

WRITING THERAPY

Charlotte Wood suffered for her art, until an old friend provided wise counsel and a great, liberating epiphany



For a long time I have carried around with me this remark by Patrick White:

"I am constantly meeting ladies who say, 'how lovely it must be to write', as though one sat down at the *escritoire* after breakfast and it poured out like a succession of bread and butter letters, instead of being dragged out, by tongs, a bloody mess, in the small hours."

Why did I like this so much, with its snobbery, its sneering derision toward *ladies*? Because I recognised it. I know the cold metal of those tongs, I thought. I know those hours. I greeted it with the same gut-clenching recognition I did Nicholson Baker's chronically procrastinating poet, Paul Chowder in *The Anthologist*. When Chowder's long-suffering wife, exasperated, finally begs him to "Just write it!", "I said I couldn't write it, it was too awful too huge, it was like staring at death."

Writing as violent birth, as approaching death – this is absurd melodrama, high farce. Of course it is. And yet ... at times my writing process has been so full of fear that descriptions like these are the only ones that come close to the truth.

Last year, working on my novel on the other side of the country from my home, I fell into a pit of devastating loneliness. I'd looked forward to this residency for months, as any sane writer would: Weeks and weeks of uninterrupted time alone, being paid, to work on my book. So maybe it's no surprise it was here I experienced the deepest crisis of my writing life. Dread is not too strong a word for what I felt rising in me.

I had always heard writers speak of the isolation of this profession, yet over 15 years, publishing four novels and a book of non-fiction, I had never understood what they meant. But during this time I came to know it well. The world of my novel – an isolated prison for late-teenaged girls – and what seemed the terrible deadness of my writing had delivered me to a place of complete despair. I had never felt so alone.

This is strange, because my writing self has always been familiar with fear. Hence my assiduous collection of quotes like those above; they make me feel less like a freak. But in those dark weeks I felt freakish all right. My work was grim and bleak, cruel and sick and degraded, and so it plainly followed that I, unable to separate myself, was cruel and sick and degraded too.

Lying there on my bed in my nice apartment by the sea, I cried in shame. And in weariness: I was so

tired of being afraid. For the first time since I began writing I thought, very clearly: What the hell is this all for? Why would a sane person *do this to herself*?

I want to be clear that this is not a story of illness and cure, nor of damnation and redemption. But my emergence, in this time, from a state of paralysing fear into one of rich, calm creativity still feels damn near a religious conversion. Because during those weeks I began to find an answer to questions about my purpose and vocation through some of the most profound conversations of my life, conversations that led me out of my romantic attachment to suffering as central to an artist's life.

My saviour was a woman called Alison Manning, an old friend whose work had taken her from journalism into the field of mindfulness and psychology. I don't have a good description of what Alison does for me, and for other writers, because any of the practical explanatory words – "counselor", "consultant", "coach" – are too trivial, too corporate or hideously self-helpy to encompass the depth, the intuitive richness and complexity of revelations she has set in motion for me.

I would never have sought "psychological help" for the existential problem I found myself with

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during that time. Not because of any shame about getting help (I have often seen a psychologist in my personal life), but because, had I presented to a GP or shrink with my symptoms then – deep dread, profound self-loathing, a sense of utter futility – I assumed the prescription would have been antidepressants and/or to chuck out my book and be free. But I knew my feelings were *writing* feelings, not personal ones, though it would have been inconceivable for me to separate the two.

I can't now remember much of what Alison said to me. I remember talking and talking though, lying on the bed with the phone in my hand, often tearful, sometimes seized by astonished silence at what I had just said, and what it meant.

The epiphany I had won't sound special to anyone else. This is the nature of creative epiphanies, in my experience: They go to the heart of one's own work – and only one's own – so specifically that to anyone else they sound either meaningless or so obvious as to be laughable.

And yet the liberation can be extraordinary. Mine was this: That the stuff that so frightened and shamed me in this work was the stuff I had not read anywhere else, nor allowed myself to properly think. My survival instinct urged me to flee these ugly, violent thoughts, to smother and hide them. And yet the opposing, more powerful instinct, was an artist's one: To bring this ugliness into the light, to peer and poke at it and find out exactly what it was. The writer in me knew that somewhere hidden in this strange, grim stuff must be the art. Alison's questions to me slowly revealed that, far from trying to rid myself of it, perhaps I *needed* this weird, ugly stuff. Perhaps it was, in fact, *all I had to offer* as an artist. The sludgy muck that so terrified me was the substance which would most glitteringly, if I was brave, reveal itself as the gold.

Other striking revelations followed during those weeks and the year-and-a-half since. I have learnt to separate my core self from my work – not in any splitting-off sense, but somehow calmly *accompanying* myself into each writing day. I've begun to conceive of my writing hours as a strangely beautiful circus tent where, only once my bags of loathing and derision are left on the

ground outside, and only if I'm attentive and observant and quiet, I can watch mesmerising things unfold. I've learnt that preparing my mind before sleep at night will more likely yield jewels the next day. I have found a deep, rich joy once again in my work.

I said earlier that this isn't a story of cure, and it can't be. I will always find myself in tunnels of this or that kind of despair, because every book is different, and every stage of every book is another corridor into the unknown. But now there is something oddly consoling in this knowledge. Writing is hard. It should be. But with help I've learnt to understand the creative mind not as a frightening monster to wrestle down or smother, but a pond to go diving in – sometimes for junk, but sometimes riches – over and over again.

Alison Manning consults with writers in groups or individually. Details and podcasts of some conversations between her and Charlotte at www.amindofonesown.com.