



Already Taken.

"Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken." - Oscar Wilde.

One of the hardest parts about being a writer is dealing with the tangled mess of emotions that assaults you when you're reading something you love: there's a feeling of sheer joy in the lyricism of words well woven; a renewed awareness of the pure power wielded by these spidery ink-forms crawling across paper; a need to speak sentences out loud, just to make their presence tangible; and yet, layered into all these glories is the sinking feeling that your own literary aspirations have obviously been delusional — there's no way you could ever have penned any of the phrases that currently hold you in their thrall, which means, of course, that there's no way you could ever really be a writer.

The funny thing — funny, only when you take a step back; in the moment it is nothing short of tragic — is that this experience is common to most writers, even those whose work has been critically acclaimed. In fact, many great writers have talked about feeling similar emotions upon encountering lines they themselves have written in earlier years. There is almost always a niggling doubt that they will never be able to repeat the performance — that they will never again capture the magic.

And there, I think, lies the root of the problem. The act of writing is a sort of alchemy; every so often, you stumble upon gold, but there is no spell that will conjure it up for sure. Words, which on their own might seem unremarkable, come together to create shimmering sentences encrusted with meaning. But even when it is your own fingers the words roll from, you're never quite sure how the transformation happened. The glow seems to live in the empty spaces between words, nestling into certain crevices, while completely avoiding others. The aura of mystery remains. And so it is that while we sit, waiting for the enchantment to pour in from an unknown source, we are assailed with doubt and dread.

But perhaps there is another way to bide this time. I don't know if, in the spirit of mathematical theorems, there exists a 'necessary and sufficient' condition for good writing. But I do know that in order for it to stand a chance at all, you must feel alive when you write. Thoughts and emotions must be coursing through your veins, in order to be channeled into words that breathe and move on the page. Even at times when you can't seem to produce the latter, you can still fuel the former.

Each of us is a prism, cut slightly differently. Our journey through life shapes us, as do our loves and fears. For every one of us, there are some sights, smells, and sounds that run deep; objects or memories we hold dear; experiences that infuse us with joy; places that resonate with our souls; dreams that define us. All these things stoke the vital fires within us, making us feel more truly alive, filling us with things to say. And when one is immersed in feeling, there is no room anymore for constant critical assessments, or even to hold the emotions in — they just flow out, naturally, without conscious thought or fear.

Personally, I've always found that if, instead of stewing over my lack of talent, I put the angst aside and surround myself with what I love, I end up writing much better than I would have otherwise. Over the years, I've assembled a tool-kit of sorts — a list of tricks I use to unclog my creative pipes. Some of the items on this list are wishes, yet to be realized. Occasionally, I get to tick one off (like the hot-air balloon ride I was finally able to take, last summer), but even while they are still just possibilities, I like turning them over in my mind, enjoying the anticipation. In a similar vein are the memories I like to savor. Many years ago, I took to collecting souvenirs, simply to mark a pleasant day. Every once in a while, I go through this motley assortment of photographs, cards, receipts, and ticket stubs, and I am struck again by the vividness of the images they conjure. Each little piece of paper is a touchstone of sorts — each represents a moment of happiness. Also on my list are more tangible, repeatable experiences: walks I like to take, music that fills me with joy, favorite books to re-read, movies I loved as a child (the video equivalent of 'comfort food'), decadent desserts, people I love meeting, places to revisit.

No matter where I am, it is always possible to do something from 'The List'. All of these things are just springboards, of course, but they take me away from a place of critical judgment to a state of joy, where the essence of life surges through me. It is just a matter of time before the feelings overflow and leak through my fingers, onto the waiting paper or screen.

It took me a while to figure this out. But while it may be true that you can never write like anyone else, or even like the person you once were, it doesn't matter. If the voice in which you speak is really yours, it will automatically stand apart from the rest — distinct as a thumbprint. Write yourself onto the page. Seek out the experiences, old and new, that make you, you. Follow them where they lead, really *live* them, let them affect you, and then come back and tell a story as only you can. Each of us, as a prism, refracts incoming light differently, creating a distinctive spectrum. As long as the images are crisp and the colors ring true, there is room in literature for them all. To be a good writer, it is enough to simply be yourself. Which, of course, is just as well, because as Oscar Wilde said: "Everyone else is already taken."

Tasneem Zehra Husain is a theoretical physicist, writer and educator, currently living in Cambridge, MA. Tasneem has written numerous articles for newspapers and magazines, both in print and online, and contributed to anthologies of science writing for adults and children. She is a regular columnist for the award-winning blog 3quarksdaily.com. Her first popular science novel, *Only The Longest Threads*, will be published by Paul Dry Books in spring 2014.