

Thursday morning, 12:43 AM –AMM

AKA Night thoughts about journalism

Expectations are tricks into believing life can go according to the thoughts you have in your head. “If you expect nothing from anybody, you’re never disappointed,” and although Sylvia Plath’s heroine in *The Bell Jar*, who uttered these words, was clinically depressed and repressed, I feel her sentiments entirely.

However, when it comes to things very close to my heart, expectations cannot help but be a reality in my mind. When I applied for Writing and Editing, I had grand ideals of what I would learn and how my writing would twist and transform into a beautiful thing that I could be proud of. Writing that others could relate to, and perhaps, also be proud of. This semester’s course was focussed more on developing our unique voices as writers and I felt it has done so to a certain extent. Personal blogs are a great idea – I have 3 ex-blogs hidden in the recesses of cyberspace. Virginia Woolf in *The Writer’s Diary*, notes how she began to see the literary value in the rough and random nature of her personal diary entries. “It has a slapdash and vigour and sometimes hits an unexpected bull’s eye”, she states. Writing with vigour is writing that I am proud of and being allowed the space on the personal blogs to do so made the personal blog assignments seem like a natural extension, or elaboration of certain diary excerpts of mine.

The beat system was a fresh way of introducing us to teamwork in journalism. The beat blog system, although still working within the relative informality of the internet, was more conventionally journalism. It showed me that story generation can be simple (with many people focussing on the same area), and by having a collective of sources to work from (as we all helped each other out), made information gathering much easier. My beat blog contribution was to help upload stories, and write the ‘About’ page and during the course of semester 2 I managed to contribute at least one story a week. Running the beat blog course concurrently with general individual blog assignments often proved tricky as my time-management skills are somewhat lacking, but overall, juggling both ‘modes’ of writing was satisfying to master. All that was necessary was aptitude and interest. The long hours spent in the AMM did not tax me physically or mentally as it once did.

Journalism, as traditionally practised, isn’t a field I want to be in for a long period of time. I don’t necessarily want to be a print journalist, yet I know for the first few years in the

working world I will be one. I want to be a kind journalist, one who treats sources and stories with dignity and respect. The stories that I like writing are ones which put my brain through mental gymnastics – not because of difficulty of writing, but because of thought-provoking subject matter. The beat blog system taught me these skills, and provided a space for me to practise these lofty journalistic ideals before the entering the world without the support structures of this course. Lyn Smerzak, my writing and editing coach for this term, was instrumental in some of my work being the best it could become (I think specifically of the NHI opinion piece, published on the beat blog). Her incisive and instructive editing, alongside her warm personality and perennial cup of tea, added to the satisfaction of writing and knowing it was good.

The editing exercise challenged me in new ways and I found out that I truly enjoyed the process of editing. It's quite startling that I felt so differently, when I assumed different personas – the first one being the reflective writer, the other, an excited sub-editor. There were distinctly different personas and feelings attached to the different processes. I had not truly valued good editing and editing that engaged with the original piece of work. I find myself re-writing pieces many times when the content elicits sensitive memories in my mind. The right words are needed to capture the ever-shifting nature of memories (and it usually escapes me but I try nonetheless). This happened when I wrote the two-story series on my journey with breast lumps, as well as the story on abortion in Grahamstown.

However, I wanted to be more challenged by some assignments such as the tentative tasks undertaken to integrate online strategies and platforms into our writing lives. I understand we all move at different paces but sometimes, it made very little sense as to why we were moving so slowly. At a third year level I expected to be doing different work to JMS 1 and JMS 2 students, however with a lot of the online journalism components, I realised my JMS coursework was highly similar to what I was tutoring to JMS 1's. The Storify and live-tweeting assignments are topics covered in the first year digital journalism course. This frustrated me and invalidated the work I had done thus far in journalism. Thus, these assignments were not particularly challenging to my online skills and it was difficult to muster up motivation to do these assignments.

The nature of writing is that one needs to spend hours on it and that it something that can only be bettered through practise and editing. This obviously requires a lot of time and dedication and although the course requirement was 10 hours a week, I know I have worked

hours more than that per week. Besides formal lectures, coaching sessions and practical times, I have been in the AMM re-working stories, doing research for stories and using the phone to interview or contact sources after work hours. This is besides the time taken to interview sources (or even having multiple interviews with a source). Often, other academic subjects would fall to the wayside for journalistic pursuits. Although I did so in the knowledge of prioritising my journalism and writing above other academic subjects, I did not like it, nor feel like it had to be this way. There does not feel like an end-point in journalism – I usually had 2 stories or assignments on the go on any given week. Immediate pressure is good for deadlines but persistent pressure led to me being quite unmotivated at times, as well as physically exhausted.

The actual assessment of tasks has been much more to my liking. I enjoyed receiving tangible feedback in the form of written responses to personal blog assignments as well as one-on-one consultations. Both forms of assessment were solitary and prioritised the relationship of the student and lecturer. As a shy person, I am receptive to this assessment. A critical eye is always important to writing being the best it can possibly be and all the writing lecturers involved in the course imparted much wisdom and guidance.

The vac work I've done this year has been hilarious because I didn't expect any of it. It was all an adventure (albeit at times a painful one). I worked for Cue in the June/July vac and in the OpenSource Newsroom during Highway Africa in the September vac. I pinched a nerve in my back the week before beginning work at Cue and at the time I didn't realise what an impact this one physical injury would have on me in the subsequent weeks. My leg was still stiff and relatively immovable on the first day of Cue. At the end of the day, Darryl Accone, one of the Cue editors, told me "to go home, rest my leg and seek medical assistance". I remember this verbatim because it knocked me down more than my stiff leg and messed-up back ever did. I struggled with feeling worthless as a journalist, invaluable to the newsroom and relatively useless. Going to the newsroom after the short rest proved to be an exercise in futility. My leg had not healed properly but worst of all, my mind had become injured too. My vac work during Highway Africa was probably one of the best vac work experiences I have had to date. Besides the excess of food and choice of desserts every lunch, I was writing stories on content I felt confident in. The stories I wrote were routine (profiles, news features, hard news pieces) yet the sources I interviewed were ambitious, forward thinking people. The whole experience was a whirlwind of running across campus and town looking for people

and events, but the satisfaction of a job well done trumped the physical and mental exhaustion I felt at the end of the last day of the conference.

Friday morning, 02: 43 AM – My Bedroom

AKA The Aporia

In Toni Morrison's piece called *The Dancing Mind*, she says that books, writing and reading are haunted by the two worlds simultaneously. However, the industry itself is summarised by Morrison as being "about creating and producing and distributing knowledge; about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one's own mind dancing with another's"

I came across the word 'aporia' in a Politics course.

Its strict definition according to Merriam Webster Online Dictionary is as follows: "a logical impasse or contradiction; *especially*: a radical contradiction in the import of a text or theory that is seen in deconstruction as inevitable"

This word means more than a mere paradox. It captures the feeling or thought of the unrequited paradox. The paradox that cannot help being one as it is a "logical impasse" and yet it continues to be so despite our best human efforts to compromise two sides or reconcile a unified meaning to things. Of course, as with good theoretical concepts, I started using this word to describe things in praxis, not theory.

Morrison brings up a point that others such as Zadie Smith, Ernest Hemingway, Susan Sontag and Virginia Woolf have brought up time and time again. The act of writing can be solitary and I confess to my authentic and cathartic writing being in solitude. Yet writing cannot exist without the act of reading and of others reading writing produced. And if a writer wants to eke out a living through writing, she must follow the industry protocols and processes that dictate many people reading her writing. This aporia, the mixing of private and public worlds, is one Morrison collapses by stating "nothing could keep me from doing it". Far from being a romantic idealisation of writing and having others read one's writing, this statement manages to make the aporia irrelevant. It still exists, no doubt, but it does not matter if one writes and reads and will not relent at those activities.

You must be wondering what the point of this detour is (I am too, the link seemed stronger in my mind earlier on). Morrison is a writer by profession and her views are different to mine, a

writer who is not in the book industry. Nonetheless, her statement that undermines the aporia is one that I fully agree with. Writing has been the habit I wish I could kick. I find myself writing things at odd hours and to the detriment of other aspects of my life (at times) and often the solitary nature of writing isolates me from people who I should probably talk to. Writing has shaped my identity as person and as I learnt in previous years of Media Studies, a person's identity is in a constant state of flux. There is that fluidity in writing as there is in identity creation and reformation. As my writing changes, I change and vice versa. My identity is not as a writer but as a human being who enjoys writing, reading other's writing and sharing her own work with others. This semester's work has let me engage with the solitary, private side of writing and expose that to people. That has been a personal achievement. This semester has shown me that my identity is woven around ideas of being a kind human being who likes writing, whether that falls under health journalism or intersectional feminism. These topics, these modes of writing, have been mediated through my voice as a writer. This voice could only have been found and been in existence on the act of completion. The act of completion is having others read my work, bring it to life in their minds and have our minds dance together.

Words: 2 068

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