Courageous, Purposeful, and Reflexive

Writing as a Missional and Emergent Task

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Abstract

Writing is an essential means of communicating ideas. However, it is also hard work. Most writers learn "on the job" through trial and error and self-reflection. This article advocates seeing writing as a missional and emergent task, a craft undertaken towards a greater good. Two different approaches to writing journal articles and books are described, each calling for courage and reflexivity. The article then provides practical insights on how to press through a sense of being stuck, before offering a step-by-step guide to responding to peer reviewer comments. We hope that this practical article will encourage the craft of writing, providing emerging and established writers with practical suggestions as they seek to place themselves and their ideas in the public arena.

Introduction

Writing is essential. To communicate our ideas, we write sermons, post on social media, craft journal articles, and write book chapters and books. However, most learning about writing is informal. Writers build on previous knowledge. We learn on the job and through communities of practice, including the ecclesial communities that we research, the institutions and organisations we work within, and the editors and reviewers who engage with our work. Writers reflect on practice. We learn through trial, error, and self-reflection. We learn from each other. In part, this is necessary because there is there is little formal reflection on writing within fields of missiology and ecclesiology. Conceiving and writing this article has itself been a learning journey on the missional craft of writing: a journey that we now invite the reader to join us on.

In her 2017 book *Air and Light and Time and Space*, Helen Sword points to the diversity of approaches to writing. Based on interviews with one hundred "exemplary academic writers and editors" and a questionnaire of 1223 scholars who attended her writing workshops, Sword discovered not a particular, universal approach to writing, but four categories that can be addressed by different people in different ways (Sword 2017, 1–2). She called these BASE habits: Behavioral, Artisanal, Social, and Emotional. *Behavioral* habits relate to how "writers carve out time and space for their writing"; key *artisanal* habits include "creativity, craft, artistry, patience, practice, [appropriate] perfectionism . . . [and] a passion for life-long learning"; writers are *social*, relying on others to provide feedback and support; successful writers cultivate healthy *emotions* and "modes of thinking that emphasize pleasure, challenge, and growth" (Sword 2017, 4). These habits undergird diverse approaches to writing, approaches that are unique to each writer.

Sword's BASE habits were evident in presentations offered at the inaugural *Ecclesial Futures* Missional Research Workshops, held online in June 2021. As part of the workshops, we each gave a ten-minute presentation on the craft of missional writing. This

article extends their reach to a wider audience, weaving in insights from wider literature and being attentive to the missional motivation and aspirations of our writing. Based on our experience as writers, reviewers, supervisors, and examiners, the article explores the writing process in terms of impetus; the task of writing; getting unstuck; and responding to peer review.

"Writ[e] with others," Sword encourages (2017, 123). So we did, sharing our learnings verbally, then working collaboratively on the manuscript, crafting a co-authored piece.[1] We bring four distinct first-person voices to this writing task (Holman 2016, 95), sharing our experiences of the craft of writing and hoping to encourage writing in the field of mission studies and ecclesiology.

Why Write?

Writing is craft, and, for us, writing is missional. We don't write primarily for fun, although writing can certainly *be* fun (Sword 2017, 165). We write because we dare to hope that the ideas we share might make a positive difference to the work of the Church and of Christians, as we all seek to discern and engage in the *missio Dei*. This is what makes our work missional: it is reflexive on practice related to mission, and it seeks to encourage and enhance the participation of ourselves and others in the mission of God.

As researchers exploring the future of the Church, we find ourselves in environments of experimentation. There is curiosity about what God might be doing as we research the transformation of local Christian communities or individual lives. There is thoughtful reflection as we consider the systems in which such communities are formed and thrive. There is creative craft as we express ideas, and experimentation as we clarify how best to communicate insights.

Like Stephanie Paulsell, we write "with the good of others at [our] heart" (2002, 29). Sword found the same: "A striking number

1. Sword contrasts co-authored work, where "two or more authors contribute to the writing and editing of a single piece," with co-attributed and co-written works (Sword 2017, 124).

[of her interviewees] dwelled mainly on their pleasure and pride in knowing that their work has made a difference to other people" (2017, 109). They know their research is important and have successfully communicated it. Audience is key here: as practical theologians, we write not only for an academic audience comprised of other scholars, but also for people in the Church and in ministry leadership, seeking to communicate to them the significance of our insights. Within ecclesiology and missiology, this is perhaps easier to achieve than in some theological disciplines: the Church-facing implications are readily apparent. Because we write for multiple audiences, our communication is multi-layered. As well as articles and books directed to academic and ecclesial audiences, we craft blog posts, tweets, Facebook posts, and short articles in order to make our ideas more accessible. However, while writing is essential in the nurturing of change, there is a lack of reflection on writing within fields of mission studies and ecclesiology. As a result, the communicative craft of writing suffers. Emerging and established writers lack access to insights learned through trial and error and expressed through diverse personalities. Hence, consistent with the approach of Sword (2017), who researched writers, and Holman (2016), who dares us to "writ[e] without footnotes," we offer these insights.

Writing and Editing the Words

According to Sword, successful writers adopt a wide range of writing habits, rhythms, and rituals. Such diversity was evident among us. In terms of editing, Nigel begins each writing day at the beginning of his writing, further honing the existing words before tending to the new. Lynne fears that her perfectionism would see her polishing early words to a high gloss before she turned to writing any more. Elaine edits just the previous session's words before turning to the new. In this, we are "staying with it," editing and improving our work: discarding, reworking, and revisiting (Paulsell 2002, 29). In relation to scheduling, Steve writes for the first hour

of every day. Elaine blocks larger patches of time. Lynne wants to get better at this!

Don't lose sight of this diversity. In this section, Nigel and Elaine introduce their writing processes. You're invited to learn from and adapt these learnings for yourself or to try other approaches that these ideas spark.

Pushing Past the Fear

Elaine on Showing Up and Writing

When I was asked to write about how I write, the first thing I felt was exposed. It didn't matter that I have written several books and plenty of articles. The old, familiar squeeze of anxiety popped up. Because writing about anything that others will read—even writing about writing—is a vulnerable act. We truly have to show up as ourselves in our writing, use our own voice, put ourselves out there. And in academic culture, which is about as "judgy" as it gets, all of that takes immense courage.

What I found as the years rolled by from graduate school, to professor, to dean, to founding Neighbourhood Seminary, is that most of my writing challenges boiled down to fear. Early on as a new professor, I feared that with the many demands of creating and teaching new courses, serving on committees, and caring for my family, I would not have enough time to publish, which in my university context would lead me to perish. I would lose my job, have to find another one, which would be difficult in light of my lack of publications, and then if I could find another job, I would have to move my household across country yet again. I saw myself in the future at the food pantry, taking home a sack of pinto beans and rice, wondering why I spent so many years earning a PhD when this was the outcome. It was not an idle fear. This actually happens to people.

But wait, there's more. I feared that if I wrote in my own voice expressing my own thoughts I would be mocked by my colleagues on the rank and tenure committee, who held opposing theological

views and who maybe didn't respect my guild or my gender. Those whose task it was to judge the quality of my work, determining whether I got tenure. That is, if I ever found time to get my writing done and then found a decent publisher who would risk publishing a "newbie" theologian. So many "ifs." All these mental scenarios led back to beans and rice.

As you can see, I have a vivid imagination.

That imagination is a curse when I let fear have its way with me, especially about what and how I am writing, because then nothing gets done other than a big fat headache. On the other hand, imagination is my best friend when it comes to the actual art of writing. So the real question here is how to overcome the fear and lean into imagination and courage. How do we attend to the negative emotions and overcome the anxieties over the "ifs"? And how do we manage to make time to write, and to focus our writing on what really matters to us?

I cannot speak for everyone, as we writers each have our own methods. What I share here are a few tips that I hope may help you overcome your own anxiety, internal resistance, or whatever is keeping you from fully showing up and writing with passion and skill. This will also help your eye to stop twitching from writer's block combined with a looming deadline.

First, let's talk about a behavioral habit: our use of time. Some writers with charmed literary lives get up every morning, take their coffee and disappear to write in solitude in their eclectically decorated office, coming up to breathe hours later with pages of publishable material ready to send off to the editor. Those writers are not us. We arise, make coffee, run out to feed the chickens, take the trash to the curb on our way back, clean up the dog sick that happened at the door while we went to the chickens, make breakfast for the kids who are probably going to miss the bus and have to be driven to school, check in on our elderly mother who lives with us and must go to the doctor today although we forgot, accidentally put our laptop in a pool of grease on the kitchen counter, have to clean up said grease, and finish the article that was due yesterday.

Here is what I do. I schedule blocks of time in my calendar, in advance, giving myself at least four hours and sometimes more. Those days are all blocked off before any other thing can gobble up that precious open space in the calendar. I try to block half a day once or twice a week for a book-length writing project that is going to require several months to complete. On those days, I lock myself in my office or wherever I need to be to write that day, and I write. I generally get more work done that way than if I try to write one hour per day. Having a weekly block of time helps me to get into the mental flow of what I want to write, and then the writing comes more easily and with fewer revisions needed. I need silence and lack of interruptions. If I can get that space, I can get "into the zone," and write with passion and freedom, and often find the writing flows easily. For book-length projects I also try to schedule a writing retreat toward the beginning of the project, a few days if possible, where I go away and hole up at a retreat center and work without interruption.

Then, each time I sit down to continue the writing project, I develop what Sword (2017) calls my "artisanal craft," reading aloud and making small edits to the work I did in my previous writing session. This quickly exposes grammatical errors, run-on sentences, and all manner of little errors. I pause to correct as I go. Not only does this polish the writing but it puts me back into the flow of thought that propels the project, preparing me to dive in again in this session.

If I am writing about a new topic that is somewhat beyond my academic field or that involves expertise from a field about which I am a beginner (Byzantine history, for example), I draw on social networks and send those pages to a reader (a Byzantine historian who works at my institution) who has some expertise in the field in question and ask for their feedback. This way I can edit as needed, and I can anticipate and prepare for some of the questions others may have when I present the chapter or article at a conference.

But let's get back to the topic of fear, and how it connects to structures for writing and the content of our writing. When I wrote

my first post-dissertation book—*The Mystic Way of Evangelism* (2008)—I asked a group of four friends who were representative of the audience for which I was writing to read every chapter and have coffee with me once a week. They were kind enough to agree. This did two things. First, I had to produce a chapter a week, even if it wasn't in final form, and get it to them the day before coffee. Second, I got reader feedback from the types of readers I wrote the book for; feedback which, though kind, was honest. They kept my feet to the fire on content, form, and voice, and in getting my work done on time. Finally, after I finished the first draft of the book, I took a half-day to go back and read the whole manuscript aloud. This time, I deleted everything I wrote when I felt afraid because I was listening to the imagined critics who would make sure I did end up with beans and rice. I left in place everything that I felt and believed deeply, and wished the whole world could understand, everything that I wrote when I wasn't afraid, but was absorbed with the topic. That process, encompassing each of Sword's behavioral, artisanal, social and, emotional habits (here time, feedback, readers, and choosing to honor my voice and passion) was the beginning of claiming my own voice, and my responsibility and calling as a theologian. And that, friends, is foundational for all the writing we do.

Bringing Our Selves

Nigel on Writing as Emergent

Helen Sword confirms my intuition that there is no one way of writing: indeed, there are as many ways as there are writers. And yes, of course one's psychological profile will emerge as we draw on the internal resources required to put finger to keyboard.[2] I came to writing in the second half of my life: my first longer-form article was published when I was around forty-five years old. For me, I consider that it took that long to have enough to say that was

2. As we do these days—though I wonder what difference transcribing a voice recording might make.

worth putting into the public domain. That relationship between publishing and having one's words placed in the public domain is important. And it is double-edged. On the one hand, the writing has to "stand-up" as worthy of being published. On the other hand, this induces deep fear (as Elaine has articulated) that it will be somehow "trashed" once one's head is placed above the parapet. Testing out your work with others as Elaine does and as we offer as journal editors for a draft article generally deals with this anxiety. Thus, looking back, what I have written is based on reflection on personal experience, and on research that I have conducted. From these come things I have learned and wish to share—things which are somewhat original, not having been said before in quite that way. There has, therefore, been an element of "downloading" and I wonder sometimes how long this might go on for.

I want to underline what's been said already about social habits: collaboration really helps! Not just pragmatically in that it reduces the amount of time it takes to produce the work. More importantly there is an interactive and sometimes helpful combative process which hones and improves the writing of all involved, a process that is different from simply having an editor look at the work when it is nearly done. What I normally do is share out the work and then we comment on each other's writing before everyone "commits" to the finished product: one that is acceptable to all the writers, even though it might not be what each would have written themselves. Of course, there might also be an upper limit to the number of authors writing: if it looks more like a committee, beware!

How to get going? I like the behavioral idea of the "fuzzy goal"—taken from management literature. A fuzzy goal has enough definition so that you know the direction of travel (we are going over here and not over there), but is not overly ambitious, nor so focused that it limits any creativity and meandering along the way. This is why I take quite a lot of care over a book proposal—not because the publisher requires it (though they do), but because it is a discipline to describe the kind of book one wants to write, including the shape and the details of each chapter. The same can

be done on a lesser scale via an abstract and/or introduction for a journal article (which really should be answering one fairly simple research question). Rarely does a book work out exactly like the proposal, but that is the point. This is what life is like, and how God works, if the Spirit is like the wind blowing where she wills (John 3:8). Perhaps we could say, to riff on Aristotle, that life, even God, abhors a straight line. The proposal is enough to get "the sails" of our writing set and to avoid staring, becalmed, at the blank page. Writing becomes simply filling out the prior proposal.

Proposals or rudimentary frameworks also offer an (artisanal) space for creativity. This is where I have enjoyed writing the most. I know there is something I want to say in this chapter or article; I know what the subject area is, but I don't know exactly what I will say or how it will turn out. This raises a helpful fear that I won't be up to it. Faith is therefore required to set out on this emergent journey. There is something truly beautiful about arriving with a collection of words that emerged from within (where God dwells, according to our baptism) and which represent a newness, originality: something we knew needed to be said and now has been, there on the page in black and white.

Because what we write emerges from within our whole selves (Okay, and the extant literature!), I have found being in touch with my unconscious to be really important. Recently the shape of a journal article I wished to write emerged on my regular ten-mile bike ride. For me, riding clears my mind and lets what is below the surface emerge. There are many ways of doing this, but paying attention to the unconscious, especially at the boundaries of wakefulness and sleep, and being aware of when the unconscious is speaking to one is vital for good writing.

This brings us to a key question: how much of oneself to put on the page? Believing there is no theology without biography (McClendon 2002) and because reflexivity is highly valued in practical theology (Graham 2017), I have erred on the side of putting more of myself in my writing. Of course, too much of ourselves can get in the way and obscure the point of writing. But so

too can an overly objective stance and "thin" descriptions that are too distanced from the subject.

Finally, in my experience a golden rule of writing is that "less is more," especially if we want our work to be read. The audience for theological books is generally people with a lot of pulls on their time. It helps them if there isn't any superfluous material (padding) in the work they are reading and they can get to the point fairly quickly. So, I've found myself attempting to be succinct in my writing, avoiding the tendency in some academic circles to increase the number of words in order to give the writing more import (Holman 2016, 92). I bring this attitude to my work as a journal editor too. It is why we stick to a journal article being around six thousand words as, if it is well-written, it should be able to hold the attention of the reader in a single sitting. And, in my experience, I haven't seen a script longer than that that hasn't benefitted from a good edit downwards in the number of words. We often become attached to our writing, but I find we don't miss an unnecessary paragraph once it has gone.

When It Gets Tough

Lynne on Getting Unstuck

Writing isn't always easy. There are times when words and ideas flow and we ride those waves enthusiastically. However, there are also times when writing is just hard work, when the creativity and inspiration dry up. When that occurs, how might we respond? How can we get back on track?

First, it is helpful to remember that writing is indeed hard work. Sometimes we get stuck because it is complicated. We are dealing with big ideas and seeking to communicate them in ways that make sense. The process of writing itself works to clarify those ideas, so tentativeness and change are often necessary: we might not know what we're going to write until we begin to write it. That, and a myriad of other factors, can make writing difficult.

At the same time, writing can also be pleasurable. In fact, "pleasure" and "enjoy" were the emotions most frequently mentioned by the exemplary writers and editors that Sword interviewed (2017, 156). This pleasure resulted from pursuing passions, experiencing a sense of satisfaction in their work, enjoying a sense of flow, and more (Sword 2017, 156–59). Interestingly, the pleasure and the pain frequently coexist. In fact, Sword wondered if "at least for some writers, frustration is a prerequisite for elation. Perhaps the pleasure of the breakthrough, the intensity of the flow, would lose some of its emotional force if writing were easy all the time" (Sword 2017, 163).

In the context of sporting excellence, an emphasis on "flow states" and "peak performance" is being extended to what is known as "clutch states." Here, the balance between "letting it happen" and "making it happen" is key. The latter involves a "more intense and effortful state of heightened concentration and awareness," occurring at "important moments," when the "outcome is on the line" (Swann et al. 2017, 377, 395). At these times, already-honed skills are utilized, and focus is "complete and deliberate" (Swann et al. 2017, 395).

Sword's work, and the added wisdom from sports psychology, remind us that while writing can be pleasurable, it isn't always going to be easy. But experiencing difficulty does not mean that we should abandon writing altogether. Rather, it can be an invitation to lean into previously-developed skills, determination, and purpose. Writing is a privilege and an opportunity to explore things that we are interested in and passionate about. This privilege and opportunity does, sometimes at least, look and feel like enjoyment. For me, remembering my broader purpose of writing (engagement in the *missio Dei*) also helps keep me focused and hopeful.

When writing is difficult, there are some behavioral tools and tricks that we can employ to help move us towards productivity again. I find it helpful to do three things: to recognize, diagnose, and act.[3] I'll introduce each next, and then provide an example from my own recent writing.

3. There is resonance here with the *See-Judge-Act* tasks of Contextual Bible

Recognize: Notice That You Are Stuck

The first task is to recognize that you're a bit stuck. Perhaps writing is seeming a bit harder than usual, or you're not feeling motivated. It might be that words or ideas are not coming easily, or that you keep being distracted. Sometimes we realize that something is wrong, but just keep trying harder, when actually we need to pause.

Diagnose: What Is Happening? What Kind of Stuck Are You?

Once you have acknowledged your stuckness, it is time to diagnose possible reasons for it. I consider at least five categories: physical aspects, the subject matter itself, a need for a change in perspective, a need to read or research more, and some sort of performance anxiety.

First, and easiest, are there physical things that might be causing you to be finding it difficult? Do you feel hungry, or thirsty, or tired, or uncomfortable? When did you last eat or drink or rest or move?

Secondly, is the subject impacting on your wellbeing? Is your writing touching on issues that are difficult for you? Perhaps the topic itself is challenging for some reason, or it might be reminding you of something unresolved in yourself.

Thirdly, do you need to look at your data or writing differently? Perhaps you need a fresh perspective.

Fourthly, do you need to know more? To read more widely or deeply? Are there additional questions you need to explore in empirical research? Or perhaps you might benefit from a clarifying conversation with a wise or knowledgeable colleague.

Finally, are you reluctant to share your writing with others? Are you close to finishing, and afraid to let it loose? Is it so familiar to you that you think everyone must know it already? Does it seem unimportant, obvious, or boring?

Study: recognising what is, judging (or here, diagnosing), and acting in response (Graham et al. 2005, 182–83).

Of course, it is possible that none of these capture your own stuckness. In that case, consider what other questions might help clarify the sort of stuckness that you are experiencing.

Act: Try Something!

Even the diagnosing can help. Sometimes, knowing what the issue is can be enough to get you unstuck. But if it's not immediately resolved, it is time to discern an appropriate response. To do something different.

If the problem is physical, listen to your body. Eat, drink, rest, or go for a walk.

If the problem relates to your wellbeing, it might be helpful to check in with a friend. It is good to reach out socially and to ensure that you have structures in place to keep you safe and emotionally healthy.

If you have been looking very closely at something, you might like to step back and look at a bigger picture. If you're been looking at the big picture, chose a small part and explore that in detail.

Do you think you need to know more? Do you *really* need to know more? Remember, you can't read everything. If you do need to read more, go for it. But don't be overwhelmed and don't be afraid to share your own insights.

Finally, be brave. Remember, you have something to contribute and no one else is as familiar with it as you are. Working as we do in the missional space, I sometimes wonder if there is a spiritual element to my stuckness, something that I need to press prayerfully through as part of my participation in the *missio Dei* (Holman 2016, 97). Sometimes I need to lean into audacity over humility, and write despite my own inadequacies and the inadequacy of human language (Paulsell 2002, 22).

If none of those tips work, press on, with something, regardless. Engage in some productive procrastination: clean footnotes, order the library book or article that you need, or work on edits for a different piece of work. Give it time. Often, things that seem difficult become clearer when we return to them.

An Example

In my research on how churches acted in response to COVID-19, I had been analysing interviews and church services in relation to a particular question and had one focus group to go. As I prepared to analyse and write from that final focus group, I recognized that I was experiencing at least two different types of "stuckness."

It seemed really hard and big. I wasn't sure where things went or how best to analyse the new data. When I tried to apply the previous codes, they didn't fit neatly. It was too big and muddly and I was feeling unmotivated.

I made a cup of tea, attending to the physical. And I realized I needed to be brave. I had become so familiar with what I was working on that I could no longer see why it was important. In fact, it had begun to seem unimportant, obvious, and boring. I know from experience that it's best to not listen to the voice that tells me my work is one of those things. Because generally, it's simply not true. In these moments, I need to press on, and so I did.

I also needed to look at things from a different angle. Therefore, I opened a fresh document and stopped trying to "fit" data into my existing categories. I started again, with the codes that came from the data. The work and words began to flow again, and while it was not exactly fun, it stopped being horrible, and I stopped being stuck.

Later, I merged the two sets of codes together, attentive to the similarities and differences. My analysis was richer because I recognized that I was feeling stuck, sought to diagnose why that was the case, and did something about it.

So, if (when) you feel stuck, first recognize, then diagnose, and finally act.

After Peer Review

Steve on the Craft of Working with Feedback

Writing is craft. Craft suggests a care about how and what we write. This craft encompasses not only reading literature, reflecting on ethics, collecting data, and assembling words. It also applies to feedback: to what happens after we "submit our writing to another . . . and ask them to show us our mistakes" (Paulsell 2002, 25). When I submitted my first journal article, I thought the writing was over. In the years since, I have realized that the period between submission and publication is essential to the craft. The feedback from the review process is a gift to the emergence of my research. I need to skilfully discern feedback and undertake the emotional work required of all who participate in processes of change.

Between submission to a journal and publication, our work will be read closely by the issue editor, two blind peer reviewers and a copyeditor. If "emergent" is an adjective, the process of coming into being, then these four pairs of eyes play a central role in the process of an article's coming into being. Sword writes that "our ability to write effectively about our work requires not only training, commitment, and skill but also a willingness to change, grow, and learn from others" (2012, 13). This suggests the mysterious Reviewer 2 can actually be a collaborator, contributing to the craft of writing.

Consider how students are taught to read journal articles. Check the title. Skim the abstract. Read the conclusion. Peruse the introduction. Go to the section most relevant. Contrast this with the review process. Four pairs of eyes, carefully reading front to back, probing for coherence and consistency. How might the missional practices of emergence, craft, and discernment apply to the task of writing about ecclesial life? How might the review process contribute to intellectual creativity and allow your writing to shine?

The first pair of eyes, those of the editor, will check for scope. The scope of every journal is outlined in their Aims (for instance, https://wipfandstock.com/journals/ecclesial-futures/). Pressing

themes are outlined in recent editorials. These are signposts. The craft of writing involves pointing to those signposts. Key phrases from the scope can be woven into your introduction and conclusion. As you submit your article, your cover letter can outline how your article is within scope. Your creative pointing to these established signposts reassures the editor, who will pass it onto two blind peer reviewers.

Two more pairs of eyes are now involved, invited because of their experience and insight. This can take time. Reviewing is a craft, likely undertaken by a person with a range of commitments. They are probably reading your precious article in the margins of their lives, balancing work and family. The editor will collate reviewer feedback. Editing is a craft, and this includes offering guidance to you as author.

How you receive reviewer feedback plays a critical role in the emergence of your article. Growth can occur in two domains. One domain is your character. The other domain is your writing. These domains are distinct, yet interrelated. Reviewer feedback can generate emotions, including feelings of anger, or regret, of being misunderstood. These are important. They need to be heard and respected—but never by the editor. Here is the process I follow after I receive peer review, seeking to grow as I collaborate with editors and reviewers.

Acknowledge Receipt

Before you read the reviews, send the editor a quick email saying you received the feedback and are looking forward to reading it and processing it. This gives you time.

Choose When to Open the Email

The response in the email will range across five categories. These include reject; major changes and resubmit to reviewers; major changes and submit to the editor; minor changes and submit to

the editor; accept as is. While the decision itself is beyond my control, I can control where I am when I hear the result. I choose an appropriate time to open and read the email, ensuring I have some time clear afterwards.

Feel the Emotions

Central to the craft of writing is attending to feelings. We are humans and the reviewer comments will result in emotions, perhaps ranging from joy to rage. These feelings need to be respected. Respect these feelings by naming them in a journal or walking with them in your body. Respect the editor by not locating your feelings in your reply to them.

Turn the Feedback into Data

It is tempting to personalize the feedback, trying to guess who said what. Such thinking is fruitless. Instead, make a table. I begin with one column for Reviewer 1 and another column for Reviewer 2. I insert their comments (representing major or minor amendments) into rows, grouping similar comments.

Analyse the Data

Something happens as phrases and sentences are detached from the editor's email and re-ordered in a table. My table now contains gold. The reviewers have given my work the closest read it is ever likely to get. I underline the affirmations, seeing my work through new eyes. Can I build on these strengths? I look for patterns, realizing that in different ways, both reviewers might be pointing to things that could be improved. I ponder tensions. Rather than rail against the inconsistencies, I wonder what can be learned from how my communication is being received. I write my thoughts in a third column. I draft some actions, which are placed in a fourth column.

Size the Task

Looking at the fourth column, I make a list of the indicated tasks. I group these into categories. These includes changes (as I agree with the reviewer that work is needed), alternatives (as I hear what the reviewer is saying but decide to approach it differently), and rebuttals (I hear what the reviewer is saying but have logical reasons for why I disagree). These decisions require discernment. As I size the task, I am pondering my identity as a writer. Is it my pride that refuses to accept a section could be tightened? Sometimes, I check my discernment with the editor, emailing, outlining what I heard from the data and what I plan to do in response. I invite feedback.

Complete the "To Do" List

With a sized workload, I consider how I might allocate the required editing time. In a spare ten minutes I can chase a reference, but I need ninety minutes to draft a tighter introduction.

Communicate the Changes

Once I complete the tasks, I write a letter to the editor outlining the changes I have made and the reasons why. Sword writes that "academic writing is a process of making intelligible choices, not of following rigid rules" (2012, 30). I need to provide evidence for my intelligible choices. Making the table helps this process, as I cut and paste my work from the third and fourth columns into the letter to the editor. This process is clarifying my voice and attending to writing as craft, the discernment by which my writing emerges.

If the editor agrees with your discernment, then a fourth pair of eyes is introduced, that of the copyeditor. They read for grammar, syntax, and punctuation. If you hear from them, it will be in relation to fine detail, the final polish.

Conclusion

This article has explored the writing practices of four practical theologians. It has outlined the motivations that lie behind our writing, named the importance of courageously finding and using your own voice, and highlighted the importance of reflexivity. Practical suggestions on what to do when you feel stuck were followed by a process for responding to peer review.

Across the four writers, there are shared themes. Readers are encouraged to push past fear and uncertainty and to see writing as an expression of wisdom and insight. Collaboration occurs across the entire writing process: collaboration involving fellow writers, wise others, early readers, editors, and peer reviewers. Writing is a deeply human yet Spirit-attentive process. It is emergent and missional.

Sword's BASE habits were evident in the article. Diverse behavioral habits relating to time, place, and rhythms and rituals were noted. We explored the importance of social habits such as writing for the sake of others, learning from others, writing collaboratively, and seeking feedback. Emotional matters were addressed in relation to courage, stuckness, and attending to feedback. Finally, the purpose of the article is artisanal—we seek to develop our own writing, and the writing of others. There are as many approaches to writing as there are writers. We hope that this article will help you find and grow in your own unique approach.

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