

Chapter 3. Anxiety Canyon

When I traveled to Copacabana in 1992, the journey was rough. There were no guardrails. Wooden crosses dotted the hillside, reminders that sliding off the cliff could happen to anyone, to us in our Land Cruiser. Yet, people in packed busses and cars pilgrimaged to the sacred town, crossing the Altiplano and Lake Titicaca— a vast inland ocean millions of years old—and winding down a steep, narrow road to have their vehicles blessed. The blessing was supposed to ensure travelers ongoing safe passage, but the crosses on the hillside suggested otherwise.

Our arrival at the Basilica of Our Lady of Copacabana, a Spanish Colonial shrine built in the 1600's, was a feat of faith, luck, and skill. I was relieved to be outside of the vehicle, but the stress of arriving had exhausted me. Inside the basilica, the contemplative pace, the funereal hush, the atmosphere of prayers floating in the rafters, and the smell of incense did me in. I was overcome by sleepiness. The carved icon of the virgin was older than I could fathom. The weight of centuries made me tired. I considered stretching out on a pew to take a nap, using my knapsack as a pillow. This was my opportunity to see something I'd never seen before. Instead, I closed my eyes, pretending to pray while my boyfriend and the rest of our entourage finished their tour. I was ready to leave, and I was *wanting*. Wanting to be by myself. Wanting to sleep. Wanting to write, to eat, to take a hot bath. At the same time, I didn't want to get in the Land Cruiser and drive the treacherous road back to La Paz where I could do those things. I couldn't get where I wanted to be without enduring anxiety and discomfort.

I sometimes feel the same fatigue and reluctance about writing. I want to write and not write at the same time. When I'm driving or at work or engaged in regular life stuff, I want to write. But when I actually have time to write, I get sleepy. I want to do anything else but write. I'd like to be creative and productive all the time, yet my output suggests otherwise. Then I get frustrated with myself for wasting time, which drains my creative drive even further. Sound familiar?

THE PROBLEM WITH SELF-BLAME

Some writers use humor to deflect how hard the internal process of the writing journey can be. The writer Gabino Iglesias puts it this way, "Many people have a book in them, but it takes a special kind of freak to leave the Land of Laziness, cross the Plains of Procrastination and Insecurity Mountain, find the Blade of No One Made You Do This, and use it to cut your chest open and yank that book out."

Ouch. The core belief driving this assumption is this: "The only thing stopping you from writing is you." It comes with an unspoken subtext: "What's wrong with you that you're not writing?" That recrimination is reinforced by writing coaches who tell us to overcome writer's block by simply developing a writing habit and setting the timer to power through. As if that's all it takes. As if we hadn't tried it already.

"The only thing stopping you from writing is you" is supposed to be motivational. Part of me—the demanding part—believes all I need to do is buck up. But it does the opposite. "The only thing stopping you from writing is you" means you're failing as a writer if you can't write. Blame is not a motivating energy. Self-blame reinforces creative neglect and self-deprivation.

Unhelpfully, our culture perpetuates the myth that creativity requires some sort of genius, that it's innate, that we're either have creative ability or we don't. The mistaken message we receive is that if we aren't inspired and writing all the time, we're not doing it right.

If we're going to leave the Land of Laziness (I'm not sure such a place exists) and heed the call to write, we need to navigate another formidable obstacle without falling in: Anxiety Canyon. Imagine Anxiety Canyon is the size of the Grand Canyon. All 1,902 square miles of it are filled with writing angst. The canyon is inside you and all around you. To write, you need to find a path through it. But it's invisible. You don't know where it starts or stops.

Daunting, right?

The writer David Ebenbach points to Wile E. Coyote as a great example of what happens when we're chasing an idea (the Road Runner) through Anxiety Canyon. The Road Runner can speed across cliffs and run on air. The Road Runner can keep going no matter what. Wile E. Coyote can run on air, too, until he looks down. The panic gets him every time.

Most people aren't aware they have an Anxiety Canyon inside them because they don't know what to call it. It's so vast and subtle, they don't realize it's stopping their creative drive. That's why I believe it's inaccurate to assume laziness keeps people from writing. What keeps us from writing is the creative anxiety we feel when we look down.

CREATIVE ANXIETY

In the 1960's, social scientist Frank X. Barron researched highly creative people to determine the traits that set us apart. His study subjects included creators in several fields including the writers Truman Capote, Frank O'Connor, and William Carlos Williams. This is

what he and his researchers observed: highly creative people can find order in chaos; we're drawn to ambiguity and complexity; we're willing to take risks; and we have a high tolerance for disorder and disarray.

Chaos, disorder, ambiguity, complexity, risk.

Writing requires we dwell in these states on a regular basis. It's no wonder I get sleepy. Comfort is preferable to vulnerability. Barron's study also found that highly creative people are more introspective leading to increased self-awareness. I'll add that we tend to be highly sensitive. Our introspection and sensitivity allow us to create and write. We see, hear, and feel greatly. It's only natural that at times we seek a buffer from the world.

However, sensitivity is on a first name basis with anxiety, making the creative process inherently anxiety-provoking. While everyday anxiety encompasses a general feeling of worry and unease, creative anxiety arises with the pressure to create something new that has the potential to be judged. How will our work be received by others? When we deeply care about the quality of our work, it's easy to feel vulnerable, overwhelmed, and discouraged.

There are no road maps for where we're going when we're writing something new. Every time we write, we must risk feeling anxious. We must be willing to enter the unknown territory of our imaginations and tolerate the discomfort and range of emotions that come with not knowing what comes next. We must risk feeling self-doubt, self-criticism, disappointment. Sure, there are craft tips and plot points and standards to keep in mind. But we must stare into the abyss of the blank page or screen and write sentences that have not been written before. There are decisions we make with each word, each sentence. Potential chaos, disorder, ambiguity, complexity, risk—that is, *uncertainty*. Uncertainty about what comes next, what

our characters should do, what the next plot point should be. Uncertainty, like sensitivity spawns anxiety. Creative anxiety leads to self-doubt, fear of failure, and hinders our output or block us altogether. Creative anxiety is a chunky stew of fear, shame, uncertainty, insecurity, and frustration seasoned with the discomfort of chaos, disorder, ambiguity, complexity, risk.

Creative anxiety is hard to hold and can feel overwhelming sometimes. I mean, who wants to feel the discomfort of writing something imperfect, confused, and unformed, grammatically problematic, lacking correct punctuation, without a consistent metaphor, or crisp sentences or brilliance of any kind? Writing is messy. Like this paragraph I just wrote. It's impossible to avoid the mess. It makes sense that we avoid unpleasant emotions. That's why it can seem easier to stop writing.

THE ATTEMPT TO CONTROL

In the creative process we find order in chaos. However, order is often confused with control. In our desperate attempts to control our anxiety and the discomfort of uncertainty, we get stuck. Creative anxiety leads to over-functioning or under-functioning. Over-functioners attempt to control anxiety with excessive action. We work hard to avoid feeling bad. We may prematurely organize the messy writing process only to get stalled just as we're getting started. We may micro-edit the same paragraph obsessively to make it perfect. We may do extensive research to avoid the anxiety of writing a messy, unformed draft. Under-functioners shut down to avoid their anxiety. My desire to nap instead of write is an example of me avoiding creative anxiety. Both tendencies stem from a need to control or numb creative anxiety, preventing us from addressing the root cause.

Fortunately, this book offers many ways we can manage our creative anxiety and keep writing. We can't eliminate our creative anxiety altogether, but we can learn to accept the discomfort of our lack of control in the face of chaos, disorder, ambiguity, complexity, and risk. Learning to live with uncertainty and ambiguity is important for creativity.

CREATIVE VULNERABILITY

Creativity has the potential to expose us again and again. For me, standing naked in front of art students is less scary and revealing than writing words that will one day be released into the world. When we write, we entrust our emotional safety, control, predictability, and comfort, maybe even our sense of self to our creative ideas and stories, things that might fail us.

Being vulnerable means we're susceptible to harm or attack. Others can hurt us if we care what they think. Just as often, we hurt and attack ourselves. Every time I write, I expose myself to the uncertainty of what comes next; to tricky emotions; to the criticisms of others, and to the meanness of my own judge-y mind. If we don't manage creative anxiety well, then writing resistance in the form of procrastination, perfectionism, distorted thoughts, and expectations can steer us off course.

We need creative *vulnerability* to write. Vulnerability is the antidote to creative anxiety. In her book, *Daring Greatly*, writer, speaker, and researcher Brené Brown defines vulnerability as the intersection of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Writers travel the terrain of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure each time we write. Vulnerability, she says, "is the birthplace of...creativity."

There are big benefits to being vulnerable. Creative vulnerability isn't a weakness to overcome as our culture suggests. Paradoxically, being vulnerable, getting comfortable with vulnerability, is the way of strength. Embracing vulnerability requires less energy. The most effective way to write is to travel *with* our messy emotions rather than fight against or suppress them.

In an interview about filming of the road trip movie "Will & Harper," Will Ferrell said that his job with his friend Harper was to be as vulnerable as possible. That's what we have to do as writers: open up to our own vulnerability so that the right experiences and right words can come through on the page.

Our problems with forming a consistent, sustainable writing practice seems stem from the unwillingness or inability to tolerate the discomfort of vulnerability. Some writers, to bypass their discomfort with being exposed, choose to write in secret or share their work within tight circles. This approach is perfectly valid if you prefer to keep your creative life private. Many private writers including Emily Dickenson, Sylvia Plath, Franz Kafka, and Thoreau, achieved wide renown for their talents only after their deaths.

HOW FEAR AFFECTS WRITING

Brown's studies have shown how vulnerability can elicit our deepest fears and shame, which inhibits creativity. We're not resisting writing; we're resisting the discomfort of being vulnerable. We're resisting the fear of being *not good enough*. Creative vulnerability feels like tension in the body, anxiety, and shakiness, steeling yourself against imagined threats or it can be subtle and pervasive like white noise.

Our resistance is not laziness; it's a neurological response to fear. Our brains are amazing machines, evolved to be vigilant and hyper-sensitive to potential harm. However, our neurobiology has difficulty distinguishing the difference between eminent danger (say, of bears chasing us) and the existential fear of "writing failure." Our brains can interpret vulnerability and the failure to write as devastating, as a failure of self.

For most of us, creative anxiety churns up childhood fears. During our early cognitive development, we may have experienced embarrassment or shame when a teacher compared our creative work to others. Maybe we compared ourselves and fell short. Research has shown that adverse childhood experiences can have long-lasting and profound effects later in life. Humiliations and failures can affect us as significantly as trauma—both big T and little t varieties. Our internalized experiences with writing and creativity harden into negative beliefs about our creative ability. Most people, by the time they're teens, abandon their creative attempts, stung by others' critiques and self-criticism. "I'm not creative," they say. If we don't develop the capacity to handle creative vulnerability, we reinforce our avoidance.

Getting present with the feelings of creative discomfort allows you to journey with your creative anxiety more effectively, less painfully. Getting present, seeing your creative anxiety with clarity and *without judgement* helps you become less reactive to fear, and more resilient and disciplined. Getting present means learning to identify your emotions and your neurological state. For some people, getting stuck in a paragraph or on a sentence is enough to trigger anxiety and *not good enough* feelings. For others, it might be getting a bad critique from their writing group or a negative review. It varies for everyone—and varies with each piece you write—which is why it's important to recognize your own vulnerability triggers.

I gave up writing for a year because I bumped up against a deep fear: I believed I didn't have anything useful to say. Who would read what I wrote? Other people were smarter and had already said it. Given the state of the world, why was my writing important? Eventually, I had to answer my irrational voice and negative cognitions. At the same time, I very briefly dated a new friend, a bookstore owner who read my stories and told me to keep writing. (In hindsight, his encouragement might've been the entire purpose of our short relationship.) Sometimes all we need is a different perspective. However we do it, we need to develop the capacity to see ourselves and our work through different lenses. We need to become the writer who writes the book. Eventually I realized I own everything that has happened to me; I have as much a reason to tell my stories as anyone, whether or not anyone reads them. I write them for me. In fact, I'm writing this book—the book I wish I'd read thirty years ago—as a love letter to my younger self.

Until we consciously develop the mental framework to feel discomfort and to see ourselves and our creativity through different lenses, we unconsciously anticipate the risk of being rejected or abandoned when we write. We're uncertain how our work will be received, which means how we will be received. However, creative energy doesn't just go away. When creative impulses are constrained or repressed, the pent-up energy transforms into negative emotions including anger, rage, and judgement of self and others. It can also develop into aches and pains.

Instead of blaming yourself for being lazy, recognize your neurobiology is avoiding writing because writing leads to vulnerability and exposure. Honor the fact that writing resistance is the brain's complex and inverted way of trying to protect you.

CREATIVE INVENTORY- FIND YOUR ALLIES

Brené Brown writes, “A lot of cheap seats in the arena are filled with people who never venture onto the floor. They just hurl mean-spirited criticisms and put-downs from a safe distance. The problem is, when we stop caring what people think and stop feeling hurt by cruelty, we lose our ability to connect. But when we’re defined by what people think, we lose the courage to be vulnerable. Therefore, we need to be selective about the feedback we let into our lives. For me, if you’re not in the arena getting your ass kicked, I’m not interested in your feedback.”

Do you define yourself by what other people think of you? Or do you put up walls to protect yourself from other people’s criticism? Chances are, you do a little of both.

Take a look at the people in your life giving your feedback. Who are in the arena with you, writing and creating and doing the hard work? Who are your supporters and cheerleaders? Who are the people casting doubt on your dreams or hurling insults from the side? Identify those people in your life (or those voices in your head) and make a list of the people you choose to be a part of your writing journey. Find your allies.

CREATIVE TOOLBOX- SMALL VICTORIES

Here are some important tips to keep in mind as you confront your own creative anxiety.

- It takes tremendous courage to face your vulnerability. It’s easier to approach vulnerability when you take small steps. Be proud of yourself for being brave enough to

write even when you feel anxious or insecure, even when all you write is one sentence.

Small victories can build into big ones.

- Maybe you feel stressed by deadlines or projects hanging over your head. When you start to feel your creative anxiety rising, remind yourself that the discomfort is temporary. Write in ten minutes spurts. Seek support from friends you trust. You'll feel better about yourself for writing through the discomfort rather than for avoiding it altogether.
- When you're feeling overwhelmed and having a hard time writing, get present. Gently focus on the sensations in your body. Feel your breath as you inhale and exhale. Breathe consciously for a few moments, making sure your out-breath is longer than your in-breath. This will calm your nervous system and make starting easier to do.
- Don't look down. You're running on air, chasing your idea. Follow it as far as you can without worrying about the ground beneath you. For writers, looking down is the equivalent of looking into the abyss at the size of the project or the reaction of the audience.
- Allow your writing to be less than perfect. No one is perfect; no piece of writing or art is perfect. If you hold yourself to impossible ideals, you're more likely to give up writing. Embrace your imperfection because writing poorly is better than not writing at all.
- Let go of the idea of what other people think of your writing, especially people who are not in the arena with you. Most people are concerned with their own lives. Remember, it's impossible to please everyone. The most important person you're writing for is you.