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Writing Is Like Touch

Lucy M. Candib, MD

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Touch is an action that allows your body to feel something outside it, to perceive the size, shape, texture, temperature, and hardness or softness of the object or being. As a sensation, it is about what happens inside of the person touching. Touch is also a force however light or firm, painful or delightful, that affects the creature being touched. It can convey feelings and meaning. It may assist or guide an action, such as assisting someone coming down a high step, and can indicate the need for attention, such as touching a companion and then pointing to an owl in the tree. Its effect may or may not match the intention of the toucher, and unintentional effects can be completely unknown to the one touching (an unexpected tap on the shoulder of someone with post-traumatic stress disorder). At its best, touch brings the toucher and the one touched into a shared union of feelings, of pleasure, and sometimes of communion. Of course, we cannot be in the world without touching and being touched; touch is essential to our well-being—the sensation of touch to our safety and our joy and sentient touch to our humanity.

Writing, like touch, allows us to perceive what we are feeling and sensing. Unlike the unheard tree falling in the forest, we know writing, even if unread, affects us, the writer. It may satisfy, challenge,

or frustrate us as it engages us in meaning and allows us to express and sort out feelings, often saving the world from having to withstand our rantings, confusion, or pain. The process itself of writing can be healing, both through the actual doing of it and through looking back at one's own growth. Writing, albeit an action, like touch, is also a way of knowing and learning. Writing can enable internal cognitive processes to develop, self-organize, and sometimes mature. And, like touch, writing enables us to communicate with the world outside our head. Here writing has a further reach than touch, moving beyond those nearby, to those remote both known and unknown, and to those in an unimaginable future. We may start out writing for ourselves, to “get out” our feelings, to sort out our experiences, to figure out our analysis of something, and with time and experience, use this writing to engage in a dialog with family, colleagues, or a whole world of readers with shared interests. This last kind of writing has become a professional duty for academics, an onerous and sometimes odious requirement that forces us, unwillingly, back onto ourselves. And more affirmingly, writing appreciated by an expanded world of readers can be an enormous source of gratification that sends us back to the keyboard or the lined yellow pad. Most of the time, writing like touching is playing many roles

simultaneously. Of course, we don't think about all these functions of writing when we sit down and boot up. We are answering bureaucratic emails, expressing frustration with dysfunctional systems, well-wishing and condoling, all within a few minutes, then moving on to task work, and finally approaching the “What am I doing here?”

Why do I write? To answer that, I need to think about how writing works for me, works in my life, or doesn't. Sometimes I write because I am brimming over, and writing is a way to let it out. It comes fast and furious, usually reasonably coherent and self-contained. My most successful single pieces have come from this energy. Sometimes I write because I am the only person who can write the thing I have to say—no one is going to say it ahead of me, beat me to the punch. I take as my mantra for this kind of writing my spouse Richard's assessment: “You have prepared your whole life to write this!” Sometimes I write to figure out what I think. This is the opposite of the “make an outline of what you want to say, then fill in the sections” school of writing. This is the “I don't know what I want to say or what I think until I write it down” school

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of writing. Where I get to is not the destination I would have dreamed up. This is “creative” writing not in the sense of stories and poems but in the sense of making something new out of thin air. Here the writing-as-touch simile is much like the sculptor’s hands bringing forth a partly imagined figure from a humble block of clay. The figure emerges from my hands into the world where it can affect others. This writing serves my multiple voices: my personal experience of myself, my family, and my work over time; the feeling self that witnesses and expresses sadness and hurt, and sometimes joy; and my professional self explaining, telling, teaching.

But sometimes the relevant question is not “Why do I write?” but “Why can’t I write?” How did I get into this mess—obliged to write and even asked to produce a piece on why I write?

I am mortified that having written about “making time to write,” having given courses on writing for medical folks, and then, having taken a 6-month sabbatical ostensibly to write a manuscript, I find myself ducking and dodging, doing anything but writing. I clean off desks, sort electronic photos, organize electronic bookmarks, encounter and deal with computer hassles—some of my least favorite activities, all in the service of not writing. Here not writing is most like the numbness of not feeling; I know I am touching things but I can’t feel it, the nerve endings are

deadened. I try various ways, like shaking my hands, to get the feeling back—take notes on all the articles I have accumulated, get the relevant books and take notes on them, meet with research assistant, and try to lurch forward from the material she has dug up. I know all the tricks. Write for x hours a day. Require yourself to produce two pages a day. Set the kitchen timer for 10 minutes. Write about how you are doing with the writing (this piece is that strategy). Do a timed portion of free writing. These activities are like the pianist fooling around with old rhythms and tunes, hoping that a new melody will spontaneously emerge once the fingers are warmed up to the feel of the keys—using touch as a “way in.” And then there is the relational strategy: find a writing buddy or a writing group, or create one if none exists. Carve out a chunk of time from your busy life and commit it to writing—this time today is that protected space for me. And now my butt is on the line.

What is that line? Like others, I worry about failure: What if I can’t do it? How would it be to give up? To just have the rest of my life and not do The Thing I Said I Was Going to Do? And that leads to the sorry motivation of writing out of shame. Perhaps the drive to avoid deep shame is stronger than the angst that I can’t do it. Perhaps the fear of exposure as an impostor is far more intolerable than just grinding it out. Perhaps the fear of

disappointing those who have supported me makes me feel I have to slog onwards through the Slough of Despond whether I want to or not. Here fear of touching parallels fear of writing: what will happen if I don’t touch (I exclude myself from the relation with the other and lose the possibility of connection); what might happen if I do touch (I might be pushed away, denied, or misinterpreted as patronizing or overly familiar.) More wholesomely, perhaps the self-defined version of myself as the one who must do the hardest things, must overcome obstacles and prove myself, perhaps that’s who keeps me going when the going gets tough. Like the athlete taking on the most difficult challenge, using the proprioception of the whole body to excel, pushing through the pain to where the body feeling becomes pleasure, I must take the writing past the point of pain to the satisfaction of well-executed skill. Finally, I remind myself, perhaps because I do actually believe it, that writing, like touch, is healing. And then quietly, when I am not really thinking about it, the sensations align themselves, the hands and feet work together, and I find that the clutch engages, and I have slipped into writing gear without really paying attention.

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