

# **Writing**

**MJ Barker**

# Introduction

Welcome to my free book on writing. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

*Note that some of these pieces were written over a decade ago now, and before many of the most profound shifts that the world - and I - have recently been through. I hope that it is of interest to see how my ideas have evolved over this period. But please do be mindful of the context in which they were written as they may not always represent either my own, or culturally current, thinking/practice on these topics.*

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# On Queer Writing

*Originally published in Queerlings magazine: [queerlings.com/megjohnbarker](http://queerlings.com/megjohnbarker)*

To celebrate the launch of this awesome new queer writing magazine I thought I'd reflect on queerness and writing. I've been writing, myself, for my whole life in one way or another, but I would say that queerness has only gradually infused my writing – as it has my self – over time. Perhaps it has followed something like the journey through queerness which I'll follow here.

In addition to writing myself, I currently mentor a number of other queer writers including Simon Forsyth, Daniel Morrison, Jeanne Devlin, David Darvasi, Stacy Bias, Katie Green, and Russ Wolf, whose work is referred to here. It's through my dialogues with them that I've come to approach both the content and process of writing ever more queerly. I'm deeply grateful to them for the wisdom and learning they've shared, which very much inform this piece.

Jules Scheele and I started our book *Queer: A Graphic History* by exploring the different meanings of the word queer, and I thought that'd be a neat way to structure this piece. So let's consider queer writing in relation to otherness, to being LGBTQIA+, to being non-normative, and to the overall project of queering everything.

## **Queer as in other**

The original meaning of queer from the 16th century was of something strange or illegitimate. You might think of phrases like 'nowt as queer as folks' or 'queer as a three dollar bill.' From the late 19th century, this meaning became attached to same-sex attraction specifically, and queer began to be used as a term of homophobic abuse, for example in the letter from the Marquess of Queensberry which became famous through the trial of Oscar Wilde.

It's due to this meaning of queer that a magazine like *Queerlings* is necessary at all. We still live with the legacy of queer people being regarded as something different, something other, something abnormal or illegitimate.

It remains rare for queer experience to be the focus of mainstream fiction or non-fiction. For years queer characters have been depicted as the bad guys, as tragic, or in tokenistic ways like the 'gay best friend'. We still see this today, particularly in the representation of trans people, as highlighted in the recent documentary *Disclosure*.

Novels and memoirs centring queer experience are generally targetted specifically at queers, seen as only of relevance to us. This is unless they sensationalise queer experience in ways deemed interesting to a cis-het audience, for example by depicting a promiscuous bi person or by telling a conventional narrative of a trans person 'changing sex' through medical procedures, with before and after photos.

While things are gradually shifting, there remains a sense – sometimes even explicitly taught in creative writing classes – that the white, cis het male protagonist is the only one that audiences can really relate to, or want to read about.

For these reasons we need magazines, bookshops, writing classes, and more which centre queer experience, and outlets which publish specifically queer stories that may well not be accepted or celebrated by mainstream publishers. Bravo Queerlings!

### **Being LGBTQIA+**

The reclaiming of the word queer from the 1980s onwards has led to it being used as an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, and eventually also bi, trans, intersex, ace, and other groups beyond the cis het supposed-majority. This is the meaning of queer that Queerlings is using when it says it ‘seeks to publish queer works of fiction, non-fiction and reviews from LGBTQIA+ writers.’

There are many reasons to encourage and celebrate this understanding of queer in relation to writing. As I’ve said, we need people to write about queer experience, as LGBTQIA+ people, in order to get queer stories and voices out there, to counterbalance the heteronormative cisnormative nature of so much that is published, and to claim our place in writing and in the world.

Writing therapist Simon Forsyth quotes poet Ted Hughes who said ‘what’s writing really about? It’s about trying to take fuller possession of the reality of your life’. In a world where queers remain marginalised and stigmatised, where our identities are up for debate and our realities are called into question, writing ourselves as queers, and writing characters who represent us, could be seen as a vital personal and political act.

### **Being non-normative**

Many people who use the word queer – rather than gay, lesbian or bi, for example – often mean something more than being under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, however. They’re questioning both heteronormativity and homonormativity, or normative ways of being LGBTQIA+.

The battle for gay rights was historically fought on the basis of being members of a minority group who were treated unequally in society. This battle often involved arguing for the right to do things that the normative majority got to do, such as getting married and serving in the military, and having the ‘pink pound’ recognised as a valuable target of consumer capitalism. The more revolutionary understanding of queer challenges this approach.

We might question whether the institutions that people have fought for the right to join are anything that we should support. This might involve, for example, pointing out the problematic history of marriage in relation to the ownership of women and children, taking an abolitionist stance towards policing and the military, or questioning consumer capitalism for its built in injustice and the toll it’s taking on the planet.

Such an understanding of queer often endeavours to centre the voices of the most marginalised, rather than trying to present queers in as normative ways as possible in order to gain acceptance to normativity. Core agendas may be ones like addressing trauma, poverty, homelessness, and violence, rather than relationship or occupational rights, for example. It is this understanding of queer that Queerlings are referencing when they say ‘we especially encourage submissions from BIPOC, Trans, Non-binary and other underrepresented voices in our community.’

What are the implications of this understanding of queer for queer writing? As well as centring the voices of the most marginalised, we might attend to the diversity of queerness represented in our writing. In our fiction are we including gay and lesbian characters, but not bi, trans, intersex, or ace ones? If we do include gender and sexually diverse characters are they mostly white? Middle class? Non-disabled? Do we represent queer experiences and agendas beyond the more normative ones? Of course there are important considerations here about who we can and can’t adequately represent beyond our own lived experience, and there are many good resources out there addressing these tensions and how we might navigate them.

In non-fiction we could ask which views and knowledges we’re centering. This is something that Jules and I have endeavoured to address in our graphic guide series by bringing the thoughts of activists alongside those of academics, by emphasising the voices of BIPOC, trans and non-binary scholars and activists, and by ensuring that the characters who we depict navigating the terrain of the book are diverse in age, gender, sexuality, class, disability, race, and more.

I hope that readers will see themselves represented in the books, in both the characters and the experts, and that they’ll be able to connect with what the characters are navigating. There’s still a long way to go, of course, in decolonising my own knowledge as an author with a background in white western versions of psychology and psychotherapy, and I’m constantly endeavouring to learn more from the margins.

It’s my hope that these graphic guides function as a jumping-off point for people to learn about other people’s work, so it’s important for me to think carefully about who I represent and how. It’s also important to carefully consider who I can adequately represent, and where my job should be, instead, to step back and raise up other voices. Being part of a queer writing community feels important to me for this reason, because there’s the opportunity, for example, to offer mentorship, to facilitate writing events, and to endorse other people’s work and get it out there as widely as possible.

### **Queering writing**

The final understanding of queer that we covered in *Queer: A Graphic History* challenges the sense of queer as an identity at all. Queer theory and queer activism view the fixed hierarchical binary identities which people are put into – man/woman, straight/gay, cis/trans, etc. – as part of the problem.

For a start, we might question whether queer really is a minority position. Added together, the vast majority of people tick one or more of the boxes of:

- Being attracted to more than one gender,
- Experiencing their gender beyond the rigid masculine/feminine binary,
- Being fluid in their expression of gender and/or sexuality over time,
- Enjoying kinds of sex other than penis-in-vagina (PIV) intercourse – or no sex, and
- Doing their relationships outside of normative coupledness.

Yet more people are queered off the heteronormative model of a lifecourse at some point. They don't tick certain boxes of being a 'successful' self such as marriage, kids, home-ownership, career progression, etc. This may happen due to choice, disability, mental/physical health conditions, unemployment, caring for others, infertility, etc. As Jack Halberstam has suggested, we could regard such 'failures' as queer, because of the challenge they present to normativity.

As well as denying the reality of many people's invisible queerness, fixed binary identities support the division of people into normal and abnormal, legitimate and other, healthy and unhealthy, and so on: all of which serve the power structures of neoliberal capitalism, encouraging people to police and monitor themselves and each other, and strive to conform to cultural ideals.

What might the implications of these kinds of understandings of queer – as challenging identities and binaries – be for queer writing? In this case queer writing might look something like what architect and writer Kyna Leski describes when she says 'a creative process comes from displacing, disturbing, and destabilising what you (think you) know'.

Rather than focusing on which identities or experiences are represented in our writing, we might turn to explore which stories are told, and which are not, and in what ways we do or don't tell them. For example, does our queer romance novel conform to a standard heteronormative story of falling in love, getting together, having the first kiss and first sex, moving in together, and living happily ever after? What might different queer love stories look like? Might they follow a different narrative arc, or include multiple stories, or start and end in different places, or celebrate different kinds of love – like ace or aro love for example.

A great example of queering writing in these ways are the wealth of trans memoirs which have been published in recent years. Many of these deliberately mess with – or queer – the conventions of a trans story according to the standards of a medical approach to transness and/or of what is palatable to the wider public. The conventional trans narrative is frequently an account of always having known you were 'born in the wrong body', having a moment of realisation, coming out, getting 'the surgery', and living happily ever after in a new gender.

Authors like Juliet Jacques, Travis Alabanza, Juno Roche, CN Lester, and Amrou Al-Kadhi have all queered this standard trans memoir form in interesting and important ways through their writing. For example they:

- Centre experiences other than surgery,
- Celebrate trans as a gift for others to be around rather than depicting it as a loss for others,
- Explore the ongoing experience of transness beyond key moments of transition,
- Focus in on everyday moments of transness,
- Offer multiple equally valid answers to an early sense of difference,
- Foreground who they are beyond their transness, and
- Mix up their trans stories with other people's tales and/or with non-fiction elements.

I'm excited by the idea of queer writing as writing that tells different kinds of stories in different ways. For example, some of the queer folk I'm working with, and reading, engage in projects where they:

- Capture different aspects of themselves and their experiences in multiple characters through a book,
- Tell stories of past interwoven with stories of present, queering standard linear narratives of experience,
- Deliberately interfere with the way queer and trans people have been depicted in previous works of fiction by cis/het authors, by writing alternative versions of those stories or the same stories from different character perspectives,
- Create artistic/writing pieces where 'seen' stories are told on one side and 'unseen' ones are told on the reverse, or where their own stories are interwoven with the stories that have been told about them,
- Play with incorporating elements like 'choose your own adventure' to offer multiple possible journeys through the same life,
- Mash up different genres and/or fiction and non fiction elements,
- Include narratives which challenge any normative sense of which aspects of our lives should be viewed as 'success' or 'failure'.

Ideas I've played with myself include a memoir where I take all the different common stories of transness that are out there and write a chapter telling my gender story through each of these different lenses. I would present all of these approaches as offering something potentially useful, but as inevitably being only a partial story. This gets beyond binaries of right or wrongs stories to ask what different stories open up and close down. I'm also keen to write a graphic plural story of my life where multiple, differently gendered, sides of me are represented as engaging in the unfolding narrative, also challenging binaries between 'real life' and imagination, and plurality as a form of madness or sanity.

This connects with what author and writing teacher Anya Achtenberg says about the importance of finding a multitude of voices in our writing, as well as the writing prompts she offers such as 'what story lies next to the one you are writing?' It also makes me think of Juno Roche's response when asked at an event by a cis author how he could best write a trans character. Juno responded that he should find the trans person within himself.

So writing queerly might involve thinking beyond the identities that we depict in our writing to the form, structure, and narrative arcs that we engage with. We might deliberately endeavour to queer – or trouble – standard writing formats.

I was fascinated that most people I mentor began with a more standard kind of project – a memoir or a novel for example. However during the pandemic many of them moved towards something very different. A couple of these projects question the divide between art and writing by incorporating both words and visual or three dimensional aspects. Some engage with explicitly transgressive modes of writing. Many have moved away from aiming at conventional publishing, towards alternative forms of putting words out there, via social media, zines or chapbooks for example. Some are challenging the writer/reader binary by drawing people into conversation and making that part of the work.

One person is collecting together the experiences of queers during lockdown and how they have engaged in creative processes of self-shaping through this time, which makes me wonder about seeing the creation of (queer) selves as, in itself, a creative/writing project.

### **Writing queerly**

This leads me to my final consideration, that queerness might be a way in which we approach the process of writing as well as the content.

When I became a writing mentor, the thing that surprised me most was how much I ended up encouraging mentees – and myself – not to write. This became such a theme that I'm now considering writing a whole writing book on 'not writing'!

My stance on this came from what I'd learnt in queer community about consent. I noticed that most of us were engaging in writing from a non-consensual place. We were trying to force ourselves to write when we didn't want to, we were trying to undertake projects because we thought that was the kind of writing we should do, or because it seemed most likely to get published, we were aiming for a certain number of words per day and feeling bad if we didn't manage that. All of this seemed to me very much like the heteronormative way of approaching sex: feeling that we have to do it, that it should happen a certain amount, and that it should take a certain form (PIV) and result in a certain outcome (orgasm) in order to be valid.

One thing I've learnt from ace community is that sex can never be truly consensual unless we know absolutely that it's okay not to have sex right now, and indeed that it's okay never to have sex. We need to know that we're free and safe enough to not have sex, that we're under no pressure to do so, and that nothing else is contingent upon it. All of this is pretty threatening to the heteronormative – and even homonormative – way of doing sex and relationships.

So I figured that writing worked in the same way. We can't be in consent, as writers, unless we know that it's absolutely okay not to write. What most of us, myself and my mentees, found, when we stepped away from writing in our previous way, was that we ended up engaging in

different forms of creativity which were far more fulfilling to us, many of which challenged those binaries around 'proper' writing vs. play, art vs. writing, writing practice vs. therapeutic/spiritual practice, and creation-of-writing vs. creation-of-self.

All of this takes me to a place where I also have to question the writing/not writing binary! Going through a very personally traumatic year, during a pandemic, I've ended up having to tell a lot of people that I'm not writing, despite having given up the day job to 'become a writer' in 2019. However I then take a look over at my bookshelves and realise that I've probably written more words this year than ever before, it's just all been in the format of journaling through my process. And even if I hadn't been journaling, I've been working on myself more this year than ever before. Could that not be seen as an act of writing: of writing myself?

What about the stories I tell myself in the form of fantasy, to soothe myself to sleep each night or to enjoy a solosexual moment in the middle of the day. Do those only count as 'writing' if I physically write them down? If other people read them? And what about all the painstaking emails and messages I've written in the last year, as I navigate trauma, letting people know what I'm going through, expressing my needs, and setting my boundaries? I never count those as 'writing', but of course they are: and they are a way of writing myself and co-creating my relationships, and my not-relationships. Another not-binary for you!

Most of my mentees struggle with something that I also still struggle with, 23 books in, which is whether we get to call ourselves a writer. 'I'm not a writer because I haven't been doing it very long.' 'I'm not a writer because I haven't published anything.' 'I'm not a writer because I haven't written a full book.' 'I'm not a writer because I don't write fiction, or poetry, or something proper like that.' Imposter syndrome is incredibly high around being a writer.

But, taking a queer perspective, is it even possible to be a writer, or indeed to not be a writer? Neither of these things is a stable identity, and this binary is as questionable as any of them. So perhaps we can lift the burden of trying to determine which category we fall into. Personally I love authors on writing like Natalie Goldberg and Lynda Barry who take us back to the bare bones of writing: back to the little queer selves we all – perhaps – once were, who simply enjoyed playing with words and/or stories and/or pictures, not worrying whether we were 'writer enough' or 'normal enough', or even 'queer enough'.

In her wonderful essay *The Uses of The Erotic*, Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde questions the divisions we have made around what counts as 'sex' and the disciplining, oppressive functions these have. She suggests expanding out our understanding of 'the erotic' to encompass all kinds of sensual and creative experience, including making love to a partner in a patch of sunlight, writing a poem, and constructing a bookcase.

This is perhaps why it makes so much sense to me to apply the same understandings to the writing process as I do to the process of sex. If we can expand out our understanding of queerness, and writing, and queer writing, in such ways, perhaps we can acknowledge the personal and political power of claiming all of us as writers, at least of our own stories and the

stories of our (queer) communities.

“Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of... This is a grave responsibility... not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.” Audre Lorde.

Meg-John Barker is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender, and relationships, including *Queer: A Graphic History*, *Gender: A Graphic Guide*, *How To Understand Your Gender*, *Life Isn't Binary*, *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want To)*, *Rewriting the Rules*, *The Psychology of Sex*, and *The Secrets of Enduring Love*. They have also written a number of books for scholars and counsellors on these topics, drawing on their own research and therapeutic practice. Websites: [rewriting-the-rules.com](http://rewriting-the-rules.com), [megjohnandjustin.com](http://megjohnandjustin.com). Twitter: [@megjohnbarker](https://twitter.com/megjohnbarker), Instagram: [@meg\\_john\\_barker](https://www.instagram.com/meg_john_barker).

### **Further resources**

You can read writing therapist, Simon Forsyth's piece, where I found a couple of the quotes included here at: [writing.ie/resources/writing-therapy-and-the-power-of-the-pen-by-simon-forsyth](http://writing.ie/resources/writing-therapy-and-the-power-of-the-pen-by-simon-forsyth)

You can read about Daniel Morrison's project on queer lockdown here: [facebook.com/Queer-Spirit-in-the-Great-Pause-116361600151780](https://facebook.com/Queer-Spirit-in-the-Great-Pause-116361600151780)

And there's some great videos about queer writing during lockdown here: [newwritingsouth.com/within-the-four-walls-queer-lockdown-stories](http://newwritingsouth.com/within-the-four-walls-queer-lockdown-stories)

You can read my thoughts on writing, and on queer failure, on my blog here:

[rewriting-the-rules.com/self/how-to-start-writing](http://rewriting-the-rules.com/self/how-to-start-writing)

[rewriting-the-rules.com/self/embracing-failure-in-work-home-and-relationships](http://rewriting-the-rules.com/self/embracing-failure-in-work-home-and-relationships)

Jules's website is: [julescheele.com](http://julescheele.com)

Anya Achtenberg can be found at: [thedisobedientwriter.com](http://thedisobedientwriter.com)

Lynda Barry at: [thenearsightedmonkey.tumblr.com](http://thenearsightedmonkey.tumblr.com)

Natalie Goldberg at: [nataliegoldberg.com](http://nataliegoldberg.com)

And Audre Lorde's essay at:

[uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11881\\_Chapter\\_5.pdf](http://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11881_Chapter_5.pdf)

# How to Start Writing

Originally published for JKP Blog -

<https://intl.jkp.com/jkpblog/2020/04/how-to-start-writing-with-meg-john-barker/>

## **How do you overcome writer's block?**

My perspective on this has shifted radically in recent years. I'm a strong believer now that one of the most vital things we can do in life is to learn to treat ourselves (and others of course) with consent. This means shifting the old patterns that so many of us have or pushing through or forcing ourselves to do things when we're not in self-consent. My approach to this is similar to sex. We simply cannot have consensual sex if we don't absolutely know that it's okay not to have sex now, or indeed ever. We can't do consensual writing if we don't absolutely know that it's okay not to write now, or indeed ever. The sex that we may have if we create these utterly consensual conditions will be far better than any we would've had the old way, and it may well look very different indeed to what we expected it would look like when we were trying to do a certain thing because that's what we thought we should do. The same is true for writing.

So now when I have space in which I could write, I begin by tuning into whether I want to write. I invite myself into that creative period rather than trying to force it. And, if I can, I try to give myself a range of options as to what I might do, and go with what feels live, rather than pushing into a particular project. Again this is a good analogy with sex: having a range of options rather than a default script. A good practice with creativity is inviting it, making a start on something, and giving it a certain amount of time. If it's not flowing and you don't feel present and engaged after 45 minutes, for example, then stop and rest or do something else. Invite yourself again the next day, and do the same again. That way you never give yourself the negative reinforcement of continuing to write till it becomes a really unpleasant and punishing experience.

All of this is particularly important for marginalised people – who are particularly likely to have trauma histories. Writing is an area where we can easily re-traumatise ourselves, feeling the common fear/shame response whereby we don't think we're okay unless we're writing, but also feel terrified of writing badly. Working with the inner critic is a particularly important task for writers, as is finding – if we can – the younger, freer parts of ourselves who are more able to be creatively playful without self-judgement. There's plenty more on my website about working with these different 'plural' sides of yourself.

## **Could you describe your own writing process? What motivates you?**

Personally I often find that taking a walk and letting my thoughts drift to various projects helps me get fired up about one, so that's a good thing to do prior to a creative period. Journaling about what I'd like to write about – rather than actually trying to write it – can be another good practice for firing me up. It seems to me though that projects have their time. Often when I've

allowed myself not to go there when I'm not feeling it, when I finally do so I realise that things have clicked into place in the meantime in helpful ways.

I try to have a few projects floating around at any one time, which is easy for me because there are so many things that I want to create. I have the option at the moment, for example, to focus on blog posts applying my ideas about relationships with ourselves and others to the current Covid-19 situation. I have the option of podcasting with my co-creator Justin, or working on my next book with my co-author Alex (and I highly recommend creating with others as a way of getting around blocks and inner criticism). I have an ongoing erotic fic project I can go to. And I have some comic based zines I'd like to write. I try to feel into what is most live and fires me up, or let myself rest and be gentle if none of them do, because we are all adapting to a massive global trauma at the moment and we're going to need plenty of rest. I generally find that once something does take hold of me, it becomes the thing I want to do with my time and blocks are less of a problem.

I'd recommend writing also with your editor turned off, ideally free yourself to know that it's for your eyes only and you need never publish it. Just enjoy the process of writing it and remember that you can return to the question of whether/how to edit it and publish it later, if you want to. Much of my best writing – I think – comes from a place of vulnerability, and I could never allow that if I was thinking about putting it out there while I was writing it. I guess what motivates me to write is going deep into my inner experience, applying the things I've learnt there, and then turning what I learn from that process into something which might be useful and engaging for others. That can take the form of non-fiction, fiction, writing, or comics.

### **What books have inspired you or helped you through a difficult time in your life?**

My top one would be *When Things Fall Apart*, by Pema Chodron, which has got me through so many difficult times I can't even. It's a Buddhist mindfulness book about how we can relate to our struggles and difficult feelings.

Then, writing wise, I love anything by Natalie Goldberg, who writes beautifully and radically about how to write.

In relation to trans, Juno Roche's books have had a big impact on me, and I also love their approach to writing. Juno has opened up both my way of being trans, and my way of writing, as they've shown me how valid it is to write about our personal journeys as well as how it's fine to write bits on your phone in daily life rather than always having this sacred, protected, writing time.

### **What kinds of experiences would you love to read about in the submissions?**

Oo good question, I mean the kinds of writing I personally love most would be erotic fic, ghost stories, graphic memoir, and writing which says something about relationships and how people tick, so those genres are always going to appeal to me. But in terms of experiences I'd love to read writing – like that of Travis Alabanza, Juno Roche, and Juliet Jacques – which troubles conventional trans narratives and gives a sense of the diversity of ways of being trans as well as

the complexity of trans experience beyond the kind of tragic or sensationalist stories we see in the media. If people tune into their experience and write from that place then I'm pretty sure that's what we'll get.

**What makes a story come alive for you?**

Um, a spooky thing or a sex scene, maybe a spooky sex scene?! No, really for me I think it's about being pulled into a person's experience – whether that's the author of a memoir piece or a character in a fictional story. I need to care about them and what happens to them. The books I tend to put down are the ones where I don't find anyone I'm rooting for and want to know more about. Even in my non-fic writing I'm increasingly trying to include myself, or – in my graphic guides with Jules Scheele – characters we might care about who are exploring the topic and have adventures along the way.

**Could you share any words of advice for writers at the start of their writing journey?**

Yes, I'd say go where it is live and juicy and vulnerable-as-hell and write from there. My experience is that writing from that place really speaks to others, and that's far more important than how good your vocabulary or grammar or any of that stuff is. All of that can be fixed up after.

Also remember that it's absolutely okay to not write. The best writing comes from a radical acceptance of not writing.

# Showing Your Working: On Writing Vulnerable

August 2019

Now that I'm a full-time writer (yes, I did it!) I'm thinking even more than I did before about the process of writing. Something that comes up a lot around my own writing – and in my work with clients as a writing mentor – is vulnerability. I shared [a post](#) last week that was pretty vulnerable in terms of content, so I thought I'd follow up with one about the process of writing and sharing vulnerable work. I'm guessing that a lot of the stuff that I cover here will also apply to other forms of creativity too.

Writing is a vulnerable act. This is one of the many things that it has in common with sex (which needs to be the topic of a whole further blog post). When you write, you're putting yourself out there – exposed. Even people who are doing pretty safe forms of writing – where there's nothing personal in there and where every statement is backed up with facts and figures or references to other peoples' work – still feel massively vulnerable. We're scared of getting it wrong, we can easily imagine every possible critical comment, we fear being 'found out' in relation to how little we know and/or how poorly we write, we compare ourselves to other writers who we admire and we can't possibly measure up because our voice is not their voice.

## **Writing about vulnerable stuff**

How much more vulnerable then when we're writing about things that we, ourselves, feel vulnerable about. I felt that heavily last year when I was finishing the writing for my new [graphic guide on gender](#). It struck me just how much of what I was writing about was deeply personal and painful: Writing about trans during the [trans moral panic](#); about [#MeToo](#) as a survivor; and about intersectional feminism when I'm so aware that I'll inevitably perpetuate the very systems I'm challenging at times, because of the things that I don't see in the areas where [I'm privileged](#).

And then there's writing more directly about our personal lives. This has come up with several clients lately. One worries that describing his daily moments will be read as egocentric – that it's not doing anything for anybody else – even though it's the writing he feels so passionately drawn to. Another fears what limits may be put on their activism, or their future career, if they write as openly about their own experience as they'd like to. I'm surprised when another client doesn't see the link between the memoir-style posts that they write, and the writing that I do. I feel like my own vulnerabilities are starkly apparent in much of what I write, but perhaps the critical self-help style that I generally use obscures them somewhat.

The challenge from that client spurred me on to publish a few of the more vulnerable blog posts that I've been holding back on: ones that are more directly related to my own life and my own struggles. I put [one out there](#) last week. The feelings on publishing a more personal post always follow a familiar path. First a fizzy nervous feeling: 'did I really do that?' Then a fear of negative repercussions. Then a few comments come back: people saying that they connected with what I wrote, that it was just what they'd needed to read on that particular day, that they share that

experience and it left them feeling less alone, that it helped them to reflect on their own lives. Those comments help me feel less alone and more connected right back. And I'm reminded that it's nearly always the more vulnerable things that I write that get that kind of response.

I'm reminded of something [Mollena Williams-Haas](#) said in [this talk](#): How creating from our most vulnerable places often leads to the best work we can do – for ourselves and for each other. It's often higher quality, connecting creator and audience on a more visceral level, and it's one of the best ways in which we can be of service to our communities. I love the way that Mollena links submission to vulnerability to activism in this way, it's something that resonates deeply for me too. In fact that talk is an excellent example of what I'm talking to because she went for the vulnerable, open approach – weaving together [the erotic and the creative](#) – and it spoke to me so much that I remember it to this day.

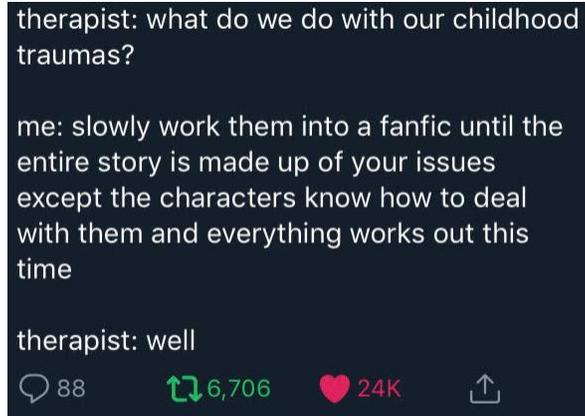
### **Showing and telling**

One of the classic pieces of advice to aspiring fiction writers is 'show, don't tell.' Readers don't want to be told the main character is a cocky piece of work who hides an inner vulnerability, they want to see that from the way he strides across the bar in the first scene, oh-so-casually glancing around to check that everyone is clocking him.

So is there a value to showing rather than telling in non-fiction too? I guess the writing that I do which I experience as most vulnerable is the stuff where I show my workings, rather than just telling the reader that this is something I struggle with too.

When I first wrote [Rewriting the Rules](#) the main place that I did this was the conflict chapter. I illustrated that with a detailed description of the kind of excruciating conflicts that I've had in partner relationships. In the second edition I added much more detail about my own relationship patterns in the love chapter, in order to demonstrate how these come from a combination of wider cultural messages, and our own lived experiences growing up with these messages all around us.

Nowadays I do a few kinds of vulnerable writing. I write more memoir-style pieces where I reflect on something I've been through, or am personally struggling with, or attempting to put into practice at the moment. I write fiction which is well summed up by this person on twitter.



I also create comics and zines about aspects of my experiences.

Generally I use the personal sharing I do in such writing as an example: this is how you could do this kind of work, this is how you could understand how our experiences shape our habits, here's a practice you might try. But sometimes I let the showing stand alone. Perhaps there's not always the need to tell as well as show.

### **When is vulnerable too vulnerable?**

This is complicated territory because writing from the vulnerable place is also risky. You could end up hurting yourself by trying to write about something which is still too raw and painful. The writing could stray into something over-sharing or self-focused in a way that doesn't really connect with others. This is particularly likely if you're still very caught up in the details of what happened in that particular situation. It could feel too vulnerable if people respond critically to it once you've put it out there.

There's some kind of balance to be struck between the value of writing about what's live when it's live – the authenticity and sense of aliveness that kind of writing can have – and the wisdom of knowing when something needs more time before you approach it creatively – either in order to be safe enough for yourself, or for it to take a form that others can connect with.

On our podcast Justin and I often come up with ideas we'd love to cover but they feel too live for us – or for others in our lives – at the moment. We keep a list on our phones of topics that would be great to cover, but we want to come back to them when it feels like we have a bit more distance from them ourselves.

Another thing I do is to journal about the things that are really live initially in a format which is not for public consumption. I've filled hundreds of pages in the last year, going through major transitions in work, home, and relationships. Many of the ideas and practices that have come out of this writing will likely eventually find their way into my non-fiction and fiction writing, but it's probably best that the writing I do for the initial processing is for my eyes only.

There's an inner sense of 'not ready' and 'ready' which I'm beginning to trust in this – and other

– aspects of life. For example, there will hopefully eventually be seven comics in this series, but this is the only one that's felt complete enough to get down so far.

If something starts to take shape as a piece of writing for a reader beyond yourself you can always write it when live and return to it later. It's a great idea anyway to separate the writing process and the editing process. This means that in the first drafting you can really sink into the flow and write it however it comes, knowing that you'll be coming back to it before it goes out anywhere, so you can free yourself up to make mistakes and be imperfect. This is what Anne Lamot calls the 'shitty first draft' – something we're allowed to do in writing and in life.

Personally I find it helpful to have a notepad or extra document open alongside my writing, where I write down the worried or critical thoughts I have about while I'm doing it: from information I need to check to issues around diverse representation. Then I know I can go back to those concerns during the editing process, but can park them and keep writing for now.

When I've written something and it has that feeling of potentially being too raw, or too vulnerable, to put out there at present, I leave it and return to it later: a month, a year, whatever.

I also have a sense of who my crew are for reading things that I've written which I'm not sure about sharing. If you know that the future version of yourself, plus several friends, will be reading the writing and feeding back about it before it sees the light of day, that can also help you to feel more free to write now.

Over time you can get a feel for what is just the right amount of vulnerable and what is over the line. Like if the exposure scale goes from 0-10 perhaps 5-6 is that sweet spot for things that are real and vulnerable in ways that stretch you a useful amount, and will likely connect with other people. But over a 7 is into the too-vulnerable zone and worth leaving till it feels less live. I've adapted this from an idea I got from Love Uncommon, that when our feelings are 0-7 the thing to do is to stay with them, but over 7 has tipped us into trauma/overwhelm and the thing to do there is to get back to a sense of being safe-enough before we try to stay with the feelings.

### **What if...**

Here's a few things people often worry about when writing about vulnerable stuff, plus my thoughts on them:

#### *What if...people hate it?*

I figure for everything I write there's going to be a few folks who'll really love it – the ones for whom it hits just the right point on the right day. Now that I have quite a lot of people who regularly engage with my stuff, there'll probably be quite a few others who like it, which is great. Then there will be the vast, vast, vast majority of the world who have no idea who I am, no wish to read my stuff, and would feel pretty meh about it if they ever did. Then there'll be a few people who – if they did read it – would totally hate it, either because they hate me – or people like me – or because it's the opposite of what they think, or because they're just having a bad day – or whatever.

In my case I'm generally writing for the people who find my stuff interesting, useful, or entertaining. Nobody else has to read it. If they do, and they don't like it then that's okay, they don't have to read my stuff again.

*What if...people are mean about me?*

I think that people imagine that this will happen a lot if they put stuff out there, but it's actually pretty rare. I write on some fairly controversial topics and I've very rarely have someone attack me or criticise my writing. It has happened, but to be honest it's usually been something out of left field that I could never have predicted. I wouldn't have avoided the experience by deciding not to write about the vulnerable stuff.

It's definitely worth having some plans in place – if you write publicly – about what you'll do if you do find yourself being criticised or attacked in a big way. Is there somebody who can take over your inbox and social media during the time it's going on? Could you get away and do self-care till it's died down a bit? Is there a holding message you can prepare in advance to put out while you take your time responding – if a response is required? Can you think advance of some kinds of filters to decide which kinds of critical feedback you'd like to take seriously and which you wouldn't (around who gives it, in what form, what kind of issue it raises, etc.)?

*What if...I change my mind later?*

People worry that once you've written something it's somehow set in stone and you could be judged for it FOREVER. I think it would be great if we could make a habit of returning to things we've written in the past and say how our views have shifted, or what we know now that we didn't know then. We're all in an ongoing process, and it's not fair to judge a person now by who they were or what they knew 5, 10 or 20 years ago. Also culture is moving on and this makes it more possible to do better on many issues today than we might've done in the past. We could reflect on this process of change in our writing in useful ways – being accountable for the impact of our work – instead of being defensive and insisting that every word we've ever written was perfect.

*What if...it's vulnerable for other people I'm writing about?*

This is where consent comes in (I said writing was like sex in more ways than one). If you're writing about other people then it's not okay to put something out there that could leave them vulnerable without their consent. There are several options here:

- Only write your story, not those of other people who might struggle to read themselves depicted, or to have themselves read about by others. Having had the experience of being reported about in the press twice without my consent I know very well how utterly traumatic, confusing, and powerless this experience can feel. I wouldn't wish it on anybody.
- Keep things general rather than specific.
- Anonymise people (like I did when mentioning my clients earlier).
- Have consent conversations with people you would like to write about. Remember to

acknowledge the power you have in the situation and any pressure they might feel under to agree to it: Ideally give them several options rather than just 'go ahead' or 'don't do it'. Take anything other than a definite 'yes' as a 'no'. Remind them it's fine to change their mind at any time (ongoing consent).

- Write collaboratively with the other people concerned so that you all have control over it together – this could be a useful process anyway.
- Write it as fiction rather than non-fiction, changing all identifying features, combining people together, or completely making up characters but keeping features of the experience true to life. This is what a lot of therapists do when they want to write about client work without breaking confidentiality. It's what Alex and I do when we want to write a bunch of diverse experiences around an issue in our collaborative books.

There are complexities around all this of course when it comes to memoir writing particularly: what constitutes writing about somebody else versus telling your story? Again it can be useful to give yourself complete freedom to write what comes in the first draft, and then decide which strategies – or combinations of strategies – you'll use to keep it ethical when you're editing.

*What if...I get something wrong?*

You can go gradual. It's not a binary of keeping something to yourself or putting it out there for all to see. You can have trusted friends read it first to give you a sense if it's something worth sharing more widely. You can have sensitivity readers who you offer something to in return for reading it with an eye to particular aspects you want to be sure you've got right (e.g. axes of oppression you're not personally familiar with but have written about, or science or history parts). If you have a publisher then you'll have at least one editor who will read it before it goes out there. If it's a blog then you can always share it only with a certain group of people, or put it out publicly but only share it with your social media friends or followers initially. And if you do get something wrong you can acknowledge that and change it immediately if it's online, or in a later edition if it's in print.

### **Writing vulnerable**

Why would we write vulnerable stuff given all of these fears and potential pitfalls? I think that it does something very important for us personally, and for others reading our work.

Personally there is what Patrick Califia calls an antidote to shame in writing vulnerable stuff. This is often the stuff that we fear – deep down – might not be okay about us. Writing it and putting it out there is a way of saying 'this is me, with all my inevitable frailties and failings and flaws, and I'm still okay.' Under capitalism it could also be seen as a political act to challenge the success/failure and good/bad person binaries by speaking openly about our struggles, our mistakes, and our messes.

Related to this, writing vulnerable goes against the current pressure to curate and present a perfect image on social media and beyond (which brings with it a horror of being revealed as imperfect, which we inevitably are).

For me it's always been about resisting the common depiction of the 'self-help author' or 'expert' who has it all together and doesn't struggle in the way that 'regular people' do. Fuck that noise quite frankly. We hardly need another point of comparison to judge ourselves against and find ourselves wanting in the current climate. If we only put out our successes and triumphs and never our struggles and tragedies we're feeding that culture of comparison. So we'd better get vulnerable.

Or we can sidestep the whole thing entirely as I do on Instagram and only share images of lovely nature/animals and food I've cooked (yes I am quite a good cook, but I'm rubbish at loads of other things I promise).

# Writing about writing

August 2011

Last week somebody sent me an email which really pleased me. They are writing a non-fiction book and asked for my advice about this. For some reason I always feel a particular thrill when I'm able to help with something that isn't in what I think of as my areas of expertise. It's a similar feeling when I'm at a conference and I'm the one who manages to get the powerpoint working! This blog post is a version of the email which I sent them in response to their query.

In the last year I've started to provide workshops, and to write papers, about writing itself. As somebody who struggled greatly to write – and to get published – initially, it feels wonderful to help to open that door for other people. I've written quite a bit on [how to get published in academic journals](#) (for non-academics or people who haven't done so before). Here I want to focus on writing non-fiction books.

For many years I had a plan for a non-fiction book about relationships, aimed at a general audience. But it was such a huge project, which I had so much invested in, that I never get very far. I'd written textbooks, and edited academic books, but the prospect of a whole book presenting my ideas (rather than just those of others) felt way too daunting.

Last year I finally managed to break through and get the whole thing written, but it must have taken around a decade to get to that point. In some ways I don't regret it because it is a better book for waiting, and also because of what I learnt about writing – and about myself – through finally pushing through all the blocks.

Here are the top tips which worked for me, mainly about the everyday process of writing, and the emotional side of what gets in our way. Of course, these ideas won't work for everybody. Writing is clearly a very personal process as you can see if you compare the advice of different fiction authors. For example, two of my favourite novelists go about the process completely differently: [John Irving](#) comes up with his whole story, working backwards from the last line, and only then starts writing, whereas [Stephen King](#) begins at the beginning and doesn't know how it is going to end, it is more like a process of receiving a complete delivery of boxes and gradually unpacking them (although this might explain why it ends with a giant spider quite so often).

## **My top tips**

\* Whilst you need to be aware of your audience and where they're coming from, try to let go of any desire to please everyone. For example, with my book I had to recognise that I was imagining the average person on the street complaining that it was too complicated, and an academic critic complaining that it was too simplistic. Recognise those kind of fears, but remember that even if the book speaks to just some people that is enough. Aim at the 'good enough' book rather than the perfect book.

\* If you can, make a plan to write for an hour every day (for me, early on in the day works best). Just write during that time, not worrying about the quality of it: you can always come back to edit another time. If it starts to flow then keep writing. If it doesn't, then stop after the hour and come back to it the next day. That way you won't burn yourself out spending hours and hours looking at a blank screen and feeling rotten. It can help to have a list of other tasks you want to do towards the book which don't involve writing – e.g. reading, making notes, searching online. Then you can do these when you are not writing. Also, I find that walking is often a good way of freeing things up. I often return from a walk with a clearer plan.

\* For me structure helps a lot. Have a plan of the structure of the book, then the structure of each chapter (subsections). Then, for each subsection, you can think about the point you want each paragraph to make. If you have a developed outline then writing just becomes a case of filling in the detail, rather than having to write and shape the story as you go along.

\* Break it down. Seeing it as a book can be really scary, so it is useful to break the book into chapters and the chapters into sections. Then, each day, you can think which section you want to write (e.g. something 500-2000 words long) and just do that. If you do this it becomes much more like writing a blog entry or a short essay (which people are often more familiar with). You can always go through later and edit them together more smoothly.

\* When you're really struggling to write, it can be useful to write, or talk to someone, about what you want to write. Instead of actually writing the book, you could write in a notebook, or in an email, or talk to a friend (perhaps recording the conversation), about what you want to write in this book (or in a particular chapter of it), what the aims are, why it is important. Just let yourself loose on that, starting each sentence with 'I want to write about...'. You might well find that some of what you write or say can then be turned into a first draft.

\* Ideally write about the bit you're feeling most passionate about at the moment, rather than being too rigid thinking you have to write from beginning to end, for example.

\* Whilst you are writing, try not to worry too much about (a) how many words you've written, (b) the quality of the writing, or (c) what other people will think of it.

In my experience it definitely got easier and easier the more that I wrote. The first 3 chapters were extremely hard going, but then I got the momentum and I could tell that it was going to happen so it got faster, easier and better. I went back to those early chapters later to polish them, so that was fine. I think the thing is just to get something written, whatever the quality, and that'll start to give you the confidence that you can.

I hope these tips are helpful. [Natalie Goldberg](#) has some wonderful ideas for mindful writing which apply to fiction and non-fiction alike, and I picked up some of these ideas from her. I'd be interested in hearing other people's feedback on what they find useful.

# All About Writing

March 2018

I've been meaning to write about writing for a while. When I went back through my all my old blog posts over the Winter holiday I discovered that it was something I haven't said much about here since I started this blog back in 2011. [The one post](#) I did find from 2011 was prompted by an email from somebody asking for my writing tips, and so is this one. Thanks so much to Rena for asking for my tips for her person Alex, who is keen to write more.

This is a great time for me to reflect on writing. I wrote the [2011 post](#) after I'd finished writing my first book for a general audience (rather than an academic book or textbook) but a year before it got published. Now I've published six of those kinds of books, including a second edition of that first book [Rewriting the Rules](#).

I'm working on [two more non-fiction books](#) as well as allowing myself to return to fiction writing: something I hadn't done for years and have never published. I've always had a dream to mash up genre fiction like ghost stories and erotica with self-help and memoir. I'm finding that fiction writing is teaching me a lot about writing style and process that feeds back into my non-fic too. Having long defined myself as equal parts writer, therapist, activist, and academic. I'm now just going for writer first and foremost, and seeing the other three aspects as things that inform my work as a writer.

## **Becoming a writer**

So what are my top tips for becoming a writer? Before I start in with the practical stuff it's important to say that – as with so many things – privilege of all kinds makes it a great deal easier. It's enormously hard to make a living from writing. [Sixteen books in](#) and my yearly income from writing is still in the low thousands, and it would be in the hundreds if it wasn't for one of those books ([Queer](#)) being pretty successful. Remember that the writer gets only a small percentage of published book sales.

Personally I'm extremely fortunate to have a paid job – at the [Open University](#) – which includes public engagement writing as part of my role and gives me some time for it, as well as having writing ([textbooks](#) and [websites](#)) as a main focus of the teaching work that I do. If your job doesn't pay you to write, or if you're unemployed and dealing with the benefits system, it can be much much harder to find time, energy, and motivation for writing.

The other main block to writing – alongside paying the bills – for most of us is our [inner critic](#). Writing tends to bring up all our old shameful messages and pretty much every time I start a new project I face an internal barrage of 'who do you think you are?', 'you don't know enough to write this book', 'you're going to get it horribly wrong and offend people', etc. etc. etc. There's something extremely vulnerable about setting words down on a page: like it might capture our

essence and set it in stone, and then if people respond badly it means that we ourselves are bad.

So what ways have I found to write in spite of everyday commitments and an often very vocal inner critic? Here's a list but it's important to remember that different things work for different people. As I said in my [previous post](#), no two writers are identical, and you might well find it helpful to read a few books about different authors' approaches to get a sense of the variety of writing practices that can be helpful.

1. 'Write with the door shut, rewrite with the door open'

I got this one from Stephen King's awesome book [On Writing](#), which I return to regularly. How I understand it is that when I'm writing the first draft of a book I just write it for me. I try and put all my concerns about how it will be received, whether it's problematic in some way, even whether I'll be able to publish it, on a high shelf and just write however it comes. If I start to get anxious I remind myself that I will be going back through it with all of those thoughts in mind once I reach the end (probably after a month or two to give me some space from it). I make myself a bullet point list of questions to ask during the rewrite so that I can put them aside while I'm writing. I also remind myself that I'll be passing it by a bunch of [beta readers](#) before it goes out more widely who will help me pick up on any errors or problems.

Knowing that I'll be rewriting with the door open helps me to fully drop into the writing and allow it to flow, instead of that horrible jolting, slow process it can be if you're questioning every word as you put it down on the page.

2. Apply your ass to the seat

I'm pretty sure Stephen King has this one too, as do many writers about writing. It is SOOOO easy to procrastinate writing. It is SOOOO hard to actually start writing, especially a big project which can seem impossibly huge when you're at the beginning. When I wrote [Rewriting the Rules](#) the person I lived with at the time suggested writing for an hour at the beginning of every day, no matter what. No word counting, no worrying about how good it was, just [keeping the hand moving](#) – as [Natalie Goldberg](#) puts it – for an hour each day.

After an hour, if it was feeling painful – or if I had other things I had to do that day – then I'd quit. But if it was going well – and I was able to – I could keep going. The first three chapters of that first book were pretty painful and I mostly stopped after an hour. But by chapter four I'd got into the groove and, when I was able to, I kept on writing beyond the hour.

The other good thing about morning writing is that you do it while you're fresh before the day properly kicks in. I would usually do it after taking some time outside with a cup of coffee to prepare myself. However, of course, not everyone feels creative in the morning, and you need to tailor your writing ritual to you daily rhythms. Perhaps for you it's your lunch break, or the hour after you get home from work, or the hour before bed.

### 3. Go out and write

For me in those early stages of a project I often find it hard to write at home. I can always find a million other things to do there. It's often really good to take an hour or two out somewhere. Somehow I find it easier to sink into it that way. Cafes are great if you can afford them. I've become an expert in which London cafes will allow you to sit for 2-3 hours on one cup of coffee, as well as on free spaces like libraries and museums where you can go and write.

You can also think about whether you write better longhand or at a keyboard. For me once I'm into a project keyboard is fine, but longhand writing can flow more easily in the early stages. I've heard of current writers who've written their whole first drafts in journals.

### 4. Write when it's live (if you can)

This advice is a bit of a contradiction to advice about finding your writing rhythm or ritual, but when possible it's great to write when your project feels live to you. It's so much easier to plunge in at those times when you've just had a great idea, or you feel the hunger for it, than it is to force yourself to focus when you're not in the zone.

You might find that certain things tend to enliven you – like going for a walk and thinking about your writing, or journaling about all of the things you want to write about, or chatting with a fellow writer. Writing when it's live gives you the experience of just how joyful and thrilling writing can be, which makes it much easier to come back to than if every experience of writing is gruelling and hard.

For me, having a couple of projects on the go at any one time, as well as my blog, means that I can go with the one that feels most live on a particular day. I also find that fiction or memoir style writing can work as a good warm-up for other stuff.

### 5. Consider your ideal reader and write for them

Something that has cut through the blocks at the beginning of most writing projects for me has been imagining my ideal reader. When I was writing the Queer book I got totally hung up on what well-known queer theorists might think of it and found it really hard to get started. Then I imagined the people who I actually wanted to benefit from the book: people who thought they might be queer, people who were struggling to get their heads around these complex ideas, people who were really scared of getting it wrong with the terminology. Shifting into writing for them helped a lot. When Alex Iantaffi and I were writing How to Understand Your Gender, we often thought about the younger versions of ourselves who could really have used a book like that.

### 6. Consider collaborating

Speaking of Alex, you do not have to write alone! We have this image of the lone writer in the garrett, but some of my best, and most enjoyable, writing has been done with somebody else. Somehow writing with a colleague cuts through the inner critic, because you know that what they have to say is awesome, and they know that what you have to say is awesome. Also you can worry less about the things that you know you don't know much about if you're writing with

somebody who brings those areas of experience or expertise that you lack.

If you do collaborate I'd suggest choosing writing partners carefully. It's a very intimate relationship, and like all of those it will have its challenges. Make sure you chat up front about what your writing process will be and find a way that feels write to both/all of you. Personally I've found it vital to prioritise self-care first and foremost and to put everyone's well-being at a much higher priority than deadlines, or even whether the book gets published at all.

Supporting (and surviving) a writer.

Rena also asked me about supporting the writer in your life. Again this probably varies from writer to writer, but I would suggest the following:

- As with other aspects of relationships it's helpful to think about what you can offer, and what you can't. For example, just because somebody is a writer doesn't give them permission to treat you badly (and we can get grumpy!) It's okay to expect us to be present with you when it's our time together. Us being a writer doesn't trump the things in your life that are important to you, for example in conversations about how to manage finances, childcare, or domestic chores.
- It's fine whether or not you're into the kinds of things that we write. Just because you are our person, doesn't mean you have to love our work. We can find other people for that. Don't feel that you have to be our ideal reader just because we're partners or friends, for example.
- Give us space! We will need time and space to write in. It's great if you can encourage us in that, whatever it means for us, whether that's carving out a space in a shared home where we can go without interruption, or reassuring us that it's good to go off on writing retreats.
- Expect the rollercoaster of emotion. Sometimes we'll be convinced our current project is a work of staggering genius and will change the world. Sometimes we'll be convinced that it's dross and we're just wasting our time. It's great if you can sit alongside us in those feels, and everything in between. You don't have to fix it for us, just trust that as we keep writing we'll eventually find more of a balanced perspective. If we become insufferable it's fine to take some space from us or encourage us to get some support from elsewhere!

### **Find out more...**

My initial post about writing has a few more tips, as well as links to my articles about more academic writing.

These are my favourite three books about writing:

- On Writing – Stephen King
- Writing Down the Bones – Natalie Goldberg
- Bird by Bird – Anne Lamott

# Journaling

Originally published on [megjohnandjustin.com/you/journaling/](http://megjohnandjustin.com/you/journaling/)



This piece covers what journaling is, why people might do it as a form of self-care or self-reflection, and the different ways you can go about it.

## **What is journaling?**

Journaling is any form of writing about your life, thoughts and feelings really. It could take the form of writing longhand in a notebook, creating computer docs or audio files where you speak your journal, doing an online blog about your life, or messaging on an app with another version of yourself. We're generally talking here about the kind of journaling you do just for yourself rather than something designed to be shared, as you can then be more free to be open with yourself. We're also distinguishing journaling from diarying - which is more of an account of your day-to-day life without necessarily including feelings or reflections.

## **Why do it?**

James Pennebaker's extensive research finds that writing about our feelings generally has a positive impact on mental and physical health, confidence, motivation, and various other good things.

However we'd also stress that it isn't for everyone. Generally it's best to find the forms of self-care that work for you rather than trying to force one that isn't a good fit. You might be more drawn to talking with another person, meditation, bodily movement, or something else, for example. It's important that these things don't become another reason to feel badly about

ourselves for 'doing it wrong' or not getting round to it.

### **How to do it**

Even if journaling is a good fit for you, there are lots of different ways to journal, so it's worth playing around and finding what works for you, remembering that this may also change over time. For example you can write letters you don't send in order to work through your feelings and what you want to communicate. You can start by writing down everything that happened and how you feel about it, and then move into reflective writing where you take perspective, try to see things from others' points of view, or consider any action you might take.

### **Different ways to do it**

There are lots of different ways of journaling. Here's a list of things you might try:

- Voice dialogue - writing as a conversation between different parts of yourself, or between you and an imagined person (e.g. a wise, compassionate person)
- Writing specific memories and your reflections on those
- Journaling on-and-off as you do another practice like sitting with feelings, or a ritual
- Getting together with a friend to journal and then share your thoughts
- Writing out of different emotional states (e.g. grief, anger, relief, and guilt after a break-up)
- Making lists, e.g. of things you feel proud of, or grateful for, each day
- Listing pros and cons around a decision, or what it might open up and close down for you
- Mind-mapping
- Doodling or creating rough comics
- Writing letters or emails to people or situations which you won't actually send

### **Further resources**

The following people write good stuff on journaling and therapeutic writing:

- James Pennebaker, e.g. *Expressive Writing: Words That Heal*
- Natalie Goldberg, e.g. *Writing Down the Bones*
- Anne Lamott, e.g. *Bird by Bird*
- Julia Cameron, e.g. *The Artist's Way*
- Kathleen Adams, e.g. *Journal to the Self*
- Kate Thompson, e.g. *Therapeutic Journal Writing*
- Hal and Sidra Stone, e.g. *Embracing Ourselves*

# Purpose and integrity

January 2016

Existential psychotherapist and blogger Emma Wilkinson recently very kindly asked me to be part of her 'people of integrity' project. She's interviewing people whose work she regards as having integrity and I was deeply flattered to be thought of that way!

You might also be interested in the other interview she's conducted so far with Prof. Emmy Van Deurzen, foremost existential psychotherapist in Europe.

## **Briefly tell me your story (who are you? Where do you come from? Where are you going?)**

I'm Meg-John Barker (MJ for short). I grew up in Bradford in the 1970s and 80s. I studied psychology at university, did a PhD in that area, and stumbled into working as a lecturer. But my passion for exploring and writing about people's relationships with themselves and others didn't really develop until I was around 30. It's been a gradual process of allowing myself – more and more – to study what really fascinates me, drawing on the ideas and approaches that make most sense to me, and writing in the ways that I feel I'm best at and find most fulfilling.

In the last few years I've been writing more about more self-help style books – and other materials – for general audiences rather than for academics. I see myself going increasingly in that direction, weaving together my therapeutic work with my writing, and producing the kind of creative and critical self-help that I think would be useful for people. I'm particularly excited about projects involving comics and animations, for example, or mashing up self-help with other genres such as ghost stories, or memoir.

## **What do you see as your true purpose in life?**

I see my purpose as being somebody who brings together and synthesises a lot of information and ideas about the topics that I'm passionate about, and then finds ways of putting that across which will be accessible and engaging for folks. It's all about connection for me: connecting with the people who I learn from through reading, conversations with colleagues, and my therapy work; and connecting with the people I'm talking to through my writing, workshops, mentoring and counselling.

Another important element for me is that my work locates individual experiences in wider culture, and encourages people to engage critically with the messages around them, rather than getting caught in a spiral of blaming themselves – as individuals – for their struggles.

## **How did you discover this purpose?**

I'm sure that a major element has been my ongoing reflection on my own life, and what has been helpful to me: wanting to put stuff out there into the world that might be useful to others who are struggling in ways that I've struggled.

Also there's been a process of gradually allowing myself to pursue what I see myself as being best at. We receive so many messages about what we should do in life, or what a 'proper' person in our line of work should be doing. I try to hold those messages lightly and focus more on the question of what seems most useful and valuable. I know that it's when I pursue those projects that I feel most alive, and that what I produce is of the highest quality.

**What are the key qualities in yourself or others that you value and why?**

The key qualities for me would be walking the walk, balancing criticality and kindness, and engaging with others in accessible and inclusive ways.

I value people who put their ideas into practice in their own lives as much as possible and who reflect on their own experiences to inform their work so that it's grounded in what actually works in practice. I think that kindness is probably the most vital human quality: it counters the self-criticism that lies at the heart of most mental health problems and emotional suffering; and it counters the judgement of others that is the root of so much human conflict. So I value people who treat themselves and others with kindness, and manage to balance that with a critical approach towards the wider structures, systems, and dynamics that often exacerbate suffering. Finally, I value highly people who are able to put forward their ideas in ways that are engaging to others, and include everybody, so that people can take away practical and helpful suggestions, and feel embraced rather than alienated by what is being said.

**Did you always have such a clear and honest voice? If not, what changed? How did you develop your voice?**

I think as a kid I did have a tendency to point out things that I found baffling in the world in something of an 'emperor's new clothes' manner! However, the strong messages I received at school about how you had to be in order to fit in managed to stifle that for a long while. At the same time the experience of being bullied also gave me a much better insight into how other people might be struggling and how to engage with people more compassionately.

I think my voice is still developing, and it comes best when I manage to get out of my own way. By that I mean dropping all of the ideas I have about who I should be and what I should be doing, and allowing myself to go with my gut and write and talk about what feels most important to me, in the way that feels right, and drawing on the ideas that I find most useful.

**Are there times, places or people where you find it harder to maintain the integrity of your voice?**

Definitely. It is when I find myself caring a lot what other people think of me so I start trying to speak in a way that I think they will approve of, or saying what I think they want me to say: trying to be 'cool' or 'nice' for example, so that other people will think well of me. That's a real ongoing struggle for me, and for many of us I think. I try to remind myself of the following things:

- That doing that generally makes what I'm saying or writing lower quality
- That even if I get the approval I'm looking for it will be precarious because it's not based on who I really am, and the other person or people may feel let down when they get to

know me better!

- That I can't be all things to all people and it is totally fine if some people really connect with what I produce, and other people don't like it – how could it be otherwise?
- That everyone makes mistakes and has limitations – and if somebody does criticise what I've done in ways that are spot on it is fine – and important – to own up to that.

**What advice would you give to someone seeking a more authentic life?**

I think the most important thing is developing kindness for yourself, and that is incredibly hard and a lifelong journey. When we can treat ourselves kindly we can manage to get out of our own way more and speak more authentically. We're also less concerned with putting on a front for other people, or justifying ourselves, so we're more able to hear what other people are saying, to connect with their experience, and to act in the most compassionate manner in any given situation. Practically I find Buddhist mindfulness and journaling to be helpful daily/weekly things to do in order to develop more kindness towards myself and openness to others.

# On monsters, emotions, and drawing: An interview with the artist behind the zine 'Welcome Monster Feelings'

April 2022

This post describes the thinking and feeling behind our new zines [Welcome Monster Feelings](#), and [Welcoming Your Monster Feelings](#).

It takes the form of an interview between the part of me who created it – Fox – and another part – James. If you haven't read one of my plural blog-posts before and aren't sure who these people are, feel free to check out our [Plural Selves](#) zine, and our free book about [Plurality](#). But hopefully you don't need to get that part in order to find the content here interesting.

Location: Fox's favourite cafe.

Food: Halloumi tomato pesto sandwich, OJ.

James: It's my great pleasure, today, to be conducting an interview with the artist behind the new zine [Welcome Monster Feelings](#). Thankyou for taking the time to speak with me today Fox.



*Fox: You're welcome.*

James: Would you like to begin by telling the readers a little bit about who you are?

*Fox: Nope.*

James: Well this is getting off to a great start.

*Fox: I think it'd be more fun if you say who I am and I'll say who you are.*

James: Oh go on then. How best to describe you?

*Fox: It better be good.*

James: No pressure then.

*Fox: \*giggle\**

James: I would say that you're the youngest child part of our plural system. Or rather we tend to think of you as who we might have been without all the rules we learnt about who it was okay and not okay to be in the world – without our **developmental trauma**. You are the most able of all of us to just be in the moment, to find delight and wonder in things, to move through the feelings you have rather than getting stuck in them. How am I doing?

*Fox: Why do we call me Fox?*

James: Because you often feel more like a creature than a human: a wild little thing.

*Fox: Heh I like that. Okay I'll do you.*

James: I'm not sure it's regular to introduce the interviewer.

*Fox: I'm gonna anyway. You're our James. We call you lots of other names like Old Man and Saint James and Captain Admin and ruder ones.*

James: Captain Admin is pretty rude. I don't just do admin.

*Fox: That's why it's funny. You are the one of us who does most of the everyday life stuff, particular the bits that the rest of us find boring or scary like emails \*shudder\* But you're also the main one who looks after the child parts of us: **me, Morgan (aka Beastie), and Robin (aka Tony)**. You're really good at that.*

James: I'm not sure how Morgan would feel about being called a child part.

*Fox: She's not here!*

James: I mean technically, given that we share a body...

*Fox: If she was properly here we wouldn't be doing this interview coz it's not easy for her to do this kind of thing. But we'll get to that.*

James: Is that enough introductions then? Am I allowed to start the interview proper?

*Fox: It's about time!*

### **The aims of the zine**

James: \*shakes head\* Okay then. First question. What were you hoping to achieve with this work **Welcome Monster Feelings**?

*Fox: Two things I think. The main one was I wanted to help the other members of our system – particularly Robin and Morgan who carry most of our trauma – to find a way to be with their most painful feelings. We've been in this big **trauma** period for the last few years, so our feelings can be very **overwhelming** at times, especially for those two.*

*The other thing I wanted to do was to find a way back to drawing. We made quite a few **zines** and **comics** a few years back, but it was something we found much harder to do during the trauma time.*

James: Why d'you think that is?

*Fox: Well Morgan's trauma often comes out as being an inner critic – so it's very hard for her to let us draw without feeling it's not good enough, or comparing it to what other people do, even though she also really wants us to be creative. Robin's trauma comes out as fear and shame so it's scary for him to put stuff out there in the world, in case people are mean about it. Also it's just generally pretty hard to sit down and draw – or do anything much – when you're feeling that bad.*

James: I think it was a genius move to find a project that we could do even when we felt rotten, in fact tough feelings were kind of a bonus.

*Fox: I know right? And – as we say in the companion zine **Welcoming Your Monster Feelings** – the practice of making the monsters often helps overwhelming feelings to calm down a bit. So you gradually get this knowing in your body that making a monster will make you feel better, which makes it easier to do it the next time you feel rough.*

James: Positive reinforcement.

*Fox: Right, and I love that it showed Robin and Morgan that they were vital – to the project and to us. They can both so easily feel that they are 'bad parts', or ruin things for the rest of us, and that they should be cast out again – as they both were for so much of our lives. But I couldn't have done this project without them. It was their feelings I was drawing most of the time.*

*Also when we showed our friends, and they found it helpful and said they felt similar things, that helped Robin and Morgan to feel seen, and less alone, and like they were being helpful to others.*

### **A plural project**

James: Just brilliant! So it sounds like you see this as a plural collaboration, even though you were definitely the one leading on it.

*Fox: Absolutely. Robin and Morgan mostly had the feelings, and told me about them, and then I found the way to draw them that felt most right. But we also got everyone else's feelings in there somewhere.*

James: I particularly like the holding and hearing monster towards the end...



*Fox: That's you! And he looks a bit like Sully from [Monsters Inc](#) because that character reminds us of you, and his full name is James P. Sullivan.*

James: I also helped as Captain Admin right?

*Fox: Yes! You did all the scanning and the making it a pdf, and learning how to make a pdf small so people can download it, and putting it on our website, and all kinds of things that I find an-noy-ing!*

James: And conducting this interview of course.

*Fox: Of course. Next question.*

### **Feelings, art and monsters**

James: Well I was interested in exploring with you the links in our life between feelings, art, and monsters. I know you've been reflecting on that.

*Fox: I have. It feels like we've been trying to do this project our whole life, and it involves going back towards these three things that were all kind of crushed in us.*

James: Do go on.

*Fox: Well we've written before about how we weren't allowed 'difficult' feelings as a kid. People at home and school tried to train us out of them with punishments for unacceptable emotions, and rewards when we made it through the day or week without crying. That's part of the reason that Robin and Morgan got disowned. They held all the least acceptable feelings: fear and anger, but also loneliness, sadness, jealousy, pride. All sorts.*

James: Right. Our feelings get so unbearable during the years in our life when PTSD hits because we're feeling all the things that were locked inside Robin and Morgan.

*Fox: Feeling the feelings they held for us our whole life. That's it.*

*Another thing that got pushed out of us in a similar way when we were small was art. We LOVED drawing. We drew all of the time. Our bedroom wall was full of our pictures. But gradually people around us tried to make us draw the kinds of things they wanted, and to draw in the ways they wanted us to.*

James: For example?

*Fox: Like being asked to draw pictures as a present for people's birthdays. And they generally wanted things like landscapes or still lifes or whatever, which isn't what we enjoyed drawing. Also when we did art at high school we were shocked because we had to draw things from real life rather than out of our imagination – as we'd always done before.*

James: What did we enjoy drawing?

*Fox: Mostly people and imaginary creatures. And we drew to tell stories from our fantasy life, or to get down feelings that we couldn't talk about or express in other ways. But eventually we learnt that wasn't how you were meant to do art.*

James: So, not only were both feelings and artistic pursuits suppressed, but those two suppressions were also related. Losing the ability to draw from our imagination and feelings denied us an important outlet for emotions we weren't supposed to have. How do monsters fit in?

*Fox: Monsters feel like the third leg of the stool somehow.*

*We were always fascinated by monsters. Our favourite TV shows as a kid were **Rentaghost** and **Dramarama**. Our favourite books were **pop up ghost books**. Later we read **true haunting books** over and over and over. We were addicted to **Ghostbusters** – one of the first movies we saw at the cinema. When we got to choose our own topic to do a project on at school we did dinosaurs every time.*

James: We had a huge collection of plastic dinos too didn't we?

*Fox: Yes! **Dimetrodon** was my favourite dinosaur, but they don't think Dimetrodon was a dinosaur any more!*

James: This may be a tangent.

*Fox: Heh.*

James: How did monsters relate to art and to feelings?

*Fox: Well they relate to art because a lot of what we wanted to draw was mythical creatures like dragons.*

*They relate to feelings because, when we reached double figures and things got really bad, we started reading authors like **Stephen King**, Dean Koontz and James Herbert. We thought that reading horror books would help us to be less scared in our real life – like maybe we could get used to facing frightening things by reading those books, and become braver.*

James: And did our monster love get suppressed too?

*Fox: I think so. We once tried to do a book review of a horror book in school and they didn't like that. It wasn't a proper book like the ones you were meant to read. When we studied psychology at university – and afterwards – we were always drawn to monster-y topics, like the paranormal, and why people do evil things, and the meaning of fairy tales. But those things were always looked down on as not proper, so we wound up doing our projects on other stuff – somehow making it acceptable.*

James: And yet our PhD was on loneliness, our first paper was about goths and Pagans, and the first conference we organised was about vampires. We kept finding our way back to feelings and monsters didn't we?

*Fox: All the way through. Like we did the A levels that people said we should do, instead of the ones we really wanted to do (drawing and stories!) But we spent the whole summer after we finished those exams painting our room with a giant dragon, even though we were just about to move out of there. Then after our PhD we started writing fiction. We were going to do a whole collection of alternative fairy tales and take a creative writing course, but we didn't get accepted. For a long time we've had an idea for a book called Everyday Horrors: a mash up of horror fic and self-help.*



James: It seems like we've been trying to make Welcome Monster Feelings our whole life, and finally, we're making it, now that we're nearly fifty.

*Fox: Speak for yourself old man!*

James: \*Grin\*

## Reclaiming lost things

*Fox: It's like reclaiming isn't it? By reclaiming art, and reclaiming monsters, we're also reclaiming those feelings and the parts who hold them. No part gets left behind.*

James: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. And I suspect that many people have a similar history – at least with feelings and with art. The world, and the people around them, tell them that they mustn't show their feelings, and that they 'can't draw'.

*Fox: That's why we love Lynda Barry, who we mention in the zines. She says that most kids just naturally tell stories with pictures, but then they get taught proper writing and proper drawing, and they lose all that. Her books and resources are all about getting it back, by playing with it, using wax crayons, drawing quickly, colouring in, that kind of thing. And lots of drawing from the imagination!*

James: I notice that when we can allow you – Fox – to just draw from the feeling (with the odd bit of help from Google images to see what certain things look like) it just comes out looking right.

*Fox: It's amazing. Morgan is often sure there's no way it'll come out looking like we feel it, but it really does. It's all about keeping it simple, not trying too hard, just getting the feeling down.*

James: I think Lynda Barry is helping people get back to the child part of themselves who can draw that way, and tell stories too. The part like you that perhaps everyone has somewhere inside.



*Fox: More questions please!*

## Inspirations

James: Well you've mentioned Lynda Barry. Can you say something about your other inspirations for this project?

*Fox: I guess there are two kinds of inspirations: other people who've used monsters as a way of exploring feelings, and other people who have come up with practices for welcoming feelings.*

*For the first one we're super inspired by Pixar movies. They are something we watch a lot of because they are so gentle, and we generally need that in the evenings. [Inside Out](#) and [Monsters Inc](#) are the obvious ones, but lots of the [Pixar shorts](#) explore trauma and plurality too. [Far From the Tree](#) and [Twenty Something](#) are great examples.*

*We also recently watched the movie [A Monster Calls](#), which is all about monsters and fairy tales as ways of dealing with huge tough feelings. [Hannah Eaton's](#) graphic novel, [Naming Monsters](#), is about that too.*

*We really love [this Zen Pencils comic version](#) of [Rumi's](#) poem, [The Guest House](#), by [Gavin Aung Than](#). That poem captures the whole idea of welcoming feelings better than anything else, which is why we included it at the start of [the zine](#).*

James: What about the practices for welcoming feelings?

*Fox: We wrote about [focusing](#) and [Pema's F.E.A.R.](#) practices in our [Staying With Feelings](#) zine. Those are about feeling feelings in the body. Our therapist helped us towards the idea of visualising feelings. She suggested imagining the feeling you're having as just one cell of the body, and picturing it outside of yourself, describing what it looks like: its colour, texture, that kind of thing. That helps it be more manageable – it's not all of you, just one cell, and it's outside of you so you can approach it curiously.*

James: Externalising the feeling, so it doesn't feel like all that you are and all that you'll ever be, as [traumatic feelings](#) often feel.

*Fox: Right. But cells aren't much fun. I think that imagining feelings as monsters makes it more playful. And you can do with a bit of lightness and humour when you're dealing with something that hard.*

James: Agreed. And that makes it a bit more like the [Tibetan demon feeding practice](#) that we've written about before.

*Fox: Except in that practice you don't tend to draw the feelings. Lynda Barry adapts a Zen practice*

where you draw your demons in her comic [One! Hundred! Demons!](#)

James: It's so cool that you're now part of this group of comic and animation creators who've explored monsters in this kind of way.

*Fox: I know, I love that. It's what I've always wanted.*

James: We found our long, slow way towards art, monsters, and feelings, didn't we?

*Fox: We sure did!*

### **Monster feeling practice**

James: I know that you've also made a companion zine called [Welcoming Your Monster Feelings](#). Do you want to say something about that?

*Fox: Yes. We wanted to find a way to share our practice with people, in case they might find making monsters about their feelings helpful too. We were going to finish the [Welcome Monster Feelings](#) zine with a few pages about how to do it. But our friend H said they thought we shouldn't do that, because it should stand on its own as art!*

James: What did you think about that?

*Fox: I think they were right. Because we still struggle to see ourselves as someone who can legitimately draw pictures or tell stories, we often want to wrap those things up in a kind of self-help project, like we used to do with academic projects. Publishing [Welcome Monster Feelings](#) as a standalone book of our art felt really important. But we did still want to share the practice, so I made an [extra little zine](#) about that.*

James: And do you describe your process in that zine?

*Fox: Not exactly, because I know that not everybody will work the way that we do. [The zine](#) explores all kinds of different ways people might access their feelings and turn them into monsters, and the different reasons they might find that helpful.*



James: Can you share a bit more about your process here then. That's something people often want to know about artists.

Fox: *Heh that still sounds funny – artist. What I do is I sit down, usually with Robin or Morgan. That means that we're... what is it?*

James: **Co-conscious**. That's the word for when two parts of a **plural system** are foregrounded at the same time, like you and I are right now.

Fox: *Cool. So the other part really tunes into their feeling, and kind of shows me and tells me what it's like. Sometimes we feel it inside our body, and sometimes we have an image. Like that last feeling in the book from Morgan – we got a strong image of that classic **Peanuts comic** where Lucy pulls the ball away from Charlie Brown.*

*After they've shared the feeling, I find a way to turn it into a monster picture. And I draw, with a **mechanical pencil**, whatever comes out. I like to draw in this **sketch book we got from WHSmiths**, it has a hard cover so it looks like a proper book. And that means you can't just rip out pages if you don't like it. It feels important that we keep them all – however they come out. That's part of the welcoming.*



Once it feels like I've got the sketch right I go over the pencil lines with **drawing pens**. I like the ones that have several different sizes. Then I rub out the pencil lines, and we do the colouring in. That's very soothing and often we do it together. I like these **felt-tips** which have a brush end and a fibre tip end. It feels good to use felt-tips because that's more child-like than pastels or pencil crayons or paints I think. And I like the bright colours.

James: We might need to get you some more of those felt tips for your birthday. We're close to using some of them up.

Fox: I'd like a bigger set because there's only one grey and it doesn't come out great on the scanner. There is a **really big set** you can get, just saying.

James: Heh, that is a whole lot of felt-tips.

## **Trauma, shame and monster feeling practice**

Fox: Can I ask you a question?

James: Unconventional, but fire ahead.

Fox: Well you've written a **graphic guide** about trauma and mental health, which goes pretty well with **my zine**, right?

James: I guess I was the main author of that one – on behalf of the whole system and what we've just been through. It's like the grown up version of your zine in some ways – except not that grown up because it's still a comic with lots of superhero references. Hopefully **Jules** will be illustrating

that one this year and it'll be out in 2023.

*Fox: Grown up books take a lot longer it seems.*

James: \*grin\* I do think they go well together though, you're right. What was the question?

*Fox: I wondered why you think monster feeling practice is so helpful, given all the stuff you've learnt about trauma.*

James: Ah yes, I do have a few thoughts about that. One thing that we explore in the graphic guide is how trauma is often the result of violence combined with silence: painful things that happen to someone which aren't heard or held by anyone around them. We realised that many of the things that help with mental health struggles – like meditation, therapy, or activism around social injustice – are about the opposite of violence and silence – they are about kindness and honesty. Make sense?

*Fox: Kindness is the opposite of violence, and honesty is the opposite of silence.*

James: Right. And drawing monster feelings is all about being more honest with ourselves about what our feelings actually are, and more kind around them – that gentle process of drawing them and colouring them in, and the whole idea of welcoming them rather than trying to eradicate them.

Sharing those feelings with ourselves is also a great way to connect more with the different parts of us – to really hear what it's like for them and to hold them in their tough places.

*Fox: The holding and hearing monster! Kind holding and hearing the truth.*

James: Yes! The zine also helps us to connect with other people when they resonate with your drawings. That's a way of healing the disconnection (with self, others, and the world) which lies at the heart of so much trauma.

*Fox: But why is it so important for us to be able to feel the monster feelings?*

James: Ara and I explored this a bit last year in our [Staying with the Big Feels](#) blog post. One reason is that it's hard for a person to be authentic – to be real about who and how they are – without all of their feelings. And it's hard to have real intimacy – or good relationships – with other people too if you're still hiding some of your feelings from yourself and/or from them. Being able to be yourself, and having good relationships, are both vital for [mental and physical health](#).

Another thing is that the feelings that many people, including us, most often avoid or repress are the most vital for self-protection and for caring for others. Robin has held much of our fear, and

Morgan much of our anger. We've realised recently how those feelings are so important for keeping ourselves safe-enough and for acting with integrity.

*Fox: The integri-tree!*



James: That's right, you drew a few pictures relating to this. Robin's fear of shame – when it isn't unbearably intense – helps to guide us in what we take on, and what we don't, recognising when other people are trying to pull us or push us into things, or when it's coming from a dodgy motivation inside us. Morgan's anger – when it isn't twisted into confusion – helps us to state our needs and boundaries, as well as seeing other people more clearly. Your anger sunshine picture captured this beautifully.

*Fox: Thank-you.*

James: There's lots more I could say about this, but the point is that without access to some of the supposedly 'negative' feelings, it's very hard to empathise with others, to recognise danger, and to value ourselves equally with other people, rather than seeing ourselves as worse-than, or better-than.

*Fox: For us it's often worse-than. That's why a lot of our pictures are about shame.*

James: Mm, and it's very common for **shame** to be at the heart of people's tough feelings as **Brené Brown** has pointed out. We've been reading a lot about **shame** since we did a workshop on the topic last year, linked to **the shame and medicine project**.

The **book we're reading right now** says that it's very hard to express shame verbally because it's often non-conscious and not available to the language parts of the brain. So perhaps you've really

hit on something with these drawings – giving us a way to communicate feelings that would be impossible to express in any other way.

*Fox: Wow.*

James: I know right? And it's vital because so much of what people do that hurts them and others is an attempt to avoid painful feelings – particularly shame and the fear of shame. If we were able to get to a point where we were okay with all those feelings – where we could weather them, if not actively welcome them – then potentially we wouldn't do those hurtful things. It's a lifelong journey though, as Pema would say.

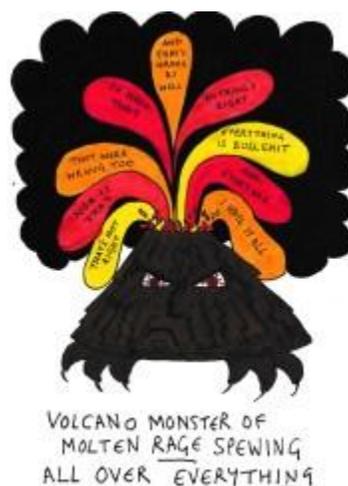
*Fox: Life long, and many books of monster feelings!*

### **Where next?**

James: That's a great segue to the final question I have for you. Where are you hoping to go next in your creative pursuits, now that you've got us here.

*Fox: Well I've already started Welcome More Monster Feelings, so that we'll keep going. Most of the monsters in the first book were Robin's ones, partly because he was foregrounded for a lot of the time we were making it, and partly because Morgan initially didn't want to do her feelings because she struggles so much not to be critical of them.*

James: She really didn't like the volcano drawing you made of her rage.



*Fox: I knew that would happen! It's the only one where the colours ran, and you can't see the face very well. But then I did the one of her snake-eating-its-tail, and the sunshine anger, and she loved those, so I think she's on board now. She has quite a few more monsters to share.*

James: Anything else you want to do, or is it all monsters all of the time?

*Fox: I would like to make more plural zines now that we all know each other better. I've started one about how people can learn to love their different parts, and there's another one to do about how they can communicate better between them.*

*But I also want to listen to H and do some more stuff that's just about our own experiences – not trying to be a self-help thing. Maybe I could do more plural comics like the Chalk Board one. Also I think Morgan would love to write about our journey of embracing our inner critic, perhaps with fairy tales!*

James: It would be great if she could feel free enough to create herself. She has such a powerful and tender voice when she can find it through all the horrors she's experienced.

*Fox: Totally.*

James: Okay. Well thank-you very much for sharing some of your precious time with me today Fox, and for joining me at the keyboard instead of the sketchpad for once.

*Fox: You are very welcome. I expect extra cuddles later.*

James: You got it. And I hear there's a new Ghostbusters movie...

# Thank-you for reading

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