**Writing With Your Head in Your Hands**

Patrick Sullivan

The other day while writing in my office there was a diffident tap on the door. I was startled and turned sharply. Anna, our admin assistant, was clearly concerned about me. ‘Are you alright?’ I realised I’d been slumped with my head in my hands trying to craft a particularly difficult sentence or two for a journal article with a deadline looming. It must have looked like emotional breakdown, but I’d only been caught in the act of writing. Writing is hard. If you are having trouble writing it is probably because it is hard, not because you are unusually dense. It is hard because it is an act of translation, not simply of the world into the word, but our thoughts about the ordering of the world. These need to be dragged from our heads onto the page. Some teachers take a very pragmatic, modernist, approach to research: gather your data, order your data, present your data, explain your data. The world isn’t like that, and nor is human thought. You cannot know what you think until you have put it into words. Writing is thinking in the same way as thrashing your arms around is swimming. One is the material expression of the other. Sometimes, on blissful days, it rattles along. Mostly it doesn’t. As Marilyn Strathern describes at the start of this series, first there is the challenge, followed by the terrifying intimation of hubris, fear of failure, despair, even depression, avoidance, frustration. Then the mechanics, the routine tap, tap, tap on the keyboard. Then reflection, erasure, amendment, more tapping. Always the journeyman, rarely the journey’s end. These are not impediments to rendering thought, they are the active part of thinking. I remember the palpable fear that would literally wake me in the night when I returned from ethnographic fieldwork in the Kimberley region of Australia. Unwilling to obviously eavesdrop on my subjects by taking notes on everything, I had been so much more of a participant than an observer that I had only scraps of field notes, randomly accumulated documents, odd tapes  and photos and an inarticulate sense of what I wanted to say. My data was mostly in my head. So was its lack of coherence. It was this that woke me up. I felt like a fraud. I had taken the money and had nothing to deliver. Managing panic into a thesis that passed the university’s word-length limit (some of it had to be artfully packaged as an appendix) was hard. It was good training, too, for the thousands of words, slippery thought made visible, that have followed. Many good professionals can advise on ordering and packaging a product, but there is only one way to write successfully: sit down, stare at the screen, type. And put your head in hands.

***Patrick Sullivan****is an anthropologist who has spent much of his professional life working on practical projects for Aboriginal groups in Australia. He began his life in print with the publication of his honours thesis by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1982, and has consistently published academic work in books and journals since. He is currently a Research Fellow at the leading research centre on Australian indigenous matters, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University. He is working on a new book on contemporary relations between Aboriginal and Settler Australians.*