 'ready the mental soil', accumulating intellectual resources, gathering books intuitively, and paying attention to our subject.[5] Incubation involves letting worlds and sources combine, playing, revisiting, searching, and wondering. Illumination can feel sudden: something clicks into place, but it has been painstakingly brewed. That 'aha!' moment can't be willed: it comes often at the most surprising moment. Of course, it is always very welcome. Then we return to the conscious process of checking and refining, verifying our account. This is the least exciting stage, but it is the

3 Maria Popova, '9 learnings from 9 years of Brain Pickings' (*The Marginalian* 2015).

4 Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (Martino Fine Books [1926] 2025).

5 Maria Popova, '10 years of Brain Pickings' (*The Marginalian* 2016).

necessary hard labour. Our most worthwhile projects have to take a long time.[6]

What I need in order to write is a room (with warmth and sunlight in it), a drive (something is troubling or calling me), some data (to think with), inspiration (from others' writing, a podcast or encounter), and a block of time. For this project, something had been building up in me for years as I watched prisons disintegrate morally: I needed to retrieve the positive lessons from all the research I had done: what had I learned about human survival and growth as well as destruction during all these years of working in prisons? Why did staff–prisoner relationships matter? The moral and emotional distress I was feeling in the field, because others were feeling and expressing it, became existential: why have I done all this prisons research? Does it have a meaning? Can I bear to continue to do it? How can research be a 'good' if improvements motivated by it are reversed, and policy is being driven in the wrong direction despite a growing knowledge-base? My fieldwork notebooks acted as a kind of anchor: they tied me to the world, and to people I had listened to, talked with, or scenes I had observed, often quite vividly. My inspiration came in the form of a book I received as a gift from my former Masters' degree supervisor (Philip Davis' *The Transferred Life of George Eliot*). This book woke up my intellectual past and helped me to see the just-out-of-reach thread in my own work: there is a moral grammar to experience; facts exist within and between persons. Intellect and feeling belong together. We can read the text of the universe in human lives.[7]

There is no question for me that writing is a joy. I love it and want to do more of it. The joy is both a motive and a product of the writing process. The finding or unfolding of sense and meaning is exhilarating. Writing about difficult material can be therapeutic, soothing, or healing, as well as a challenge: the work in progress acts as a kind of 'container'. It is a creative, often rapturous process (almost like a drug; it can feel urgent and sacred). I often feel more peaceful after writing. The *stretch* is deeply satisfying – analogous to climbing a mountain (though I have not climbed many mountains). When it works, the process gives some order to the chaos of life and feelings. It is like reaching the top of the mountain, fleetingly, before we descend back into turmoil. We unfold, intellectually, emotionally and, some might say, spiritually in the process of writing. Sharing the results of that process with others or finding others who help to bring it into being is life affirming. Other people can be a cause of vitality in

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6 Ibid.

7 Philip Davis, *The Transferred Life of George Eliot* (Oxford University Press 2017) 116.

us as we work: either directly, or they put us in touch with sources that resonate meaningfully. This can offset the inevitable loneliness of a long writing project. Mentors, writing buddies, or just friendly supporters, can be sustaining. Patti Smith urges us to 'seek out what magnifies your spirit'.[8] It's a beautiful phrase and a beautiful notion. Other people – live and in print – do that for us.

I like writing first thing in the morning, but if I can do yoga or go for a walk first, I often find my ideas begin to flow naturally, like they are waiting to be called upon, so that by the time I sit down at my desk, I have already entered the zone. Entering it feels, as Michelle Walker describes in her book, *Slow Philosophy*, like 'a transformation from one existential state to another'.[9] Time stops as we transition into this receptive, contemplative place. There is *Eros* here: love, desire, meaning, an 'opening up to something beyond ourselves'.[10] I like to stay in the zone for as long as possible, until I have to emerge to do something else. Then I am ready for company, or a different kind of work.

But, of course, there are more complex feelings involved in the writing process. I have referred to anxiety, anger and pain. I have learned that these less pleasant feelings can be allies.

Anxiety worked as an ally in the following way. One chapter of my draft manuscript troubled me as I realised I had written it with a kind of freedom that time and privacy brought: the stage where we write without thinking about being read (who is the intended audience? Is it for a particular kind of reader? What feelings might it evoke in others?). The chapter was about anger – I will say more about that in a moment. I had not anticipated this theme when I had started to write the book. I was worrying about some words I had used – was 'contemptuous' too strong a term to describe a prison culture? Did it matter that I was describing a prison I had studied 10 years ago? It resembled other prisons I knew – it was a kind of archetype and required deep analysis, just as the good prison in my narrative did. Some sleepless nights, a few bad dreams, and a feeling of discomfort about what I had observed, what prisoners had said, and how I felt, made me check my facts, take out some less necessary detail, and embark on a series of conversations with those who might be affected by the account. I talked to colleagues. I wanted to both honour the data and protect any improvement journey that a new senior management team were taking the prison on. It seemed clear that an experienced, committed

8 Popova (n 3 above).

9 Michelle Walker, *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution* (Bloomsbury Academic 2017) xvii.

10 Ibid 2.

governor (whom I knew from other places and times) was 'building a between' in what had been a rather 'I-It' prison: an expression meaning that people in it felt treated as 'experienced objects', rather than as 'experiencing subjects'. How could I reconcile these competing demands?

A chance encounter at a meeting led to a meaningful conversation about how to combine critique with compassion. Somehow, I started to describe the dilemma I was preoccupied by. My new scholarly companion used the word love. She introduced me to her notion of 'compassionate critique'. She said, 'the feminine values are neglected in our search for wisdom'; 'no-one takes care of the staff who are working in brutal prisons'. She took care of me in my struggling, anxious writer condition. I liked her standpoint. These moments of transmission are a gift. My feelings were relieved once I had edited the text in a way that felt more careful, fair, albeit still hard-hitting. I added a preface to those sections, acknowledging my complex feelings about the writing process. I arranged to visit the prison in its new state: a profound experience. I was taking care, with my writing, with the truth, with those who struggle every day to make a difficult prison work, whilst still trying to represent the devastating experience of prisoners, and the politics and effects of austerity and punitiveness. There were many other sources of anxiety (I suffer from this condition) and have mainly learned to treat it as a friend and guide. It is telling us something.

So, to anger. When I started to write my book, I thought I would begin with research methods: often the easiest place to begin. What did I do in the field, and why? I normally love writing about research methods. Out of nowhere, as I wrote, feelings of anger and betrayal erupted. I was burned out, traumatised, exhausted and demoralised by the world I had been studying, and by the university's neglect of the meaning of research funding to those of us who do the fieldwork, manage the politics (macro and micro), and sweat blood over the account. There is no connection, or communication, between 'bringing in money' (a good and straightforward task in the university's eyes) and our experience of doing research in high-intensity places that sometimes challenge our grasp of the world. The moral disintegration I was measuring in prisons was linked to increasing violence of new kinds. This was extremely difficult to witness *and* to leave behind (we carry our concerns for the safety of others with us). 'You're good at bringing in money, bring in some more', said a senior colleague, under pressure. At the time, I didn't know whether I could survive another 'project'. I was on the edge, almost precipitated over it by the realisation of such indifference to my fate. I was living

my hypothesis. I was saved by time out, and some words of compassion by scholars I barely knew. My angry feelings moved elsewhere in the book and opened up a whole new world for me. I began to understand the value and meaning of anger and its place in prison, and in the broader search for justice. This was a painful but productive process. This experience also led to my eventual decision to reduce my working hours to 50 per cent, so I could work more slowly, and humanly, on what mattered most, on what was happening in prisons, and on surviving – or doing meaningful work – in the modern workplace.

The pain of writing is partly related to the world we study – humankind can be a painful place, but this is especially the case in prisons and criminal justice. The stories and experiences of the people we write about are often deeply traumatic and may have become more so. We respond to the world and would be poorer scholars if we didn't. These responses in us often drive our urge to write. Prisoners (and staff) have sometimes said 'you are our witness'. This is no straight-forward task.

The process of writing can be painful too: we have to be prepared to 'lose and regain intellectual control or orientation'.[11] When we lose orientation, we lose ourselves. Almost every chapter of my book went through this process – until I spotted the twist (this struggle was often painful at the time and hard to endure or move through). Occasionally, the process led the other way, usually after the disorientation phase: I found myself and didn't want to: 'Oh, this is *my* theme.' I began to understand suppressed aspects of my relationship with some of the key themes in my book. This was unexpected: it both intensified and slowed down the process.

We can, as many philosophers have said, learn to suffer well and to embrace the joy when it comes. The suffering comes in unexpected ways: self-doubt, self-knowledge, and the facing up to difficult features of the world. The joy is worth working at and waiting for.

I read about writing more than I used to (there are some very good books available). I also go on writing retreats now and again, and to literature festivals, to hear people talk about their own books and writing experiences. There are some craft rules. I have done a *lot* of editing, perhaps five rounds on each chapter, sometimes having asked someone I trust to read the account. There are two main types of editing: clarifying the argument and simplifying the language. The ordering and re-ordering of ideas is important as part of the clarifying process, and a challenge throughout, particularly as I am not an advance planner. Working out what goes where is a huge part of the process of thinking and communicating clearly. It still

11 Ibid 19.

doesn't feel like enough (the thing is, it won't, ever), but I was starting to feel ready to let the book go: its narrative was found, I was satisfied that I had made some sense of my life's work, and I could imagine starting to write something else. It was whole rather than perfect: there remain some struggles in it.

Then there is attention to detail: I think I now know and can therefore contain most of my bad writing tics (stop putting words in 'scare quotes'; take out those brackets; shorten that sentence). I wish I had been better at noting all my references and page numbers as I went along (sometimes I am so in the zone, I cannot bear to check the details of my sources at the time). Susan Sontag's advice on the craft of writing was, 'Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world.'[12] That is just right.

I now talk about writing more than I used to. I find it such an enticing topic. I was invited to give my first seminar on 'The scholarly writing craft: my pilgrimage from first idea to published book' to staff and PhD students at Griffith University in 2023, as my Leverhulme Fellowship period ended and I was close to producing a first full draft of the book. I think it was my favourite seminar ever! The conversations we had felt vivid, liberating, energising, and unusually creative. I loved the preparation phase for this seminar – reflecting and reading about writing in order to make sense of this deep and precious process. There is so much to discover. The new enthusiasm I feel for doing this is rather like the way I used to feel about reading certain research methods texts after being immersed in fieldwork. Suddenly, they come to life and are full of meaning. Experience and concepts mingle and something new and exciting emerges. Now, having finished, I can't get enough of reading and talking about writing.

Several authors have influenced my writing practices: philosopher Andy West and criminologist-writer Yvonne Jewkes, in particular, as I have attended their writing retreats, but also all the good, clearly written books I have ever read. I increasingly like professional memoir, or professional books with a hint of the personal in them, so I have inched very slightly in that direction in my own writing: we shall see whether that works for readers. One effective technique I learned this time around was to start a chapter with a very personal statement about what this topic means to me, or why it matters – what is my personal relationship to it? – and then to take it out once I got going. That process opened up a sort of channel inside me to the subject. The process was often surprising.

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12 Maria Popova, 'Susan Sontag on storytelling, what it means to be a good human being, and her advice to writers' (*The Marginalian* 2015).

There are plenty of anti-writing models in the world: anything pompous, obscure, over-dense and un-human alienates me – why should I spend my time reading writing that is meant to 'impress' rather than allure or reach out to others? I love reading, but only when the text speaks.

So, do I know why I write?

When I was 13, I asked for a typewriter for Christmas (yes, I am that old!). I knew I wanted to be a writer. I have always seen books as sacred things, and I have always been mesmerised by the lives of writers: their walks, daily routines, inner demons and struggles as well as triumphs. I didn't know what kind of writer I wanted to be. I knew it wouldn't be journalism. I wanted something deeper, more reflective, and less likely to bring about hostility. When I discovered criminology – by accident – I knew it was my subject. I remember thinking, 'Now I have something to write about.' I suppose I wanted to write as a way of making sense of the world which I knew, early on, was full of wounds, wrong moves, and betrayals of love. This writing project – slow, sustained, and 'late career' – has taken me somewhere new. My good friend Susanne Karstedt described it as a pilgrimage. It is less evasive than my previous work. Something has synthesised in me, which feels important, even if I am only now beginning to work out what that is. I needed more courage, as well as more time than usual, to write this book. I had to work hard to overcome some blind spots. I feel somewhat vulnerable in letting go of it but also satisfied that it is the book I needed to write. I am a different person at the end of it, more convinced than ever that writing, and the life of the mind in action, are our most precious scholarly activities. They are linked to action in the world in ways we will never measure.

Finishing a book, especially a long-incubated one, feels strangely bereaving as well as satisfying. One writer friend said, 'this is because being in the process is where we find meaning'.[13] His comment troubled me ('What am I going to do without it?'), though I recognised the truth of his observation in the endings of both of my big books. This phase made me nervous. We don't find 'answers' but take a kind of temporary leave of an ongoing inquiry. In the end, there is life as well as meaning in the unknowable place we inhabit while we write: this is part of what it means to be in the world. We detect a germ of an idea, pay it attention, and it manifests itself.[14] He said, 'feelings of both unknowable-ness and wholeness haunt the creative process.' These are the 'very grounds on which thought arises'. I love that idea. Writing is 'a journey in the

13 Many thanks to John Briggs and other colleagues at the Pari Centre for New Learning for this helpful conversation.

14 John Briggs and F David Peat, *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos: Timeless Wisdom from the Science of Change* (Harper Collins 1999) 25.

direction of meaning'; it takes us to the place where life arises – in the tensions between order and chaos, the implicit and the explicit, the endings and beginnings.

At every writer's ending, we invite unknown others to share and respond to our own inquiry. The idea of going public was never really at the forefront of my mind, in either case, whilst I was writing. Yet, I want the book to connect me to other minds. I want it to connect me to life.