

# Writing Alone, Together

By BONNIE TSUI

July 7, 2014 8:20 pm

Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

For the better part of my writing life, I've been alone. By this I mean I have written alone, spending my days in the kind of voluntary solitary confinement that is necessary to the business of getting the right words out of my head in the right order.

“Until it exists, writing has not really begun.” This from John McPhee, in an essay on writers' block. To make a piece of writing exist, I've had to make myself disappear, to a place where people were scarce and things undone — a raft of dirty dishes, a pile of mail, an unreturned phone call — could be eluded.

Am I a recluse? Far from it. I love to punctuate my writing days with people; I go for lunch dates, drinks with friends. But the idea of being around other writers while they — and, theoretically, I — work had long seemed silly, romantic, not me.

I'd once spent three years working at a magazine, and I certainly didn't miss the office part of it. Where others saw community in the cubicles, I saw drama and distraction. Plus, I admit that I have some anxiety about being around other people who write for a living. I would worry in the way that a nerdy, self-conscious teenager would: *What if they don't like me? What if they don't think I'm smart?* And worse: *What if they're better than I am?* Envy can breed pernicious doubt, and I tried to avoid any situation that might steer me into self-loathing. A decade ago, I left New York, and with it the instant literary milieu

that comes from being associated with a magazine. At the time I wasn't writing very much in — or outside of — my job as an editor, and I felt like a fraud.

It wasn't until I came to San Francisco that I became myself as a writer, and that independence suited me. I was in control, but I was also protective of my work, and competitive. I had an irrational fear of having my ideas poached. Sometimes, for company, I paired up for writing dates with pals in grad school who were toiling away on dissertations on Latin-American history, or the neurobiology of mice. Their academic, alien worlds were light-years away from mine; the distance made it feel safe to talk about our work with each other.

For years, I resisted the fact that, as my friend Dan once put it, San Francisco is crawling with writers. That is, until I started meeting some. They started to invite me to things. I started to like them.

Two years ago, I felt what I imagined to be a pull toward a larger whole: a hive, if you will, busy with the convivial hum of others at work. I liked writing. I liked people. I was ready to try mixing the two, as counterintuitive as it seemed. I accepted a friend's offer to share an office at a longtime writers' collective and began writing in the company of others a few days a week. My officemate was a journalist for *The Economist*. My neighbor through one wall was a prizewinning poet; through the other wall resided a writer for *The New Yorker*. I liked the idea of their smart, accomplished, hardworking juju lingering in the air when I got there in the mornings. Where once I doubted, I was now open to being a member of what people said was the best writing community in the city.

I'm still wrestling with what all of this means. When we write, we are alone. So what does it mean to write in fellowship?

Some things are not as I imagined. People are startlingly generous with their time, opinions, contacts, suggestions. I am amazed at how gifted they are at the art of making what is inherently a solitary pursuit a social one. Writing conferences, writing workshops, writing classes; book clubs, book parties, book readings. Performances. Fund-raisers. Things that involve alcohol. Things that don't. We are a small social-media army, emailing, tweeting, and Facebooking about the community's work at a moment's notice.

Some things are as I feared. The ego needs a little crushing, and gets it. But I've found that the success of others brings me delight — they have become friends, after all. And it brings the motivation that I need.

As for the writing itself: I spend more time talking, which makes me a faster and better writer. This is not as weird as it sounds. My *modus operandi* of many years had been to work through ideas by writing. It sounds good, but what it meant in actuality was a lot of unfocused writing that went in circles. I'd struggle and spiral, elaborately, miserably, into a corner, before realizing that none of the writing was particularly good because I hadn't thought through my ideas carefully enough. In the conversation about ideas — the clarification of an argument, the identification of a larger point to be made, the firmer realization of what I want to say before I start crafting the prose — the writing that results is inevitably clearer and smarter. Because I have opened my mouth and practiced using the words, I now set them down with more care, precision and patience (one writer friend has said there's nothing like telling a lot of people a story, over drinks, for years, to refine its structure). I still think talking about writing before you actually do it is a bit like taking your clothes off. But I suppose I'm less afraid of people seeing me naked.

An unheralded plus of the shared writing space is the joy of *not* talking about writing. As much as I've debated interview strategies and grammar preferences, I've also discussed having babies, home-buying, riding a bike to work, the best swimming pools, that good lunch place on the corner. In short, I've talked about life. The kindness of others has made me more generous. It has reminded me of the reason I became a writer in the first place. We don't write in a vacuum. We write because we want to share a piece of ourselves with someone else.

About half the time, I still feel the need to struggle along, solo, and I do. But sometimes I channel my peers in the community. *What would he question about this line? What would she like about the next?* "I" has become, at times, a comfortable "we." Strangely enough, this companionable chorus has pushed me to refine my own voice, helping it to emerge sharpened and true. Writing with others has helped me to be more, well, me.

*Bonnie Tsui, a member of the San Francisco Writers' Grotto, is the author of "American Chinatown." She is working on a book about swimming.*