

BELIEVING AND FLOW IN WRITING: BEYOND THE GAME

Ralph L. Wahlstrom

Department of English
Buffalo State College, 1300 Elmwood Avenue
Buffalo, NY 14222
United States of America

"Nothing on earth is more gentle and yielding than water, yet nothing is stronger. When it confronts a wall of stone, gentleness overcomes hardness; the power of water prevails" (Tao Te Ching, verse 78).

Imagine this: a classroom, where every day children spend one hour simply free writing, nothing more. Their only job is to write for that hour and to believe that they really have something to say. It's a foolish notion, I suppose. I'm not naïve. Children are not docile recipients of education. Schools are not open to openness. Teachers, even when they are willing, are not often in the position to take chances. And, of course, time is of the essence. Not enough time-too much to do-the Regents exams are coming up-we've got to get through chapter 6-not enough time to get through the lesson plan-not enough time to believe.

In 1973, Peter Elbow proposed a unique approach to argument in his book, *Writing Without Teachers*. In an exercise he called the believing game, Elbow presented a strategy for believing opposing viewpoints in order to become fully engaged in a writing task. The concept was simple enough on its face but complex in its implementation. Elbow proposed that we learn to forego the almost automatic western tendency of meeting an argument with a counter-argument. Instead, he suggested we work consciously to believe even those arguments with which we disagree the most adamantly. That is, we learn to listen rather than to leap to automatic judgment and rejection. In doing so, we are able to see more clearly the nuances of an opposing position and to understand the reasons behind the opposition. It doesn't mean we agree or fully accept the argument, but it allows us to be more open, more flexible, and more able to find resolution. All of us have a basic capacity to believe.

All children believe in the most outrageous things: a fairy with a tooth fetish; a gigantic rabbit who brings colored eggs and candy to your house; and, of course, a fat man in a bright red suit who shares a living space with small humanoids called elves, and who, with their help, makes toys. You know the story. To some of us this is a good thing, this believing in fantasy; to others it is silly or delusional. I leave your choice of sentiment about that to you, but fantasy demonstrates the power of believing, of suspending disbelief, and it is not limited to children. Believing allows us to see the weaknesses and strengths of opposing positions, ours, theirs, and others'. In doing so, we can see revealed the true nature of the disagreement and, most importantly, the common ground. In Elbow's believing game the approach is supple and resilient, and the resulting ability to absorb and bend is remarkably strong and provides deep insights. What does believing do for us, to us? To understand believing, we first should look at how we doubt.

Doubting

When your mother doubts your ability to do much, there's a good chance you won't do much. When your father keeps telling you, "You'll never amount to anything," you probably won't. There are exceptions. We all know the apocryphal story of the poor young man or woman who, upon being told "You can't do that-you'll never accomplish anything," sets out to prove the naysayers wrong and, *by golly*, succeeds beyond his or her wildest dreams. It can happen, but mostly it doesn't. Near where I live is a school for emotionally compromised children who have been told "You can't do that." They've been told "You're worthless," "I don't love you," "I don't want you," and worse, if that could be possible. These children rarely figure into that story about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. For these kids, doubting is a way of life.

Writers tend to be doubters. How often do you hear students say, "I'm not any good at writing," "I hate to write," "I never have anything worth saying,"? Of course, we hear this from our middle and high school students as well as from our college students, but we also hear it from English teachers. In fact, I hear it from my graduate students, mostly experienced English teachers. It's even likely we hear it from ourselves. We certainly hear doubts about students' abilities to write from the rare colleagues who simply have lost faith in their students, but even those of us who love our craft and still believe in our students often doubt their abilities.

We have an epidemic of doubting out there. And why not? As Peter Elbow points out, we early on acquire doubt as a mode of learning and teaching. In the doubting game we call upon our years of doubting and do the obvious, the expected. We are taught to debate opposing ideas almost from the crib. One position wins; the other loses. When faced with a problem we often look at two sides when there may be many, and we tend to label a position as “right” or “wrong,” approaching every issue as antagonists. We look for weaknesses in opposing positions and end up ignoring the problems in our own ideas because we don't see the need to explore others'. We're left with a limited picture and limited options. As Elbow says, "Since the doubting or arguing process invites people merely to criticize ideas they don't like, it permits them to stay insulated against any experience of alternative thinking" (Everyone Can Write 78). The doubting game is apparent in common sense, conventional wisdom, and in business as usual. The doubting game plays an important part in creating the “rigor mortis” so many would-be writers experience. The automatic critical response, the raised eyebrow, the urge to one-up, counter, defeat – all these are stones along the way, and they sometimes seem impossible to alter. But rock is more fragile than we think. We collect stones and pile them up to build walls; walls create castles, vaults, and prisons, and we hold tight to our perception of permanence and invulnerability. This is an illusion. The ruins of the Coliseum and Ostia by the Sea are impressive, but they are ruins. Doubting is useful only as long as we are open to believing, to moving and changing metaphorical stones.

Believing

Peter Elbow's believing game is largely focused on changing the way we see writing in general and argument in particular, but it also refers to changing the way we see the world and ourselves. The believing game is more than a rhetorical strategy. At its foundation is a philosophy that can guide our teaching and learning as well as our lives. The game asks us to believe in, or at least make room for the possible and the impossible. For the writer of argument, it is the possibility of many possibilities. For the project and proposal writer, it is the belief in success. For the creative writer, it is the belief in the power of the creative lie or in the music of the poem. Susan Perry tells us that believing in possibilities opens the writer to taking risks, to discovery and inspiration (39). We have to be open to the power of experience. We cannot fear failure. As Edward Albee said of Sam Shepard, "Sam was . . . somebody who was willing to fail and fail interestingly. And if you are willing to fail interestingly, you tend to succeed interestingly" (*Sam Shepard*). Writers must fail, and they we must believe in their failed writing, that it matters- that they and their words matter.

Robert Fritz, composer and author of *The Path of Least Resistance*, describes the need to believe as the tension between desire and resolution (83). Fritz proposes we ask a simple question: "What do I want?" (33). Next he tells us to avoid thinking about process because what we already know limits our choices. He writes "the creative process is filled with discovering what you do not know" (134). Fritz's third suggestion for establishing an open vision is to "separate what you want from questions of possibility"(135). In fact, very little seems possible if you "cancel and inhibit your vision" (135). Some of the most difficult issues we face are made that much more difficult because we are locked into what we "know" is possible. Consider the following example: We need energy to fuel our industry, our homes and our means of transportation. Oil is the energy source we use. Thus we need oil. We can't switch to alternative sources because . . . This reasoning strand is true according to the conventional discourse. We do not look outside of what we already know, so we approach the problem by presenting the usual picture. This is energy. This is what we do with energy. This is how we do it. This is what we need. Every assumption here is limited, but this kind of limited approach to a problem is what passes for argument more often than not.

On the other side of that same argument, when we argue against fossil fuels, coal, and nuclear energy without taking the time to reflect and believe, we risk falling into the same rigid doubting game. It may well be that these more traditional sources of fuel are more damaging than beneficial, but only through engaging in the believing game can we come to understand all of the facets of the argument. The believer must be able to see the possibilities, or at least, must be open to playing the Believing Game. As a simple example, when we watch a movie or read a story we willingly suspend disbelief and ease into the stream of the narrative, just as do those children who believe in the fat man. We make a bargain with the story to accept the fiction, the lies, and the impossible. We know ogres and fairies do not exist, but we allow them to live in fairytales. Of course, suspending disbelief about the motivations of an enemy is far more difficult than believing wizards can fly. But it is not impossible. The believing game creates space for dialogue, ideas, and imagination. Negotiators know that while there is dialogue there is hope.

In 2003, Diane Bloom's *An Unlikely Story* told of Ann Atwater, a black Civil rights activist and C.P. Ellis, a chapter president of the Ku Klux Klan who were forced together by political necessity and, in the process of talking and seeing one another as human beings, became the unlikeliest of close friends. We hear similar stories from Israeli's and Palestinians, Hutu and Tutsi, Shi'i and Sunni, and countless others who come from seemingly different backgrounds. We connect when we allow ourselves to open up and to believe. One way to do that is through the acceptance that happens when we achieve a state of flow.

Flow: What is it?

In the Tao, flow is simply, "The Way," and writing teachers call it "coherence", but neither term is nearly good enough to explain the experience. Mihaly Csikszentmihali [chik-sent-mee-hi-ee], probably the most well known, misspelled and mispronounced writer on the creative experience, says flow happens when "psychic energy, or attention, is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunity for action" (6). Susan Perry defines it as a state in which the sense of self is altered, a trancelike experience which often leads to heightened creativity (20). Arthur Marr in *The Online Journal of Sport Psychology* approaches the idea of flow from a scientific "biobehavioral" perspective. Certain circumstances and conditioning combine with a biological, chemical reaction to cause the flow experience. Although the three modern scholars and Lao Tzu couch "flow" in different terms, they agree that it exists and that the experience is highly productive and creative. This does not come as a surprise to the average person.

Who experiences flow?

Susan Perry says that some people are blessed with a natural tendency to shift into flow almost at will, and that a rare few have never felt the stopping of time that characterizes the experience, while some few others live in an almost perpetual state of flow. We often hear sports announcers talking about how an athlete can be "in the zone," a phrase that reflects the athlete's complete absorption in an activity. The intensity of Lance Armstrong in the Tour de France, or of Mia Hamm in the World Cup of soccer, or Tom Brady in the NFL playoffs is a palpable realization of this zone, of the flow of intensity and creativity. Musicians too often seem to be in something of a trance as they play. We see it in the jazz saxophonist's contortions, the rock guitarist's face, and the violinist's rapture. This willingness to trust in one's creative genius, in flow, is the epitome of believing – being completely open to whatever comes in and flows through us and what, ultimately, is expressed. Artists and craftspeople seem to agree that flow is essential to creativity and productivity. They often describe it as a trance-like experience where they begin working – painting, playing music, carving, building, and such – and they emerge an hour or many hours later with a sense that time has stood still. Susan Perry writes, "Your sense of self is altered during flow . . . as if you've been participating in some bizarre ritual, as though your body's been taken over by 'something.'" This is pretty strange stuff, almost mystical, certainly mysterious. Writing offers that place, that trance-like zone where it seems second nature to improvise and create, and where ideas and text blend in a flowing, ongoing stream, and this writing experience is not limited to special, artistic people. We can all learn to enter the state of flow.

Mihaly Csikszentmihali and Arthur Marr describe the requirements for establishing flow. Their criteria stipulate that the individual must be invested in realistic goals and have the skills and the opportunity to succeed. This contradicts the idea that flow is mystical, magical, or exclusive. Marr is clinical in his description of the necessary conditions. He says that it universally includes "rapid consideration between many cognitive precepts or events." That is, when we experience the state of flow, we are experiencing a complex collection of stimuli – a lot is going on. In addition flow requires a knowledge base from which to draw information and insight, practice in achieving the state (We can learn to do this), absorption, a sense of satisfaction, and an expectation of success. So, writers can experience flow if they have the background, possess adequate knowledge and fluency, are able to develop an interest in the material, and feel that they can succeed. Marr adds that flow happens when a task is controlled, playful and enjoyable. So writers will not experience flow if a task is tedious, one-dimensional, irrelevant to their personal and intellectual experience, feels threatening or does not elicit enjoyment.

Flow and Writing

Experienced writers and teachers talk about coherence, the flow of a text from beginning to end. The essay that reads smoothly is coherent. In conventional terms, the writer creates this flow in several ways, and we know most of them. First, the invention, or prewriting, stages of the process must be as open and unencumbered as possible. When a writer first sits down to create text, she can achieve flow through writing through, writing freely and getting words and ideas down without being encumbered by rigid guidelines and rules.

This initial flood of words and ideas will come more easily than the novice writer might imagine. But first she has to let go of the expectations, the need to get it right, the need to achieve an impossible ideal. The writer has to believe. This flow, this coherence, is also created in writing by understanding the natural, logical interconnections in the text and, then, by learning to use the words and techniques that create a free-flowing narrative or other type of text. This requires an adequate level of linguistic fluency. So, coherence is that smooth flow that carries a reader almost effortlessly from idea to idea, sentence to sentence, page to page, beginning to end. It tends to come naturally to most of us until we try to do it intentionally in formal writing situations. This is when the doubt kicks in. Yet we have knowledge, practice and success in creating coherent discourse. When we tell a friend a story, we use language that creates a flow in time: First, then, after that, before. We go back, reiterate, and remind the listener of our point now and then. Also, we use a consistent language and a tone that reflects the situation and our intentions. This is the natural way. We use language to say and do something important. When we struggle with writing, we are often imposing a lifetime of rules and restrictions on a task that ought to flow naturally. We try too hard. When I was writing *The Tao of Writing*, Peter Elbow gave me what turned out to be the best possible advice. He said, “Stop trying to write a book, and follow your own advice. Let the words flow.” I had always suspected he was a Taoist at heart, and that confirmed it.

The Tao of Coherence

Imagine a brook flowing along over rocks and branches, through small dams of fallen leaves and debris, around tree roots, through metal culverts and on and on. Then, imagine somebody erecting a brick wall in the brook’s path. Of course the forward motion of the stream will stop momentarily; the flow will not. The water will continue to push against the wall, becoming ever more urgent, perhaps, as with beaver dams, forming a pond behind the wall. The brook’s flow has been altered, but it has not been stopped. It will eventually work under, over, around or through the wall, and its motion will continue. Now imagine your words are the brook, flowing over the distance of a page. The first and last words are separated by that distance, but they are the same water in the same stream. They and all the words in between are part of this continuum, pausing momentarily at the end of each sentence and each paragraph, but flowing all the same. Flow is change-movement-momentum. Even the familiar writing process exemplifies change: every point in the process propels the writer (even deleting words). Every decision leads to another – Janet Emig’s protocol study of twelfth-grade writers was a kind of mapping of flow and change. It documented the changing, shifting, asking and discovering of young writers at work and provided insight into their unconscious writing processes. The traditional discussion of the movements in composition tends to favor doubt. We separate Expressionism, Cognitivism, and Social Constructivism as if they are antagonistic approaches to writing when, in fact, they are complementary.

Each offered a piece of the whole. Cognitivism identified the writing process, Social Constructivism grounded us in culture and social practice, and Expressionism freed our writing and opened us to experiencing flow. Together, these concepts allow us to write consciously and provide an array of heuristics: freewriting, ink-shedding, brainstorming, storyboarding, and such. These strategies, applied consciously, can help us enter the unconscious state that we call flow. Of all these techniques, freewriting remains the most powerful strategy for entering flow. It leads to an unconscious consciousness that is akin to the concept of the Taoist state of Wu Wei, “doing without doing.” In Wu Wei, we learn to look at the spaces between the spokes. Artists see negative spaces, shadows, non-shapes. Musicians have to understand the silence between the notes to create music, and builders know it is what you don’t see that makes a house strong. Some of the most effective writing is the non-writing, through meditation, reflection, practicing the arts, and wu wei- doing without doing-- writing without writing.

The concept of “doing nothing” is antithetical to the American way of life. We tend to be doing something, often several things, every waking moment. How do we find Wu Wei; how do we incorporate “doing without doing” into our writing and teaching? Susan Perry tells us it starts with being open to possibility, experience, discovery, failure and, of course, ourselves. From my experience with reluctant, doubting, writers, flow begins inside the individual. It starts with believing. We, and our students, are so clogged with the “doing” of writing, we have no room to believe. Once we empty out those cluttered spaces we become open to the experience of writing. Wu Wei may be the ultimate expression of believing and opening ourselves to flow. Remember the lesson of the river. It flows around, over, through impediments, sometimes slowly, but inevitably. It doesn’t have to try. Free-writing and other heuristics can help us to achieve flow, to write without writing as we have learned writing has to be done. The constraints are gone. The result is that words and ideas are free to flow unencumbered by preconceptions or the rigid expectations we have internalized.

Flow eliminates the intimidating expectation of having to produce numbers of words and pages. Students look at an article or book and assume they couldn't possibly write so much. Flow writing breaks through that barrier, and we write without trying to write. Free writing is a powerful strategy for finding flow. It works to help the writer find detachment and to avoid the temptation to focus on numbers of words and pages and such. The rhythm is natural and creative, and the results are unexpected precisely because the free-writer is able to let go of the usual writer's constraints. As soon as the focus becomes spelling or punctuation the doubting begins, the flow is interrupted, and the spell is broken. Free writing leads to Wu Wei. The paradox of Wu Wei is the remarkable productivity of the consciously detached exercise. Even though the very word "product" seems to contradict the spirit of the Tao, this contradiction is as much a part of the way as the river. Free writing mirrors this marvelous paradox in that it can lead to an extraordinary improvement in a writer's ability to write well. Peter Elbow contrasts ordinary writing with freewriting in this way: Writing normally "feels like trying to steer, to hold things together, to juggle balls. When I freewrite, I let go, stop steering, drop the balls and allow things to come to me" (Belanoff, 207). This is the detachment of Wu Wei. As Elbow also tells us, "Free writing is an invitation to stop writing and instead to be written" (Belanoff, 209).

THE "HOW" OF IT: Creating that flow

I keep looking for new ways to help students find that "zone" that represents flow. I spend a lot of time creating activities, trying to tap the power of flow to help writers establish that momentum. I confess; I don't see anything better than free-writing. Ken Macrorie in an essay in *Nothing Begins With N* draws a similar conclusion. He says, "Free-writing is old stuff, a loose word with many meanings"(173). Perhaps these "many meanings" are the key to its power. We know this- free-writing is eminently Taoist, and it offers novel, useful ways of achieving flow in writing. The other heuristics I mentioned earlier also allow writers to approach a state of flow. Here is what we know so far. Writers are most likely to enter a state of flow if they have an adequate knowledge of and interest in a topic, fluency in the language and written form, and the belief that they will succeed. They must feel in control of the writing and must derive pleasure from the activity. They must be open to possibility, experience, discovery, and failure. Finally, they must believe in themselves. That believing begins with us. When we believe in ourselves, in the importance of what we do and, most importantly, in our students, they too will believe in themselves.

So, again imagine that classroom, where every day children spend one hour simply free writing, nothing more. Their only job is to write for that hour and to believe that they really have something to say. It begins with believing, ours and theirs. Again, here are Lao Tzu's words: "Nothing on earth is more gentle and yielding than water, yet nothing is stronger. When it confronts a wall of stone, gentleness overcomes hardness; the power of water prevails" (verse 78). In the Tao, nothing escapes the path, the momentum of the flow. Nothing escapes change. So I ask you, the writer or the teacher of writing, to recognize that reality and jump in with both feet. You might as well. After all, you are in the stream whether you like it or not. First, though, you and I must believe in ourselves in order to believe in others. In spite of its name, the believing game is not a game at all.

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