



THE WRITER'S COTTAGE

Sometimes the creative process requires complete immersion. Author Charlotte Wood takes us inside the shadowy world of the writer's retreat

When American writer Joan Didion is close to finishing a book, she once said, she has to sleep in the same room with her pages. “Somehow the book doesn’t leave you when you’re asleep right next to it,” she told the Paris Review.

I this feeling, which happens to me at various stages of a novel’s development. It’s an almost bodily craving for intense and total immersion in the work, day and night – and it’s why, every so often, I leave my city home and venture into the wilds for a writing retreat.

Artists have always been attracted to interludes of quiet and solitude, and many believe social withdrawal is the only way to get work done. From Henry David Thoreau’s ‘life in the woods’ to Jonathan Franzen’s super-gluing his Ethernet port to block the internet, all writers know that at a certain point, they must burrow deep into their own consciousness, forget the outside world, and work.

The Internet has made this all but impossible in daily life, especially for those of us prone to procrastination. I love technology and I’m a sociable creature, so the lure of email, Twitter, Facebook and other media is hard to resist.

But like many writers, I also harbour a deep fear of my own work. I don’t procrastinate in any other part of life: I know my avoidance is fear, pure and simple. Fear of the blank page, of failure – most of all perhaps, a fear of what my own imagination reveals about me.

For all these reasons, a week or a month away in a quiet place allows a sustained depth of

contemplation that is much harder to get among the pleasant distractions of home. In the past twelve months I’ve done three writing retreats. Two of these have been in established artists’ retreats: at Bundanon, the idyllic property donated to Australia by the painter Arthur Boyd; and Varuna, the former home of writer Eleanor Dark, in the Blue Mountains of NSW.

Both Bundanon and Varuna work on the principle that complete isolation may be less inspiring than what I’ve come to call ‘solitude in company’. Each artist has their own working space (at Bundanon, the Writer’s Cottage is entirely self-contained) but the company of other residents is

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available if one chooses. At Varuna, writers eat dinner together each night, often by the open fire. I have been resident at Bundanon and Varuna several times in my career, and made powerful progress every time.

It’s no accident that these centres – like their famous American counterparts Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony, the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland’s Annaghmakerrig and the Bellagio Center on the shores of northern Italy’s Lake Como – are established in serene natural settings. Artists and writers have always sought to work in beautiful places. The famed creativity researcher,

Prof Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, writes that while “a great view does not act like a silver bullet”, nevertheless “when persons with prepared minds find themselves in beautiful settings, they are more likely to find new connections among ideas, and new perspectives”.

But you don’t need to be accepted into Yaddo or Bundanon to benefit from the boost a creative retreat can give. In fact, my richest writing periods have been in a self-styled annual ‘retreat’ at a rented beach house in the company of four close writing friends. It was during one of these weeks that I had the most astounding experience of my creative life, which I now realise met Prof Csikszentmihalyi’s criteria for “the flow experience” – a rare and miraculous state of complete absorption, ease and control; a sense of creative transcendence almost religious in its power.

But even the best writing retreat is not all white gauze curtains and Zen flow states. Indeed, my retreat departure days often start with a panicked desire to abandon the whole idea, stay home and make chutney. But I push on, and after arrival and an initial few hours of blissful excitement, retreats tend to cycle through phases of panic and productivity, boredom and breakthrough. Over the years I’ve become familiar with these rhythms, and now accept the unproductive hours as part of a greater productive cycle. And to help get the most from the time away, I’ve recently formulated for myself this list of things to remember.

TEN TENETS FOR A CREATIVE RETREAT

1. Stick with one week. As I discovered in five- and three-week residencies this year, long stretches of time can turn out to be comparatively less productive, as the tendency to squander my time is greater. A week is long enough to sink in, but not so long that you lose momentum.

2. Remember the Professor’s “prepared minds”. I call this “tilting the mind” towards the retreat. In the month or so leading up to departure, even when not working on my book, I start consciously thinking of it as I do the menial stuff of life – cooking, sitting on the bus, doing the laundry. It prepares the subconscious for work, and opens the mind to new possibilities and connections.

3. Make a list of creative tasks. It’s an irritating paradox that once I get the time I’ve so deeply craved, panic can easily set in. Minutes can turn to hours of futile staring at the blank screen, plagued by guilt at the wasted time. Rather than vaguely aiming to “work on my book”, I now take TV writer Joss Whedon’s advice and get specific about what I want to achieve. A list of scenes to write was my lifesaver on my recent week away. Bare-bones is fine - mine went like this: “1. Mushrooms – collecting, testing. 2. Hetty’s doll. 3. Yolanda – runaway girl. 4. Corridors – space stuff. 5. They have been looked at in the night.” I don’t have to stick to the list and often don’t, but it’s a lovely safety net when the blank dread strikes.

4. Disconnect. This is crucial: I set up an email autoreply, tell my Facebook and Twitter friends I’m off for a week and change my voicemail to say I can’t be contacted. The best week I ever had was in a house with no mobile reception for wireless access. It’s best to turn the Internet off and limit contact with home to essential calls. The idea is to retreat, remember?

5. Cook in advance. In our little group we make solo breakfasts and lunches from the fridge, but eat together in the evenings. Dinners are made and frozen in advance (think delicious slow-cooked ragus, curries, casseroles), so actual cooking is limited to boiling pasta or tossing a salad. And a retreat is not the time to care about diet – hard thinking is seriously exhausting, so keep good food and drink plentiful.

6. Focus on the work, even in conversation. Part of the turbo-charged power of the retreat-in-company is inspiring talk with other artists. Reporting on progress (or lack of it), asking and answering perceptive questions, offering fresh approaches – all this often leads to a problem solved through talking. For this to work brilliantly, you need the right companions – who respect that each artist’s process is different, who won’t interfere, and yet are lateral thinkers and clever questioners. (Note: such friends are hard to find. When you get them, guard them with your life.)

7. Keep at it. Despite point 6, don’t kid yourself: hanging round the kitchen hoping for fun morning chitchat won’t get the work done, and will be cause for regret later. Hard work really is its own reward.

8. Take a walk. Even a short walk each day helps, not only to stretch the legs and spine, but as Saint Augustine said: ‘It is solved by walking.’ The solution to a tricky problem, or a new way of attacking it, will often come during a thoughtful walk alone.

9. Sleep - early and often. My routine on retreat is early to bed and early to rise, with lots of napping during the day. Australian screenwriter David Roach has spoken about “protecting the liminal state” between sleep and full wakefulness, a highly creative time. On my last retreat I began each

day reading *To The Lighthouse*, then took Woolf’s rhythms and eye into my work for a few hours. In mid-morning or mid-afternoon I would nap, and on waking, stumble straight to my keyboard and begin writing. At times I felt I was actually writing in a dreaming state, which thrust me into stranger, more original ideas and connections than I would otherwise have made.

10. Pack inspiration, not clothes. Nobody cares if you wear the same jeans and sweater for seven days in a row, but the right reading can transform the week. My group’s pooled books recently included the aforementioned Woolf, an array of *Paris Review* interviews, photographs of Louise Bourgeois’ disturbing sculptures, Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life*, and books by James Wood, Hilary Mantel, Shakespeare, the Norton Anthology of Poetry and Amy Bloom’s short stories. But be aware that books are often more talismanic than anything – the real inspiration comes from the depth of one’s contemplation.

One last thing to remember: a creative retreat is not a holiday, no matter how impossible this can be to convey to envious friends and workmates. Making art, thinking deeply, creeping your cursor across the screen towards first draft or a final one is not easy. It’s demanding. If it goes well, you will come home exhausted – but maybe also having glimpsed your real potential in the richest, most exhilarating work you’ve ever done.

www.bundanon.com.au
www.varuna.com.au

Recommended reading:

David Roach: *The Writer’s Room Interviews*
Joan Didion: *The Paris Review*
Joss Whedon: *Guidelines for Getting it Done* ◊