



Prolific Moment

Diane Stubbings

Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne

dstubbings@student.unimelb.edu.au

Review of

Peary, Alexandria. *Prolific Moment: Theory and Practice of Mindfulness for Writing*. Routledge, 2018.

In *Prolific Moment*, writer and teacher Alexandria Peary argues for a writing pedagogy that embraces the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. Responding to what she argues is the “mindlessness” of the policies and approaches to writing inherent within the US college system, Peary advocates for teaching practices which situate writing within a mindful, attentive present, and where “one’s primary allegiance must be to the present moment, not to the text, to the now of process and not the future product ...” (160). While Peary’s insights and arguments are drawn largely from her experience teaching composition and rhetoric in the American tertiary sector, *Prolific Moment* nevertheless has broader applicability, and anyone who writes, who engages with writers, or who teaches writing, will find Peary’s approach of interest.

Ostensibly, Peary’s concern is to make writing practice less fraught an experience for students. This might be achieved, she asserts, by breaking down the obstacles and anxieties associated with writing on demand, while concomitantly offering students the strategies by which they might become more attuned to who they are as writers, as well as to their own particular experience of writing. By coming to know themselves as writers, and by not fearing the existential bumps and bruises associated with the act of writing – by being mindful to those moments and utilising them in the development of their own practice – a more pleasurable, calm, and productive writing experience, Peary argues, will ensue. Specifically, a mindful approach to both writing practice and writing pedagogy fosters an experience that is less burdened by demands of genre, the angst associated with the blank page, and preconceptions of perceived abilities and imagined audiences. Crucially, Peary contends, this mindful approach, with its “[s]ustained observation of the present moment for purposes of writing”, and its employment of the breath as a means of centring the attention in that present, leads students towards “a game-changing mindful invention that pervades every aspect of composing” (3).

Prolific Moment

While the line of Peary's argument can occasionally be irregular and her discourse somewhat cluttered, she is nonetheless a passionate advocate for writing pedagogies that promote a "calm, non-evaluative, and observant" approach to writing, thereby fostering within students a "receptivity to new ideas and critical thinking" (24). In this, students are made aware of the impermanence of the phenomena associated with writing, whether that be moments of profound flow or profound emptiness. By detaching from these moments, in particular from the sensations and emotions associated with them, students are offered a way into a writing space in which "their writing is accountable to no one" (60). Further, by learning to observe (rather than be distracted by) the intrapersonal rhetoric that dogs the mind – "intertextual, socially inflected instances of language" (38) – writing students are able to access the creative potential within this rhetoric without being overwhelmed or impeded by it. In this, the aim of a mindful pedagogy is to cultivate in students a balance between mindfulness and "an inspired mindlessness" (63). The moment, mindfully observed, is, according to Peary, "constantly and reliably generative", and it is generative because of its "fleeting and fragmentary" nature (161).

As well as chapters focussing on intrapersonal rhetoric; the relationship between form and formlessness (for example, helping students to find the right moment to allow the formlessness of the prewriting period to transmute into the form of a first draft); the concurrent traps and opportunities associated with "mind waves" and "mind weeds" (those feelings, thoughts and other distractions that have the potential to entangle the mind); and, the current state of writing pedagogy in the US, Peary offers several interchapters which delineate the ways in which she applies this mindful approach within the classroom.

For those working outside of the US college system, it is difficult to assess Peary's account of the way writing is taught within that domain and how viable an alternative it is she is offering. However, *Prolific Moment* does have the welcome effect of reminding us that, too often, writing courses are skewed towards the product rather than the process, a prompt reinforced by the attention Peary pays to the phenomenology of the writing experience, specifically its physical, emotional, situational and material elements. Her underscoring of the invisible text of "asides, meta-commentaries, [and] registering of physical sensations" (53), a text that runs parallel to the written text, is also welcome, although she fails to explore as fully as she might the ways in which this invisible text infiltrates and impacts positively on the creative moment. Nor does she acknowledge the ways in which postmodern and postdramatic writing has tended to create out of, and thereby foreground, such meta-commentaries.

The utilisation of Buddhist mindfulness is championed in *Prolific Moment* as an overarching writing pedagogy; however, the necessary empirical support for many of the claims Peary makes for this approach is lacking. While her objections to current teaching policies are persuasive, they are, like the evidence underpinning the efficacy of her approach, largely anecdotal and untested. There is also a fuzziness to some of her claims – "productive mindlessness is a type of post-mindfulness" (17) – and

a failure to interrogate possible disadvantages in her mindful approach, in particular what might be lost through a consistently mindful practice. And while she cautions against “overly simplified applications of mindfulness” (10), there is nevertheless a tendency to employ the often fulsome language of mindfulness to assert a validity that is not always earned:

... a writer’s goal is, to no small extent, to slip into a state of absorption where one idea after another draws us peacefully along on an intrapersonal verbal flow, down a passage of energy and thought to the pleasure of productivity and accomplishment. (16)

While Peary differentiates between metacognition and mindfulness – offering that the former risks allowing thoughts about our thinking processes to overwhelm us while the latter prescribes a detached awareness of those thoughts – she does not sufficiently articulate why, in her reckoning, mindfulness is the superior strategy. Further, there seems to me to be within this approach an inherent danger of merely shifting students’ anxieties from the writing itself, to the associated mindfulness practices, potentially exacerbating rather than reducing the obstacles to composition and creativity.

For me, what Peary’s approach lacks is an engagement with questions of where a writer is when they write: that is, what is the imaginative space out of and through which they create and compose, and in what way does mindfulness practice enhance or hinder the writer’s ability to move through this space. How, for example, might Virginia Woolf’s account of the import to her writing of “street haunting”, of moving through a city’s streets and becoming “‘an enormous eye’ which can leave ‘I’ behind, leave the ‘tether’ of a ‘single mind’ and the ‘straight lines of personality’, and deviate into the ‘bodies and minds of others’” (Lee 413), sit within a mindful writing practice?

More troubling is the failure of *Prolific Moment* to offer any explicit account of creativity and imagination in relation to mindful writing strategies (there is no index entry dealing with either of these terms). And while there is a time for a writing practice governed by calm attentiveness, so too, I would argue, there is a time for writing practice driven by the unpredictable forces of fear, anxiety and uncertainty – what playwright Harold Pinter referred to as the “very high state of excitement and frustration” out of which he writes (Pinter n.p.) – where such emotions are not merely observed but wholly entered into, the writer allowing themselves to be fastened to and driven by those forces, no matter where they might lead.

There is much to recommend any approach to writing which recognises that the “writing self” is a “myriad of affective, cognitive, and embodied aspects ...” (Peary 153), an approach that seeks to offer students a pathway towards a better understanding of their own writing practice, not only who they are when they write, but also all the preconceptions, ambitions and feelings of inadequacy that tend to crowd the room in which they work. In *On Writing*, Stephen King recommends writing a first draft with the door closed and rewriting it with the door open (King 249), and what Peary offers here is

not only a means of opening and closing that door, but also a better understanding of the right time within the writing process to do so. That said, Peary's mindful approach should be viewed as merely one of several techniques that writers might employ in order to work effectively. We each, as writers, discover our own ways to shut out the noise that impedes our practice and to harness the energies which power it: Peary's mindful approach might help some students towards such a discovery, but it is far, I would argue, from being the universal panacea that Peary seems to suggest.

REFERENCES

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2001.

Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. Vintage, 1997.

Pinter, Harold. "The Art of Theater: No. 3", interviewed by Larry Bensky. *The Paris Review*, 39, Fall 1966.
<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4351/harold-pinter-the-art-of-theater-no-3-harold-pinter>