

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Working Minds

Peter Clothier · Thursday, March 1st, 2012

Cultural Weekly recently caught up with Peter Clothier, an internationally-known writer who specializes in writing about art and artists. *Mind Work*, his newest book, has just been published by Parami Press.

✘ Peter, your book is called *Mind Work*, but do you really think our minds work?

Oh, yes. They work alright. The important question is whether we're going to ask them to work for us or allow them to work against us. Left to their own devices, they are easily controlled by our old wounds, habits and reactive patterns, and they can easily lead us in the wrong direction. They can mislead us into unquestioning beliefs about ourselves that are patently untrue, and that can cripple us without our knowing it—a belief, for example, that I am not smart, that writing is a difficult, unrewarding chore, that I'm unattractive or unlikeable, that I'll never succeed. All those clichés... On the other hand, properly trained to do those things I want it to, instead of leaving it to its own devices, the mind is the most powerful tool at my disposal. I myself use meditation as a way to keep it in training. It's a form of discipline that helps me through the difficult moments in my life.

This is your seventh book. What makes you keep writing?

I was about to say "old habit"! Which is true in a way, but it's only one part of the truth. I keep writing because I have countless questions about my life and the way I'm living it, and writing is my way to find—always provisional—answers. For many years my adage as a writer has been: "How do I know what I think 'til I see what I say?" It's a way of finding out what's "on my mind." Importantly, too, it's my way of discovering more about what it means to be a human being, and of sharing my humanity with others. It's about connection. I know creative people who insist they do it for themselves, in a culture where making one's work known is always problematic. I don't. I write for others to read—and I want them to write that way for me. I want them to tell me who they are, to share their humanity.

When did you come to Buddhism?

I first came to Buddhism about twenty years ago, at a time of great pain and turmoil in my life. I started out chanting, with the guidance of a friend, but soon discovered in silent meditation something more suited to my nature. I now have a daily practice of vipassana—so-called "insight"—meditation. And I still struggle with the idea of Buddhism as a religion. I'm a born skeptic, and rebirth is a hard one for me. What attracts me to Buddhism is not that it tells me what to believe, but that it requires me to keep asking the questions.

What book's on your bedside table right now?

Two books, in fact. *The Misleading Mind*, by Karuna Cayton, for review. Sounds like it's right up my alley, but I haven't started it yet. And *Luka and the Fire of Life*, a truly marvelous novel-length fairy tale by Salman Rushdie. I'm coming to it long after its publication, in good part

because I now have a baby grandson, Luka, now three months old. I see the “fire of life” in him.

You reveal a lot about yourself in this book, and one of the most memorable essays concerns you describing yourself as you look at yourself in the mirror. So we’ve gotta ask – boxers or briefs?

Okay, if it’s good enough for Bill Clinton, it’s good enough for me. Briefs. But in the essay, if you recall, I stood there naked. I wanted to take an honest, unvarnished look at it. The point was to remind myself eventually that my physical body “is not me, is not mine, is not who I am.” I love brevity in all its manifestations, by the way. All my essays are brief. But now here I am, going on...

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