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Mindfulness and Creative Writing in five lessons

What's the point?

What use is mindfulness for the creative writer?

A great deal! There are special synergies between the practices of mindfulness and creative writers. Mindfulness is all about learning to live in the present moment; it is a “learning process”, a pedagogy where you learn to become more aware of what is happening right now. Conversely, the “present moment” is often a rich resource for writers who use their observations of experience to inform their creative work. Writers are especially receptive to their thoughts and sensations in ways which resemble the practice of mindfulness (Shamas & Maker 2018: 131).

Definitions

There is often confusion about what exactly mindfulness is. Having practised mindfulness for several years now, attended training sessions and read widely about it, I believe one of the best ways of thinking about mindfulness is to divide it into both formal and informal practices:

- **Formal mindfulness** involves deliberately set aside time to meditate or focus upon sensations in your body and mind. It is probably what most people associate mindfulness with: sitting in a chair or lying on the floor and focusing on your breathing, becoming aware of the river of thoughts and feelings within you (Hinley et al. 2015).
- **Informal mindfulness** is about learning to live as fully as you can in the moment, becoming aware of the sensations in your body; the smells, textures, temperatures, tastes, sounds, sights, thoughts and feelings both within and outside. Informal mindfulness can be practised anywhere; as soon as you “switch on” to the present moment in an accepting and non-judgemental way you are practising this form of mindfulness (Hanley et al. 2015).

Creative writing and sensory writing

Informal mindful practices are perhaps most familiar to creative writers. This is, after all, the source from which many writers mine much of their “raw material”; they observe and immerse themselves in different environments, taking close note of the way their senses engage with the world around them. They then proceed to evoke those environments in their work, drawing on their sensory experience. Much of the best writing puts you fully “in the moment”: you can feel the young Wordsworth rowing his boat in the looming shadows of the Lake District mountains; you are with

Mrs Ramsay as she listens to you in *To the Lighthouse*; you feel Larkin's night terrors in his poem "Aubade"; you are part of multi-cultural London in Zadie Smith's fiction. This writing has emerged from authors who have deeply engaged with the present moment in their own lives and then sought to creatively communicate their experiences on the page (Nalbantian 1994).

Learning to live and write

However, the practice of mindfulness is quite different from "being a writer" in several important ways. Mindfulness is not about trying "get anywhere": the whole point is that you immerse yourself in the present moment and acknowledge that you are "complete and whole" right now; you don't have to do anything else (Kabat-Zinn 2013: 175-92). A writer, on the other hand, can frequently be very goal-oriented and will seek out experiences in order to enrich their creative work (Flower & Hayes 1981). In this sense, being mindful and being a writer are different. Yet there is a paradox here which many writers are aware of: often artists do their most creative work when they "switch off" and "let things be" (Elwood et al. 2017). I would like to argue that practising mindfulness can enrich a writer's life in many ways. The lessons that follow are aimed at writers who would like to try to be mindful, suggestions taken from my own experiences.

Lesson one: being in the moment

Why not develop your ability to live in the moment more? Stop, acknowledge and accept the present moment when you can. Notice the sensations of the air against your face, how your head, chest, abdomen, legs and/or any other parts of your body feel; the scents, sounds and textures that create the world for you.

Then have a go at writing freely about your experiences; write what you want, whatever comes into your head. As is the case with free writing, set a manageable time-limit. The only rule is that you have to keep writing (Rebegea, C. 2013).

When you have finished, ask yourself what you have learned from doing this. What have you noticed about the world that you weren't aware of before? This moment of reflection is important and at the heart of mindful practice, which aims to get you to "think about your thinking", or in behaviour psychology parlance, be "meta-cognitive" (Hussain 2015).

Lesson two: meditation and writing

Try to set aside 5 or 10 minutes to meditate before you write and see what effect that this has on your practice. There are many ways to meditate; Williams and Penman's book *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world* (2011) and Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living* (2013) offer some simple methods explained in clear English. I learnt to meditate by following the CD instructions in Williams and Penman's book, and then developed my own personalised practice, which involves meditating twice a day. Observing how you are breathing without forcing anything is a simple but endlessly fascinating process; your breath is life, a "bridge between the mind and body" (Hanh 1999: 23).

Sometimes explanations of how to meditate can become enmeshed in "mystical" ideas – which is fine if you are interested in these issues – but can be off-putting for people who are sceptical. My preferred way is to follow my breathing using the advice Kabat-Zinn provides (2013: 41-53).

There is now considerable evidence that regular meditation can "calm" the mind: it appears that mindfulness meditation in particular helps participants produce "alpha" waves in the brain which

can improve mood and receptivity, particularly if the participants have been experiencing high levels of anxiety (Kerr et al. 2011; Nair et al. 2017). Such meditations can produce the conditions for “flow”: a state of mind which switches off the internal editor and gives you the space just to write “freely” (Goh 2016; Lebuda et al. 2016). Meditation training appears to improve participants’ creative thinking and performance. One of the biggest research reviews of mindfulness and creativity states: “although famous creators are sometimes absentminded, creativity seems to require mindfulness” (Lebuda et al. 2016: 24).

I have certainly found meditating before writing leads to more productive writing sessions on the whole. I am better able to concentrate and feel more confident in following my intuitions. Above all, I find that I am calmer and more patient if I have meditated a little before writing: thus the whole process feels less fraught, less tense.

Lesson three: mindful reading

Mindful reading involves being fully present with what you are reading. There are many ways to read mindfully, but as a start I would recommend these steps.

1. Take a moment to focus on your breathing and your bodily sensations before embarking on your reading session.
2. Notice the textures of the device you are reading on. Is it a book or a screen? Notice the way the light plays on the page; feel the weight, smell and covering of your reading device.
3. Now, being conscious of your breathing, start reading your material slowly. If you want, read the words aloud, or use your finger to follow the text. Stop every few sentences and shut your eyes, considering the meaning of what you have read, returning to concentrating upon your breathing if you lose focus.
4. Take your time. Read and re-read if necessary. If you are repeatedly distracted, be patient and kind with yourself, telling yourself it’s OK to feel confused, impatient, stupid etc. The point is that you accept the way your reading material makes you feel, whatever those feelings are.
5. When you have finished reading, take a moment to shut your eyes and just be with the words you have read.

Reflect upon how you found the process. What effect did it have on you?

Lesson four: overcoming difficulties

Creative writers can be afflicted by mental ill-health or challenging feelings (Macrobert 2012). Research shows that regular mindful practices can help alleviate depression and other mental disorders (Kabat-Zinn 2013: 427-9). There are many reasons why creative writers can become afflicted by mental ill-health. For example, the creative process necessarily involves writers getting “stuck” and finding it difficult at times to find inspiration. Writers can become depressed because of a perceived inability to produce certain desired effects in their writing, or to achieve the success they want in the wider world. Mindfulness can help writers acknowledge these difficulties, accept that they have them, and then help them arrive at their own solutions. A vital part of the process in overcoming difficulties is the “meta-cognitive” moment when the problem is at first “acknowledged” and then “accepted”.

As a first step, a writer needs to become aware of what the problem is with a piece of writing or with their processes. They then should acknowledge these issues, articulating their problems in meaningful language. Frequently, difficulties occur when an unhappy person “represses” their

unease and refuses to acknowledge they have a problem. The second step is to “accept” that there are negative feelings about the issue. This acceptance is a vital part of the mindfulness process; it can involve meditating on the problem and telling yourself that it’s OK to feel bad, and noticing the bodily sensations that happen when this problem is brought to the forefront of your mind (Kabat-Zinn 2013: 411-429).

Lesson five: nurturing compassion

Related to the point above is the idea, already discussed, that with mindfulness we are all “complete and whole” now. We don’t need to write the great novel, an earth-shattering poem, or enjoy huge worldly success to be “worthy” or “deserving”. I have found that I have been kinder to myself since practising mindfulness, and learnt to “self-soothe” in more genuine and healing ways. There is a powerful meditation, derived from the Buddhist tradition, which requires you to say a mantra in which you wish kindness and ease of being on yourself, on people close to you, people you have neutral feelings towards, on your enemies, and then finally everyone in the world and all living beings (Kabat-Zinn 2013: 140-142). This meditation can be extremely emotional. I suspect too many people find it difficult to wish themselves well, or to feel any love for themselves. I have found practising this meditation has helped me be more compassionate, and I’ve discovered that it’s made me, in my own opinion, a subtler writer. I am less inclined to create characters and situations which are not “lived in”; the people I write about feel (to me at least) less like “devices” to get the narrative from A to B, but more like living, breathing human beings. I think the simple reason for this is that I generally think more deeply than I used to about what other people are feeling. I am much less judgemental than I used to be; I am less likely to dismiss people and situations as “beneath my interest”.

Everything is potentially of interest if you are being mindful. Mental hierarchies are peeled away, and even when you are being judgemental, you are aware of your judgements. You see them as what they are: not hard, objective facts but passing thoughts.

Conclusions

Above all, writing and mindfulness are “practices”. You become mindful by practising mindfulness and you become a writer by writing. While I am aware that I have only scratched the surface of this topic here, I hope I have shown that there are ways in which mindful practices can inform writing practices in both subtle and obvious ways.

Suggested Reading

As a starting point, I would recommend Penman and William’s book (listed below) as it contains the clearest instructions on how to develop mindful practices. Penman has also written a book, *Mindfulness for Creativity: Adapt, create and thrive in a frantic world* (Little Brown, 2015) which is helpful. The definitive book is Kabat-Zinn’s *Full Catastrophe Living* (listed below) which is definitely worth reading carefully if you want to delve further into mindfulness. There are many websites to look at but I have found <https://www.mindful.org/> the most readable.

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