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The Pain of Writing, and Not Writing

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, July 19th, 2017

On the plane to Europe I developed sciatica down my left leg. Actually, it started three days before. Dominique and I had done a hot yoga class, which wasn't really yoga, just an excuse to use the name, and doing side kicks I felt something odd. The next day Dominique said it was my piriformis getting tight, constricting around the nerve. Somewhere over Greenland I decided it was sciatica.

I had heard people complain about sciatica before but I didn't really know what they were going through. It felt like a continuous electrified bridge, spanning from my low back to my hip, from my hip to my knee, from my knee to my ankle. I couldn't sleep, couldn't sit, couldn't stand without pain. Walking was OK. Normally I would have accepted that I had to tough it out—as if there were a choice—but I was here in the south of France, now, in St. Paul de Vence, with the intention of working on my next book. Problem was, it hurt so much that writing repelled me.

Of course writing often repels me. It's solitary, anti-social, sedentary, and boring. To combat this, I dictated my first book into the voice recorder of my phone. I had done the outline first. Then I paced around the empty house talking to the palm of my hand. After every chapter, I stopped and uploaded the audio file to the Cloud so in the event of malfunction I would lose at most only one section. When I was done, I emailed twelve audio files to a woman in Minnesota. She had listed herself on a website for freelancers, and the reviews for her transcriptions were good. I wanted a native English speaker, even though there were people in India and Pakistan who claimed they had perfect English and would do it for less.

Minnesota did OK, but despite my specific instructions she did not format the document properly. The words were pretty much accurate, but they splayed wrong on the page. Paragraphs were off, indents had no logic, and margins were inconsistent. On top of that, she had put two spaces after each period instead of one.

I spent a day reformatting until I had what Anne Lamott would call a shitty first draft. Good. From there I was able to start working on it. Writing is awful but revisions are fun. They're like working out a puzzle—clarifying here, simplifying there, knocking out words that just eat space, deciding at times to substitute an unexpected word to give a paragraph more punch.

As in my experience of my life, things do not always stay the same. Not all books want to be dictated. As I attempted subsequent writing, I realized that the physical discomfort of sitting for a long time was keeping me away. I bought a treadmill desk after a friend of mine, the writer Susan Orlean, raved about hers. The contraption looks like a standard treadmill except that its motor is

designed to operate for hours at low velocity. Regular treadmills would overheat; this one doesn't. Also, it does not have an incline adjustment—it stays flat. A desktop stands on legs at its front. I put my laptop on a stand on the desk, at ergonomic eye level, and pushed Start. Soon I discovered I could type with good accuracy at 2.1 miles per hour. This is about half normal walking speed, but writing is a matter of the long haul. If I write for four hours, I will walk 8.4 miles.

The treadmill desk solved my revulsion at the sedentary aspect of writing, but not my revulsion at writing itself. Revulsion is, I admit, too strong a word. Revulsion should be reserved for judgmental people, the arrogant, entitled rich, and Donald Trump. But I feel a definite disconnection from writing as evidenced by how much I do to avoid it. In this, I have learned, I am like other writers. When I tell you, "I am working on my next book," I actually mean, "I am not working on my next book," because if I were working on it I wouldn't be with you talking about it.

I arrived in St. Paul de Vence with a list of things I wanted to write and sciatica in my left leg. St. Paul is a medieval hill town, 20 minutes up the mountain from Nice airport (40 minutes in traffic), that has long been a refuge for artists and an artists' colony. It has been called the Left Bank of the south of France; Picasso, Chagall, Braque, Miró, all sought freedom here, creative nourishment and, at times, political safety.

Each year, when I am able, I join playwright Donald Freed and his wife Patty, and theatre-makers Damian Cruden and Mandy Smith (they are also married), for a week of connection and repose. We stay at Le Hameau, a hotel converted from an 18th century farmhouse, that's a 15-minute walk from the village. I can't afford this as a permanent lifestyle, but it is glorious to live here for one week.

Surrounded by history and beauty, I had planned to write. But when I set to it the first morning the pain down my left leg was unbearable. More than that, the discomfort was so distracting that I could not compose a thought.

A day passed. Here I was, on creative retreat, in sumptuous paradise, surrounded by sun and summer flowers, croissants and marmalade made from the orange trees on the property, and creative friends, and I could not bear to write. I Whatsapped Dominique a photo of pink roses, their petals opened past the moment of perfection, which somehow made them more beautiful. "I miss you darling," she sent back. "We just met, but I miss you so much. Or because we just met?" I didn't share my pain with her or talk about it—no one likes whining, not in dogs, not in people—but my friends noticed. So when Patty suggested I visit a masseur in the village, I made an appointment the next day.

To get there, I walked up the curving road, keeping an eye out (cars have a tendency to whip around the bend too fast), until I got to the arched stone entrance of St. Paul. From there I avoided the center with its steep, cobbled streets, and took to the perimeter, walking along the ramparts.

At the far end of St. Paul, as the ramparts start to curve back around the village, is the cemetery, where Chagall and his wife are buried, their gravesite covered always in stones and flowers. Opposite the cemetery was the small massage studio, so small that when I opened the door I was immediately greeted by the massage table. Only after that I saw Alexis, the masseur, a man in his mid-forties who, he told me, had traveled the world, studying shiatsu in Singapore and the East, then working in a dozen countries before coming home to marry and start a family.

* * *

“I hope you don’t mind me saying this,” Alexis said after the massage was over, “but I see things when I’m working.”

I understood that; I, too, am sensitive to energies, which I feel and sometimes see. When the children were born I saw energies often, like lights around their bodies. Sometimes I see the same energies superimposed on their adult faces, but over time and life that part of myself has receded.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Alexis said again. “But I feel the end of your marriage, how long ago was it? It is still with you. You need to let it go.”

In arcane studies of embodiment, the left side is the female side, and the back represents the past. A pain on my left side, toward the back, would mean there was something female in my past that was holding me back, and the fact that it was in my leg meant I needed to go forward, to move on.

The next day my leg felt better. Hot baths seemed to help. Four days later the pain had shrunk—now it was only in my left hip and calf, as if the bridge of connecting pain between these two landings had been drawn up. The discomfort was not entirely gone, but it was gone enough. Writing hurts even when there is no physical impediment; the will to ignore pain has something to do with the willingness to write.

Photo by Damian Cruden

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