

The Old Incapacity

On our journey from La Paz to Copacabana, before ferrying across Lake Titicaca, we traveled through the Andes across the Altiplano. The Altiplano is the world's second most extensive high plateau after the Tibetan plateau. Despite the elevation, it seemed as though we were at the bottom of something. My twenty-six-year-old hung-over brain didn't understand the wonder I was seeing. It seemed to me there was nothing for miles save for occasional mud huts that rose from the barren terrain. The landscape was vast and bleak and windswept. Several shades of brown. Some part of me knew I should enjoy the journey, hold out hope to see a llama, but I couldn't sustain interest after so many miles. I wanted to sleep.

If the road to Copacabana is a metaphor for writing, then the Altiplano is the place I would've gotten stuck. I would've postponed traveling that road; I would've taken a nap; I would've looked the other way; I would've missed what came next.

What came next was unexpected. Emerging from the landscape, standing by the side of the road were a half dozen tuba players waiting for a bus. Despite the lack of habitable structures nearby and no town to speak of, no vegetation because it was winter, and barely any people, there was hope. A huddle of men, their silver instruments shining brightly in the winter sunlight. To me, they were a surprise that had waited a long time to be discovered. They were still waiting—for a bus and the opportunity to bring their music to life.

The author André Gide wrote, "You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore." His quote seems complete because he's encouraging and

admonishing all at once, which is what most writing advice does. His advice also assumes you're able to get in the water at all. What he doesn't say is that even before discovering of a great body of water like Lake Titicaca, you might first travel through a desolate plateau.

Procrastination plateau.

This is the place we're doomed to wander alone in a no man's land of dawdling inefficiency. There's no promise that we'll see tuba players or llamas.

Franz Kafka knew this plateau as "the old incapacity." Kafka describes this state in his diaries:

January 29. Again tried to write, virtually useless.

February 7. Complete standstill. Unending torment.

March 11. How time flies; another ten days and I have achieved nothing. It doesn't come off. A page now and then is successful, but I can't keep it up, the next day I am powerless.

Every writer I know has dealt with the old incapacity. As Kafka notes, it's a feeling that convinces us we're powerless, that our writing problems are seemingly insurmountable. There is a numbness, a spirit-lessness about it. When people talk about writer's block, they describe a similar incapacity, as if waiting is the only thing they can do until it passes. If we wait for our brain to be in the mood to write, we'll be stuck for a long time on an empty plateau, sort of like those tuba players full of unexpressed music hoping for a bus to carry them someplace else. Viewed from the outside procrastination looks like we writers are simply wasting time.

How does procrastination differ from writing resistance? If resistance is the internal struggle to write, then procrastination is the habit of postponing the struggle. Some writing coaches define procrastination as the mechanism that stalls you from doing things you don't want to do, while resistance is, well, resistance to the things you feel you're meant to do. Writing reluctance and resistance and procrastination are caused by the same mechanisms in the brain, so I won't pretend there is a significant distinction. If you're not writing and you want to be writing, you can call it whatever you like.

However, our nervous systems might explain the semantics. Procrastination *seems* lazy and passive. It's considered a character flaw, as if we're fully to blame for our inability or unwillingness to do something else. Really, it's our nervous system's freeze response. Writing reluctance and writing resistance, on the other hand, suggest more engaged energy. We may be reluctant, but we haven't ruled out writing altogether; we're still moving, unhurried and plodding. When we resist, some part of us is actively doing battle with or pushing away another part of us that wants to write. We're in fight or flight mode.

The truth is, our brains are just as active when we're procrastinating as when we're resisting. It takes a lot of energy to avoid writing. Because procrastination gets such a bad rap in our culture—a culture that prizes productivity—it comes with a level of self-blame that can, over time, harden into shame. I suspect that's why, nowadays, writing resistance is the term most often used by writing coaches. Plus, the alliteration is appealing.

PROCRASTINATION DISGUISED

Here's the most important thing you need to know. Procrastination comes from mismanaging our emotions. It is not about laziness, irresponsibility, or productivity. When we try to conquer procrastination from a productivity standpoint, we don't get very far.

A stew of emotions such as fear, anxiety, guilt, self-blame, frustration, self-doubt, vulnerability, overwhelm, and/or self-pity can stall us. Studies about procrastination have shown that people avoid doing things when they struggle with negative and conflicting emotions. These emotions don't have to be conscious to be disruptive. They're present like background noise. Rather than acknowledging and accepting our fears, we avoid writing. The negative emotions might have to do with our worth as writers, or it could be about paying the bills on time, having a health scare, experiencing romantic insecurities, or job anxiety. Dealing with our feelings is key to our creative health.

I'd like to pause and mention that I procrastinated writing this chapter about procrastination. I pulled off one of my all-time best diversions by getting a new dog. Having a dog is a great way to procrastinate because my little pup has endless needs and wants. He became my repository for procrastination. Even I was fooled. That's why it's important to identify procrastination in all its guises.

Once we recognize procrastination is involuntarily activated by one of the F-words—fight, flight, freeze, fawn, fear, failure, and fear *of* failure—we can move past it. Externalizing the problem eliminates self-blame. In fact, self-blame and guilt-tripping are sneaky way of staying stuck.

Procrastination can stem from underlying trauma or depression, but you don't have to be depressed or traumatized to get caught in a freeze response. Procrastination may also

be disguised as exhaustion, rebellion, hyper-control, lack of control, lack of self-trust, and super-competence. See also: spontaneity (my dog will never say no to a longer walk).

This is when I'm most likely to procrastinate: when the piece I'm writing becomes difficult; when I lose my direction and don't know what to write next; when the task in front of me seems insurmountable; when I feel insecure and doubt what I'm trying to say; when I'm bored with what I'm writing; when my draft gets too messy and there's no easy fix; when I'm tired and don't have the will power to sit down for 10 minutes; when there's no immediate reward for writing or the reward is intangible; and especially when I'm in a hurry to finish. (Side note: I often think, "I'll knock this piece out quickly," which always backfires. My dog memoir, which I expected to write in a few quick months took 9 long years and "failed" because I was tried to force it into shape.) I also procrastinate after I've had a very productive bout of writing. I reward myself with a break that lasts too long.

A cartoon illustrated by Asher Perlman depicts the inherent avoidance of procrastination perfectly. The single panel drawing shows a man holding a mop and bucket. In the background, his van advertises a "Writers Cleaning Service." The character with the mop tries to persuade to another character to hire him with this pitch: "The process is simple," he says. "You tell me to get some writing done and then, to avoid getting started, I clean your whole house."

There are a few P-words that also play into procrastination:

PERFECTIONISM. Our self-critical thoughts take over when we can't tolerate our own mistakes. We can get stuck in a revision loop. If we try too hard to get a piece just right, or become attached to our own cleverness, we're setting ourselves up to procrastinate.

PRESSURE. Peer pressure, deadline pressure, and especially internal pressure can leave us stranded on the plateau. Pressure is tied to expectations, and expectations—this will be *great!!!* This will fail horribly—are premeditated resentments. It's not fun to resent ourselves when we're not living up to our own (often impossible) standards.

PEOPLE-PLEASING. The need for approval and validation from others are difficult to attain when we're writing by ourselves. People-pleasing is rooted in perfectionism. When we're try to please our potential, imaginary audience, we can get derailed by our potential, imaginary detractors—that is, our own self-criticism disguised as someone else's voice.

PRODUCTIVITY. The belief that we should be productive ALL THE TIME is relentless, invalidating, and exhausting. Extreme busyness is rewarded in our culture, but it can morph into an affinity for chaos. Chaos begets more chaos, and chaos is distracting. Chaos can also become habitual for people who are uncomfortable with peace. Peace, as much as we claim to want it, can be hard to tolerate.

THE BRAIN SCIENCE OF PROCRASTINATION

Googling the brain science of procrastination is another way to procrastinate. You can tumble into a fascinating rabbit hole, so I'll save you the trouble. In short, science explains what we already know intuitively: there's a tug of war going on inside our brains.

The tension is between the prefrontal cortex (the goal directed part of the brain that initiates behavior and sustains attention) and the limbic system (which includes the pleasure center). The prefrontal cortex has a hard time writing when we're experiencing a stress response or "amygdala hijack." The amygdala, as you know by now, is what generates the

involuntary fight-flight-freeze-fawn response when we have creative anxiety (or any anxiety, stress, fear, or anger). Kafka was right to call it an ‘incapacity’ because our thinking brain goes offline when it’s hijacked by the amygdala.

According to Tim Pychyl, associate professor of psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa and author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*, researchers found that procrastinators have a larger amygdala than non-procrastinators. “The procrastinators are reacting emotionally, and the emotion-focused coping response is to escape. It’s saying, “I don’t want these negative emotions I’ll experience during the task,” and so it avoids the task.”

It doesn’t help that when we procrastinate, our brains release a hit of dopamine—a neurotransmitter that helps us feel pleasure—to reward our avoidance.

WILLPOWER

Our brain’s mechanisms to reinforce procrastination works at cross purposes with what we really want to do. The ancient Greeks called this state of mind *akrasia*, that is, doing something against our better judgment. In the case of writing avoidance, *akrasia* is when we’re *not* doing something. At times, I was not writing this chapter as rigorously as I might. I was succumbing to the very powerful impulse to delay writing in favor of settling for more immediate rewards: playing with my new dog and staying up late to re-watch old episodes of *30 Rock*.

Hold up. See how seamlessly I blamed myself in that last paragraph? This is where it gets tricky. Despite knowing the brain science behind procrastination, I still fall prey to self-blame.

The belief that we should willpower our way off the couch and write is an attitude that has persisted for centuries. *If you're not being productive, it's your fault.* The dual whips of Puritanism and capitalism flog us with shame and guilt.

I've heard writing coaches talk at length about "doing battle" and "going to war" against their writing resistance. To be clear, when you go to war against procrastination, you are fighting yourself. You're doing battle with your own physiology. To win, you must generate even more anxiety, more self-blame, and pressure to overcome the initial anxiety and fear that caused procrastination in the first place. Which means you lose.

Some people can harness self-blame into action, but it's not sustainable. Powering-through eventually backfires because it requires so much energy. Forcing yourself to write through shame, anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, self-doubt, and frustration takes a lot of willpower, but willpower doesn't make discomfort go away. Neither does ignoring your writing fears. Do you really want to use the internal pressure of guilt and shame to infect your writing? To motivate you to write?

In the real world, we know war doesn't bring lasting peace. It only hardens resistance. It's inefficient and causes a lot of destruction. Waging war against procrastination and writing resistance creates internal destruction. It's exhausting. No wonder avoidance seems preferable.

Despite the dopamine hit we receive when we avoid the "threat" of writing, avoidance causes its own pain. It reinforces our own feelings of insecurity and the sense that we're not good enough. We fortify a pattern of behavior, which makes it more difficult to start writing

next time. Continually postponing an action, even an action that some part of us *wants* to do, leads to more stress and negative feelings. Writing is a journey, not a battle or a war.

THE MOST IMPORTANT P WORDS

A meme circulating the internet reads: “Today, I completed a chore I have been putting off for 7 months. It took 12 minutes. I will learn nothing from this.” While I relate to this and suspect you do, too, I believe there’s a difference between ordinary procrastination and writing resistance. For starters, writing isn’t finished in twelve minutes. It’s an ongoing task. We’re never really done. That’s why the response to procrastination must be more deliberate.

The most important P words to counter-balance procrastination are presence and progress. We need to get present with procrastination before we can make progress. Instead of trying to talk ourselves out of procrastination, instead of shaming ourselves or relying on reason to get us moving, we need a different approach.

“First, calm the disturbance,” as my mentor used to say. To write, you must consciously reset your nervous system. There’s a difference between your brain and your mind. You are not your brain’s response to fear, but you can use your brain and body to tend and befriend your nervous system. By stimulating the vagus nerve, the longest nerve in the body, you can soothe the fight-flight-freeze-fawn response. The vagus nerve controls many body functions and has been described as the “body’s superpower” because it strengthens the immune system, initiates the inflammation response to illness and disease, fortifies our

emotional resilience for healthier stress responses, and can make us calm, compassionate, and empathetic.

Stephen Porges, a distinguished psychologist and neuroscientist and the author of *The Polyvagal Theory*, refers to the vagus nerve as the “love nerve” because we are more loving when it is activated. Stimulating the vagus nerve reduces stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms. There’s fascinating research about the vagal “tone” we inherit from our mothers when we’re born. High vagal tone is associated with higher resilience and the good news is, it can always be improved.

Fortunately, there are easy, fast ways to reset your writing. When we sing, laugh, hum, chant, suck on hard candy, and gargle, we stimulate the vagus nerve, which is connected to our vocal cords and the muscles in the back of the throat. Conscious breathing also helps, especially when our exhale is longer than our inhale. You can gently massage the skin behind your ears by slowly moving the skin up and down. And my favorite: get cold. Immerse your face in cold water, take a cold shower, or hold ice cubes in your hands. All these things send signals to the brain to lower the heartrate and calm down. Walking, exercise, meditation can also shift your mindset. Don’t be limited by these suggestions. When you reset your nervous system, you can reset your writing.

WHEN PROCRASTINATION IS HELPFUL

Plateaus are important land formations for many reasons. They’re flat and stable, which makes them a good place to farm. They also play a role in forming river valleys, and they tend to be rich with mineral deposits. Seeds can be planted. I thought we were driving

through nothing when was twenty-six years old; I couldn't see that the environment was teeming with possibility.

Writing plateaus, sometimes confused with procrastination, give us a chance to slow down. We can mine our lives and imaginations for resources that will nurture our writing. It's difficult to tell the difference between a procrastination plateau and fertile ground.

Even when we harvest the land or extract minerals, procrastination is still trying to help us. Expect procrastination to show up. It's a function of the brain designed to protect us. Our procrastination is signaling that we've taken a wrong turn with our emotions or our writing. Procrastination is trying to point us in another direction, but it doesn't know which way to go.

We don't shift out of procrastination by thinking about it. The trick is to work with the energy of procrastination rather than against it. An often-quoted slogan in recovery circles says it this way, "You *can't think* your way into right action, but you *can act* your way into right thinking." We need to tend and befriend our emotions and physiology so we can find the energy to fuel our writing. It takes conscious action to calm the amygdala just like it takes a conscious action to write. We cannot discover new worlds until we cross the Altiplano.

CREATIVE INVENTORY:

Get present with your procrastination. Become aware that you're procrastinating. Recognize your reluctance and resistance. When you notice it, say it out loud to make it present. "I'm procrastinating right now."

Next, answer this question: What's holding me back right now? State your answer in one sentence or less and be specific: *I am afraid that I will confuse myself and get lost and make it worse than it is.* Now that you recognize the uncomfortable feelings holding you back, you can get present with how they feel in your body. How does procrastination feel in your body? How does resistance feel? reluctance? Are you shaming or blaming yourself for procrastination? If so, recognize it and stay present with yourself.

CREATIVE TOOLKIT

Here are some hacks to help you overcome procrastination and help you build small, repeatable successes:

- If you're still having trouble meeting your intentions, make them smaller and more specific.
- Commit to writing for a few minutes at a time and set a timer.
- Figure out the time of day when you're most productive and when you're least productive, then plan your writing time.
- Keep a calendar of your writing successes. If you're trying to write every day, see how long your streak runs.
- Writing requires a lot of decision making. If you're having a hard writing day, reduce the number of decisions you need make.
- Focus on what's doable today.
- Think through your procrastination. Imagine your future self who will feel discouraged and disappointed if you decide to postpone writing again.

- If you can't write what you think you should be writing, use your writing time to write something else.
- Conversely, don't write. Tell yourself you're not allowed to write right now. Take permission to write away from yourself. Go take a walk instead. When you get back, consciously deprive yourself from writing by telling yourself you're only allowed to write for five minutes. Stick to it. This will build your desire to write going forward.
- Finally, expect procrastination and fear to show up. They're part of the process. Say hello to them because they're old friends of yours, then write anyway.