

Book Review

The Art of Slow Writing: Reflections on Time, Craft & Creativity.
Louise De Salvo; New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2014.

Louise De Salvo publishes works of fiction and nonfiction. As a self-reflective writer and teacher of writing, she promotes the art of slow writing – inviting writers to slow down the process so that they can do their best work.

This summer, when I was rereading De Salvo's 2000 book *Writing as a Way of Healing*, I was especially impressed by her suggestion to keep a process journal for each specific project. The elaboration in this new book makes the process journal a keystone to the writing life. We can use the process journal to work out our plans and vision for the project, to question what is working and what is confusing, and to imagine different ways to move forward. Regular free writing can clarify our feelings about the project, enrich our approach to the work, and enlarge our perspectives. We can use the process journal to identify the next objective as we complete each objective, a strategy to maintain momentum suggested by a number of successful writers. We can also look through the process journal when we get stuck to find where we may have lost the thread.

Here, De Salvo continues to use her experience as a writer as well as the letters and journals of famous authors to demonstrate how thoughtfully stretching out the process of creation can deepen and energize a written work. This slow writing process is outlined in great detail, from imagining a work, to first drafts, through to final revisions and completing a book. Although this volume focuses on the writing life, it offers much to the individual for whom serious writing is but one of their life purposes.

The author invites us “to slow down our lives and our writing process”, to “discover that we'll connect—or reconnect—with the wellspring of our most profound work.”

Like Slow Food, "slow writing" doesn't just take time, but makes time." Slow writing is a meditative act: slowing down to understand our relationship to our writing, slowing down to determine our authentic subjects, slowing down to write complex works, slowing down to study our literary antecedents.

Slow writing is a meditative act. It acknowledges that we are all beginners and insists we cultivate empathy for ourselves because being a writer isn't easy. Slow writing is a way to resist the dehumanization inherent in a world that values speed. It's one way to find—or return to—our authentic selves.

DeSalvo has identified these stages for the slow writing process:

- 1- you imagine the work, think about it, and take notes about it, perhaps long before you actually begin writing.
- 2- once you start, you work provisionally, knowing you'll have many opportunities to get it right.
- 3- you work in stages, writing, revising, letting yourself learn what your subject is really about as you work.

4- you figure out order, structure, and image patterns late in the process, though you may have some ideas from the start. You revise accordingly.

5- you fine-tune the work, tightening where necessary, adding information your reader needs when necessary. You go through the work word by word, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph.

6- you don't show your work until late in the process. And then you revise again, based upon feedback.

The author offers guiding principles for 'sculpting' a writing life: establish a simple routine, set realistic near and long-term goals, touch the work every working day, give yourself uninterrupted time. Cycle through phases of journaling about the process, writing, analyzing strengths and weakness, setting up new goals. She also suggests that we create a support system for our writing life – people to mentor us and provide feedback, people whom we mentor to give back and also to keep our standards high.

DeSalvo also recommends time away from our desk: writing elsewhere – coffee shop, library, big rock in the woods, at the beach; taking walks in the fresh air; taking breaks within the day and the week, longer travel breaks periodically;

When I write elsewhere, I notice where I am, and that act of witnessing my surroundings slows me down and enriches the act of writing without taking me away from my work.

Uninterrupted time reading is also viewed as essential to the writing process.

If we read haphazardly and inattentively, that's how we live our lives, that's how we write. Learning to read slowly and attentively can help us live more fully realized lives and can help our work.

In my experience, taking breaks from writing is very valuable for the writing as well as for a balanced life. DeSalvo explains that seasoned writers write down thoughts and images coming to them in dreams or daydreams or while walking because they have learned these provide inspiration and important details for their work. She also writes an intriguing chapter on why she is a writer who cooks. Spending time on an activity that gives pleasure immediately after focused work helps her come out of the writing bubble that deep work creates and gives her a sense of accomplishment rarely felt in the long periods of writing.

All of us can write. Few of us know how to work at writing. And even fewer of us know how to sculpt our lives so we can write.