

5.

One thing I keep learning to recognize about writing, over and over again, is that writing turns you into a person who may always be wrong, but also a person who lives under the illusion that you may get it right someday.

At the beginning of writing a poem, in my case, notwithstanding my own limitations as a writer, or as a human being, a poem is open to every possibility I can come up with. From that point onward, every decision I make is a process of reducing the number of possibilities until I have no more decisions to make, that is, until there are no more possible decisions.

Like Zeno's Paradox—which contends that, for example, an arrow can never reach its target, because the distance it must travel can be divided into an infinite number of sub-distances, and therefore the arrow must take an infinite amount of time to arrive at its destination—in writing, the paradox is, it's impossible that I could ever reach a point of having no decisions to make.

On the other hand, if I'm not worried about knowing if a piece is done, then I can always come back and make more decisions at any time, based on my interests. Thereby reopening more possibilities to explore.

Now there's a lot of uncertainty in that method. Thing is: Getting comfortable with uncertainty is essential for creativity to flourish. Uncertainty is a resting place between what's right and what's possible, between what's possible and what's impossible. Uncertainty is a hideaway, a harbor, a haven, a station stop. Uncertainty is my ground zero.

One way to practice exploring which possibilities interest you is to focus not on outcomes but on qualities, aspects, or attributes. You might ask yourself: What qualities of X are you interested in studying more in your writing, in exploring more, in making more connections to, in discovering more possibilities about?

Take an unfinished painting by Leonardo da Vinci, "Saint Jerome Praying in the Wilderness," which I've read he likely began around 1483. When I look at this painting, I get a sense of restless activity, as well as layers of complete and incomplete energy. Incompleteness is part of its power, I mean.

You should notice instantly that it's a work in progress: finely-tuned here, slapped down there, with scorching anguish at its center. Some areas are left with many possible outcomes: like the forearm. Other areas never progress beyond a preliminary stage. The lion is still just a silhouette. My question to you is, looking at it, if you had the opportunity to paint the next thing, what possibilities interest you? What qualities would you want to explore? Would you work on the forearm? The lion's body? The eyes of the saint? Would you mess with the rocks? The background?



That's the kind of thinking I'm talking about when it comes to possibilities. Not trying to figure out what's the right approach? Forearm vs. Lion. But trying to explore what you're interested in exploring. We tend to be timid about this approach as writers. Trying not to touch the parts we think are complete. Trying, always, to protect those parts, so that we can finish the piece sooner.

Over time I've come to feel that approach is more like a route toward repairing only what's in front of me, and not being open to a succession of possibilities, of

growing in my understanding of what I'm understanding from my material. For a writer, nothing of what we do in our writing is lost, but rather becomes part of the eternal memory of being a writer, or just being.

Of course, knowing how to figure out a progression of possibilities in any given piece of writing, choosing your sequence of possibilities, magnifying these qualities or expanding those qualities . . . well, that can make the activity of writing feel impossible. And yet here we are. All us thinking we're going to get it right. One day.

And yet too: For me, that's the most freeing feeling—it really is, that I can't get it right. I can't figure out the correct sequence of possibilities. I often find myself, when I'm writing, thinking: I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I only know what I can do, or can try to do. I don't know what part of the DaVinci I'm supposed to start with. I only know which details interest me, into which I feel invited to explore. Therefore, I get to decide which possibilities to study and mess around with. And in what order. And to discover whatever happens then. And how I feel about that.

I think it's really important for you to decide, you know, what is your job as a writer, what do you expect of yourself, and what is it you're supposed to do? Because one of your jobs is going to be related to the idea that—when our conflicts are laid bare and our future is uncertain—somebody needs to write something that says, here is what one vision of our shared world sounds like.

Here is one progression of possibilities.

What I love about this approach is it reminds me that revision is neither good nor bad. It's just change, it's just exploration. Who knows what you might figure out if you also think like that. Put another way, one sequence of writing goes like this:

Write
Edit
Fix

But try out this sequence which, by contrast, seems more open to discoveries:

Make
Notice
Change

To write, to make art, to dance, to make music, is to figure and refigure. You're after not just the freedom to play, but a path to explore your interests, to probe and burrow, to alter and shuffle, to tack, to waffle, to recalibrate, to turn the corner. All in an effort to perceive existence afresh. It seems to me that working like this reveals what we all already know intuitively: the only choice is to chart your own way.

I'm not just saying that. I've tried it—in painting.

There's a photograph of the poet Walt Whitman I love, taken by Matthew Brady.

I once used this photograph as a model for a portrait I wanted to paint of Whitman. My goal wasn't to dupli-