**Search for a Voice**

Arthur Kleinman

My odyssey of academic and popular publication has been a search for a voice: a style of representing my ideas and projects that seemed original, enabling, comfortable, and authentic. That demanding and at times perplexing quest has taken me down dead ends, along streets that circle back on their origin, across unchartered intersections, through confusing neighborhoods where frankly I got lost, and also in more promising directions. In 1973 at the end of several years of post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard, I published four articles which largely framed my career interests for the next quarter century. Those articles varied significantly in writing style, because I found myself constrained by both theory and findings: pulled then in the direction of greater technical detail; pushed occasionally to present models in a more generalizable theoretical language; but not once finding the right balance or cadence or beauty. Indeed, I then distrusted prose that seemed either stylized or overly attractive.

Over the years, my style has gotten more spare. I use fewer adjectives. I emphasize active verbs. I am more comfortable with fewer nouns, and with ones that are the most concrete. I prune sentences more severely, and have learned to be less tolerant of long ones with compound thoughts and phrases. I feel less pressure to be comprehensive or complete, and more to be simple and direct, and to write in a coherent and compelling way. I always have written out by hand multiple drafts; maybe not the 15 or 16 that the late Susan Sontag somewhere claimed she wrote; yet more than one or two. The physical act of writing is pleasing, but also the only way I can think through things in depth. My first book, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, was 427 pages; my last, *What Really Matters*, is 260 pages. My published articles are also more concise. At 67 years of age, perhaps I have less to say that seems original and useful; or maybe I have found a voice that is more disciplined, more contained.

My colleague Stephen Greenblatt, the author of that wonderful and popular volume of Shakespeare scholarship, *Will in the World*, holds that alertness is most crucial to writing. I tend to agree, and yet the more alert I find myself to things outside and inside my mind, the more my sensibility is to distrust potential distraction and leave asides for footnotes. I have always taught my students—more than 65 Ph.D. students, 200 post-doctoral fellows, and hundreds of undergraduates and medical students—that they simply had to find or create a golden thread that unified their work, and I feel that need viscerally in my own writing—an uneasiness if I get too far away from what is at stake.

But perhaps my strongest advice on writing comes down to these two recommendations. First, if you are going to write, then write. Write every day. Write when you are most wide awake. But write. And edit yourself (and do so severely) and rewrite. Second, aspire to prose that is arresting, prose that is beautiful. Most of the time, like me, you won’t achieve it. No matter, it is the journey of aspiration that counts, that lets you weigh the best words of strong writers and test them against your own strengths, that lets you experiment, eventually comes to burnish and improve what you do write. And that will matter for your readers and ultimately for the writer in you.

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