

The Road to Copacabana: Introduction to the Writing Journey

I was twenty-six, hungover, and traveling in South America with a few companions. We were on our way to the Bolivian town Copacabana to see the Basilica of Our Lady of Copacabana, a 16th century shrine. The shrine was a destination for many Bolivians who visited to have their cars blessed by Our Lady, the patron saint of Bolivia.

Getting to Copacabana was the hard part. First, we traveled through the Altiplano in the Andes to cross Lake Titicaca by ferry. Then we drove along a gravel mountain road with hairpin turns and steep cliffs. Our driver did not brake often. He honked sometimes when we approached a bend, then sped around the curves. The road was one-and-a-half vehicles wide. There were no guardrails. At any moment our SUV could slide several hundred feet off the side of the mountain. I braced myself at the turns, closed my eyes and prayed that we wouldn't meet another vehicle head-on. Crosses dotted the road and countryside where other people in cars and buses had not been so lucky.

One of my companions, a German backpacker named Lazlo, became car sick. We couldn't stop; there was nowhere to pull over. Lazlo became paler and paler. I felt horrible for him. I tried to divert my attention as we barreled forward. Soon, I wasn't feeling well either. It was the long drive in the stuffy jeep that was doing it. Not just the drive, but the reckless turns that made me nauseous. And not just the turns, but the fear of the unknown. I didn't speak Spanish and couldn't communicate with the driver. Nor could I drive myself on this road. I

couldn't stop Lazlo from feeling poorly. I couldn't be sure that we'd even make it to Copacabana. I had no control. This was the root of my discomfort.

We bounced in the back of the jeep with every rut. My stomach flipped. I held tight to the seat. I had no idea how long the ride would last.

Until this journey, the only Copacabana I knew of was from Barry Manilow's 1970's earworm hit song. That Copacabana—the Copa—was about a 1940's night club and showgirl Lola's lost love. Turns out, there are lots of Copacabanas including a bakery, a hair salon, and the more famous Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. However, the Bolivian town on Lake Titicaca is thought to be the first. The indigenous Aymara phrase *kota kahuana*, meaning “view of the lake” eventually morphed into Copacabana, a word that's fun to sing. I was not singing on this trip.

Eventually we arrived in Copacabana. We toured the basilica and stood reverent at the statue of the saint. The church was peaceful, the air heavy with silence. Still, considering what it had taken to get there, I was disappointed. The saint was smaller, less regal and awe-inspiring than I expected. Not that I believed a statue with a crown and flowing robe could save me.

Outside the basilica, we watched cars in line to be blessed. Families took pictures. Flower petals were strewn across the hoods of cars and busses. We toured the town, bought knitted dolls as souvenirs, and ate *salteñas*, warm empanadas filled with beef stew. A stray cat mewed at my feet and I bent to pet it. I wanted to pick it up and bring it home with me for comfort.

Soon, we got back in the truck and did it again.

We traveled along the same road on the same mountain, around the same blind curves on our return to La Paz. I was not even conscious of my prayers, but my every breath was a plea that we'd get home safely.

I tell you this story because writing is a lot like driving to Copacabana. When you write, you're traveling. You're in an unfamiliar country on an uncertain road headed to a foreign, mythical place. You're on the road to *Copa, Copacabana, the hottest spot north of Havana...* Except, you're in South America, nowhere near Havana, so already you're lost in the geography of your mind.

Copacabana is an actual place and a mythical place. You'll have an adventure on your way to the to the actual place (though the road is probably different than I remember), but you may get lost on your way to the mythical place (otherwise known as the perfect ending, the perfect story, the most amazing book in the world). Your arrival will depend on you and the project you finish writing. Since there are many Copacabanas, there are many roads to get there. The writing journey means you can't see around blind bends. Your intuition is driving and it doesn't speak your language. There are times when the piece you're writing will feel out of control. Also, you're on the side of a mountain and you might skid off and tumble and become memorialized by one of those crosses.

Not really. Writing won't threaten your life in that way. However, *not* writing can certainly threaten your life. Not writing can threaten all the things that make your life worth living. It takes a lot of energy to disregard your own heart and creative desires. The energy of not writing is tiring. And punishing. Something happens when your soul wants to write but your body and mind aren't doing it. Frustrations in life—physical, mental, and emotional—can often be traced to a common cause: you're neglecting something you love to do and were called to do. Having a desire to write and a love of writing is a gift. When you reject a gift, you reject the love, opportunity and grace that comes with it. Some part of you feels empty and starved. Maybe you're not starved physically, but when you don't write, your dreams starve, your creative call

starves, your soul starves. Writing can be scary and hard, but if you don't do it, that malnourishment is noted by the body. You'll likely suffer repercussions you won't like and will attribute to something else.

The writing journey means we must travel through a series of landscapes including the bumpy terrain of writing resistance, creative anxiety, vulnerability, and uncertainty. The path is full of potholes. It's wild and overgrown. There are detours, hidden entrances, yields, u-turns, and ruts. It's easy to get stuck. Often, we'll come to a fork in the road: one way leads to perfectionism, the other to procrastination. Getting unstuck might mean brandishing a machete, hacking away the weeds, and forging a new route.

To bypass roadblocks of writing resistance, it's helpful to have a map. There are plenty of books about writing that can guide us along the way. Craft books focus on establishing voice and developing plot, character, tension, point of view, and so on. From a craft perspective, we get stuck because we haven't employed the right technique. Other writing books offer prompts and exercises to generate ideas. They move the imagination forward in new directions. There are advice books by successful writers whose geniuses inspires us even when their lives and talents seem inaccessible. We might emulate them, but it's impossible to travel their same path to success. All these books are important, but none of them address the problem most every writer faces at some point: the emotional journey to write.

Pocket Therapy for Writers maps the psychology of writing. If we're going to write, we must overcome our resistance. This book identifies the mental, emotional, and neurological roadblocks that stall us or make us lose our creative motivation. The writing journey is also a spiritual journey, an expedition of the heart requiring courage and faith. We undergo an inner transformation when we write. If we can't navigate the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and

physical task of writing, then our heroes can't navigate the storylines we've dreamed up for them.

The idea for this book first came to me twenty-five years ago when I felt as though I were failing at every turn. I'd been teaching fiction writing for more than a decade and thought I should be further along in my writing career. I joked with friends that I should write a book called, "How Not to Become a Writer" because I had that part down pat. For kicks, I jotted down notes to myself and tucked them away. My students struggled with motivation and resistance, too, so I wanted to teach them what *not* to do. Here are some of my early notes: "If you *DON'T* want to be a writer, DO these things: browbeat yourself into discipline; talk too much about being a writer; wait for inspiration; have big expectations." And so on. I was right back then but needed to reframe it. The struggle helped me heal and make sense of the internal battle between the part of me that wants to write and the part that resists and stalls. Eventually, I went back to school and became a licensed psychotherapist, determined to understand the brain science impacting our ability to create.

The brain-body connection is real and profound. It's possible to generate new neural pathways for writing. To shift focus from the problem to the solution, I researched and experimented with methods to increase motivation, perseverance, inspiration, and resilience. We must think differently and practice new behaviors to move from resistance to motivation. Using an integrative approach, I draw on aspects of several psychological theories including Polyvagal Theory, Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Internal Family Systems (IFS), Narrative Therapy, Positive Psychology, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Throughout the book, I've added Creative Inventories and Creative Toolboxes designed to help writers find

the path back to writing more quickly. Since we're all at different stages of the journey, and since not all therapeutic modalities work for everyone, the chapters offer alternatives for readers to explore. These exercises and tools are not your usual writing prompts to tap creativity. Instead, they're psychodynamic and behavioral, introspective and practical, and they are research-based, offering concrete actions to overcome resistance. When we encounter resistance, we can mitigate procrastination, perfectionism, creative anxiety, and vulnerability by working with and around resistance instead of against it.

The first section of this book, "Can't Get There From Here," focuses on writing resistance in all its forms. What keeps you from writing? What psychological and physiological factors affect your motivation to write? Recognizing the neuroscience behind why you get stuck is important to getting unstuck. The second section, "The Map," considers the psychological, behavioral, and neurobiological solutions to increase the motivation to write. How can we "tend and befriend" the nervous system? What kind of stimulation and meditations will strengthen our neural pathways for writing?

Section three, "The Passengers," is about traveling the terrain of your inner landscape and knowing your companions—versions of you and your internal family who argue about who's driving and where you're headed. This section discusses the adventure in discovering new roads within yourself—your sense-of-self as a writer, your intuition, and your motivation—to become the person who keeps writing. These passengers need to cooperate with each other so you can write. To become a different writer, you must create a different relationship with yourself and your writing.

Where do you find inspiration to keep trudging when life gets difficult? That's the topic of section four, "Those Aren't Bumps in the Road; That's the Road." Life is difficult; resilience

is necessary to keep writing. Brain-body techniques build willingness and emotional resilience. Self-care is essential. We can't change the road, but we can change the way we travel.

The last section, "It's The Journey, Not the Destination That Matters," recognizes that as soon as we finish one project, we have another idea that calls us back to the page. The process starts all over again in a new way. Each writing project has something different to teach us. We become writers, again and again.

The writing journey is not a straight path. My own journey has taken many forms. I've sailed over oceans of time, climbed mountains and molehills, plowed past ex-boyfriends and ill-fitting jobs, endured loneliness, frustration, and bad haircuts, waded through stretches of overwhelm, swam my way to joy, and hiked with several dogs. All of it real. All of it also in my imagination.

We start where all journeys start: with a desire to get somewhere else. To get there, we write. One word at a time. That's how you find Copacabana, the delight of your imagination, the ending of your book.

CREATIVE INVENTORY

Some people want to write more or write faster; they want to overcome internal resistance to writing, or develop a regular writing routine. Some people want to start writing for the first time while others need a mid-career boost. Some are looking for inspiration, others for motivation, perseverance, discipline, mindfulness, or greater self-awareness. Some writers have no problem starting new pieces but can't finish either because they get stuck in revision loops or find the process of revision daunting. Others are intimidated by the process of starting from scratch. Here are some questions to consider as you read this book:

- What are your writing goals? What do you hope to get out of this book? Be specific.
- What are your creative strengths? List five things you can give yourself credit for.
- What are your creative weaknesses? Make a list of things that hold your back, get in your way, or are areas where you fall short and want to improve.
- What scares you about writing?