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How To Make Writing Time

John Cleese, *Creativity: A Short and Cheerful Guide* (Crown 2020).

A friend gave me this book. It's so short, with lots of white space between one-sentence paragraphs, because I think Cleese was trying above all to make his book approachable. His little book is about creativity, not creative writing, although writing is his main topic. But Cleese, like all of us, began his career in law school. His firm belief is that anyone can be creative, if one sets aside the time and place to "play" with ideas the same way children play with toys. I think his observations serve creative lawyers, as well as creative writers.

A Few Excepts From *Creativity*

You *can* teach creativity. Or perhaps I should say, more accurately, you can teach people how to create circumstances in which they will *become* creative.

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If I wrote a sketch by myself in the evening, I'd often get stuck, and would sit there at my desk, cudgeling my brains. Eventually I'd give up and go to bed. And in the morning, I'd wake up and make myself a cup of coffee, and then I'd drift over to the desk and sit at it, and, almost immediately, the solution to the problem I'd been wrestling with the previous evening became quite obvious to me! So obvious that I couldn't really understand why I hadn't spotted it the night before. But I hadn't.

This is how I began to discover that, if I put the work in before going to bed, I often had a little creative idea overnight, which fixed whatever problem it was that I was trying to deal with. It was like a gift, a reward for all my wrestling with the puzzle. I began to think to myself, "It can only be that while I'm asleep, my mind goes on working at the problem so that it can give me the answer in the morning."

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And *that's* the problem with the unconscious. It *is* unconscious. You can't order it about or hit it with a stick. You have to coax it out in all sorts of strange and crafty ways. And be clever about interpreting what it does tell you.

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The greatest killer of creativity is interruption. It pulls your mind away from what you want to be thinking about. Research has shown that after an interruption, it can take eight minutes for you to return to your previous state of consciousness, and up to twenty minutes to get back into a state of deep focus.

Let's just think about interruptions.

It may be an interruption from the outside, like someone coming over and talking to you, or an email popping up in your inbox. Or it may come from inside, as you suddenly remember something that you forgotten to do, or worry that time is running out, or that you don't think you're clever enough to solve whatever problem it is that you're trying to deal with.

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But perhaps the biggest interruption coming from your inside is caused by your worrying about making a mistake. This can paralyze you. "Oh," you say to yourself, "I mustn't think that because it might be wrong."

Let me assure you when you're being creative there is no such thing as a mistake.

The reason is very simple: you can't possibly know if you are going down a wrong avenue until you've gone down it. So, if you have an idea, you must follow your line of thought to the end to see whether it's likely to be useful or not. You must explore, without necessarily knowing where you're going. As Einstein once pointed out, if we know what we're doing when we're investigating something then it's not research!

In order to remove such interruptions, whether internal or external … you have to create a safe place, where you can play. This involves first creating boundaries of space and then boundaries of time.

You create boundaries of *space* to stop others interrupting you. You shut the door and you put up a "Do Not Disturb" sign; or you go an hide somewhere people won't bother you.

You create boundaries of *time*, by arranging, for a specific period, to preserve your boundaries of space. You might for example decide to create a specific play period that starts in a few minutes' time and finishes, say, ninety minutes later. You treat those ninety minutes with huge respect and don't allow any

interruptions. And, knowing that this chunk of time is sacred, you can then start to play.

Excavating A Story From The Unconscious

Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir Of The Craft* (Scribner 2000)

King, like Cleese, believes that setting aside a place and time for writing cues your unconscious that it's time to come out and play.

Like your bedroom, your writing room should be private, a place where you go to dream. Your schedule—in at about the same time every day, out when your thousand words are on paper or disk—exists in order to habituate yourself, to make yourself ready to dream just as you make yourself ready to sleep by going to bed at roughly the same time each night and following the same ritual as you go.

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In my view, stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates a sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech.

You may wonder where plot is in all this. The answer—my answer, anyway—is nowhere. I won't try to convince you that I've never plotted anymore than I'd try to convince you that I've never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. It's best that I be as clear about this as I can—I want you to understand that my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow (and to transcribe them, of course). If you can see things this way (or at least try to), we can work together comfortably. If, on the other hand, you decide I'm crazy, that's fine. You won't be the first.

When, during the course of an interview for *The New Yorker*, I told the interviewer (MarK Singer) that I believed stories are found things, like fossils in the ground, he said that he didn't believe me. I replied that that was fine, as long as he believed that *I* believed it and I do. Stories aren't souvenir T-shirts or Gameboys. Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one

out of the ground intact as possible. Sometimes the fossil you uncover is small; a seashell. Sometimes it's enormous, a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* with all those gigantic ribs and grinning teeth. Either way, short story or thousand-page whopper of a novel, the techniques of excavation remain basically the same.

No matter how good you are, no matter how much experience you have, it's probably impossible to get the entire fossil out of the ground without a few breaks and losses. To get even *most* of it, the shovel must give way to more delicate tools: air hose, palm-pick, perhaps even a toothbrush. Plot is a far bigger tool, the writer's jackhammer. You can liberate a fossil from hard ground with a jackhammer, no argument there, but you know as well as I do that jackhammer is going to break almost as much stuff as it liberates. It's clumsy, mechanical, anti-creative. Plot is, I think, the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice. The story which results from it is apt to feel artificial and labored.

I lean more heavily on intuition, and have been able to do that because my books tend to be based on situation rather than story. Some of the ideas which have produced those books are more complex than others, but the majority start out with the stark simplicity of a department store window display or a waxwork tableau. I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job isn't to *help* them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety—those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot—but to watch what happens and then write it down.

The situation comes first. The characters—always flat an unfeatured, to begin with—come next. Once these ideas are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate. I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things *their* way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it's something I never expected. For a suspense novelist, this is a great thing. I am, after all, not just the novel's creator but its first reader. And if *I'm* not able to guess with any accuracy how the damn thing is going to turn out, even with my inside knowledge of coming events, I can be pretty sure of keeping the reader in a state of page-turning anxiety. And why worry about the ending anyway? Why be such a control freak? Sooner or later every story comes out *somewhere*.