Outside desk-work

Dame Professor Marilyn Strathern

In ‘Writing across boundaries', Bob Simpson and Robin Humphrey (2008) talk of the problem of moving across the gap from data to text - acute for social scientists for whom those are separate genres, and especially for anthropologists returned from the field who are negotiating gaps in the continuity of their lives.  Indeed, what is going on outside their desk-work is also important.  The authors return to the gap later to quote a supervisor who thought that the leap across it had to come from outside. He/she was referring to the student-supervisor relationship, and what could happen outside that, but I want to talk about an outside of another kind.

Perhaps the most useful thing might be to talk, too, less of the student experience than that of the writing experience itself.   And about something that happens not because one has never encountered such a gap before but - on the contrary! - because gaps go on opening up.  Almost every time one writes.  And when you have been writing for as long as I have (my first article was published 43 years ago) you may not only come to expect them, but come to welcome them.  The trick is that the ability to make the leap may well lie outside whatever it is one thinks one is doing at the desk.  The third person here does not of course conceal the fact that I am talking about a personal trajectory; it may not resonate with everyone, but if it resonates with some could be worth spelling out.

What initially may appear to the young research student as a gap between data and text changes colour over time.   Habituation to writing creates other kinds of gaps, such as that awful one between everything one has already written and a new venture, or between the magnitude of the field of enquiry, the heap on the plate, and the bit one wants to bite off for now.   I describe one particular gap just as I find myself often describing it to students who seem cast down or a bit low or even depressed about writing.  I am sure there are times when my comments come over rather unfeeling, as not caring enough about the state they are in.  I think that is because I want to say that, while I am sorry if someone is feeling miserable, it doesn't help for me to feed it with commiserations.  Rather, what I from my own moods can tell them about what may be happening (sometimes not always) is that the gap opening up between what needs doing and the capacity to do it can actually be a prerequisite to writing at all.   Similar gaps can make people stumble at any point or in any corner of their lives; for the would-be writer they can be the threshold of creativity.

I write all the time, but what marks off new tasks from old (or going over old ground) is finding myself plunged into something close to despair.   I lose confidence, my self-esteem plummets, it is clear that everyone has already said things better, and it had been quite absurd to take on a task that now seems insuperable.    Part of this will concern ‘data': the materials I have begun to assemble to write about / with seem inadequate, puny, unsystematic.  An air of unreality hangs over my beginning efforts, though if I am lucky that can temporarily clear by my hanging the argument on someone's else words (you know how real other people's words appear, solid and sensible things as they are!), just as I began this piece.   It depends how much time I have as to what kind of panic may also accompany this lack of nerve, but I still recall vividly August 1994 which I had put aside for writing my inaugural lecture at Cambridge, and the mounting sense of hubris (it was by choice that new professors gave such a lecture) that accompanied the despair.   About half way through I formulated the thought - or this is how I imagined it afterwards - that the depression was getting was getting me down!   It had happened before; this was acknowledging the phenomenon.

Since then I have not just learned to live with it, but have begun go understand what falling down this gap does.  It is a moment of dissolution, when past certainties melt away, and everything one thought was at one's fingertips (materials, notes, analyses) slips out of grasp.  For myself, at least, it is climbing out of the crevasse, emotionally speaking, that is the writing.   I am solving a problem not (just) on the desk, but somewhere else in my life, while at the same time knowing that without the urgency of that dissolution the writing, on the desk, wont do the gathering work it is meant to do.   The process of writing is dealing with the crisis.  Often the first draft then comes very fast, very exhilarating to go with, and the ‘work' is subsequently going over what I have written to edit it, correcting errors, adjusting arguments, being sensitised to logic, making expression as clear as possible, finding better words, and so forth, a process that typically does not stop until the proofs are sent back.

I don't think I am claiming too much to say that the dissolution in effect throws previous solutions into turmoil, shakes up the kaleidoscope, renders formless the caterpillar inside its chrysalis, and recovering some sense of form is the new work.

A curious situation arises, then, in which if I have something important to write  (I mean in the sense that I owe a decent piece of work to a conference organiser or book editor) I look for the initial loss of confidence.  But I can't fake it!    It only works if it comes for real, and the real loss of nerve is always -- again -- a bit of a surprise.

**REFERENCES**
Bob Simpson and Robin Humphrey  2008,  Writing across boundaries: Explorations in research, writing and rhetoric in qualitative research,  Qualitative Researcher, issue 8, pp 10-11.

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