

“Small but powerful.”—*Foreword Reviews*

the  
mindful  
writer



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# Introduction

## WHY MINDFULNESS?

There are shelves full of books aiming to help beginning writers with every aspect of the writing craft, from character to scene, from image to metaphor, from plot to point of view, and beyond. All these are important elements to study and master, and many of the books are quite useful, but at its center, writing is a less complicated endeavor than these many texts suggest. I believe there are two primary skills that a writer needs to hone, skills that supersede the others, skills that need to be practiced and perfected not just at the beginning but throughout one's career.

The first skill a writer needs to cultivate is an understanding of the inner workings of the sentence, paragraph, and page, just as a mechanic or engineer might learn how every working part of an engine propels an automobile forward. How do nouns best do their job? How do verbs suggest imagery in a reader's mind? What is the most efficient way of providing readers with as much information as possible — setting, tone, character motivation, voice — in the smallest number of words, while still writing elegant prose or poetry?

The second skill a writer must develop — one that goes beyond the adroit use of language — is the art of seeing with fresh eyes, thinking with an open mind, searching the nooks and crannies of any subject to find what has not yet been explored, or what might be explored further to shed some original light and engage the reader.

This book is aimed at helping writers nurture this second talent — seeing with fresh eyes and open mind — through a process known as mindfulness.

Let me expand: Too often beginning writers find themselves drawn to the common, customary, and comfortable conclusion or realization, to what we all seem to know and agree on as a culture: a moral of the story, so to speak. And why not? We have been shown all of our lives — in film, on television, via countless cultural messages — that certain ways of experiencing a subject are valid, acceptable, and safe.

To give just one instance, it is of course sad when a loved one dies, whether a cherished grandparent, a friend, or a spouse. It is true that our first reaction to the news is often one of shock, perhaps followed by a sense that “it is not fair . . . this person should be here still.”

But as valid as that reaction is, it comes as no surprise to a reader, and more importantly, it does little to deepen the reader’s (or writer’s) understanding of death, loss, and the loneliness that often follows.

“Writers spend all their time preoccupied with just the things that their fellow men and women spend their time trying to avoid thinking about,” the novelist and memoirist Harry Crews reflected some years ago. “It takes great courage to look where you have to look, which is in yourself, in your experience, in your relationship with fellow beings, your relationship to the earth, to the spirit or to the first cause — to look at them and make something of them.”

That’s the writer’s job in a nutshell, to look “where you have to look.” Or as the brilliant poet Mary Oliver puts it, “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.”

You will see that this book speaks primarily to writers and

often uses quotations from writers to make its key points.

The truth, however, is that the practice of seeing sharply and authentically, feeling what is honestly there to be felt, opening ourselves to emotions and experiences we might otherwise avoid, is part of every art form. Actors, painters, dancers, and musical composers have their own concerns and terminology, but they know very well that exploration and discovery are necessary to make art.

A final advantage of deliberate mindfulness is that it can help you to concentrate on your work — a true challenge in our modern, digital, gadget-driven world. Being mindful of what distracts you, of what leads you to walk away from your writing desk, of the inner voice that chides “don’t bother, the work isn’t good enough,” is the first step to turning off those distractions, or voices, and getting the work done.

It isn’t easy, but no one said it would be. Work is work, whether digging a ditch or, like the poet Seamus Heaney, digging in with your pen.

One last word, before we go forward. The practice of mindfulness is based in Eastern spiritual tradition, and much of my approach draws from the Buddhist tradition. But this book is ultimately about writing not religion, and you can be of any faith, or undecided, and still practice mindfulness.

Call it what you will, but by all means, slow down, listen, observe, and try to write the deeper truths.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS OF THE WRITING LIFE

As the author of *The Accidental Buddhist*, a memoir exploring my potholed attempts to fit Buddhist practice and philosophy into a

typically busy, overindulgent modern lifestyle, I am often asked to explain how the Dharma teachings have influenced my writing. Despite the frequency of the question, however, for many years I found myself unable to provide anything close to a satisfying answer.

I knew that the Buddha's core teachings had seeped deep into my life, in ways that I had not originally anticipated, but I could not honestly say that my writing habits had changed as a result, or that I had taken on a "Buddhist approach" to the highly deliberate routine of choosing words, composing sentences, and accumulating pages. My work, it seemed, went on as it always had: ploddingly, unevenly, and with consistent difficulty.

Yet the question — "You are a Buddhist, so can you tell us how your Buddhism affects your writing?" — kept returning, and I kept offering feeble and evasive responses. Then one day it occurred to me: my inability to articulate a satisfying reply might mean that I was, in fact, trying all along to answer the wrong question. It was not Buddhism that had influenced my writing, but quite the opposite. The river of influence, perhaps, ran in the other direction. Rather than seeing mindfulness and Buddhism as shaping my efforts on the page, what I've come to understand is that my lifelong pursuit of writing and creativity helped to open me to the path of Buddhism. The innumerable lessons learned in struggling with my writing over the years had made me aware (albeit in an inarticulate, subconscious way) of the simple wisdom of mindfulness and nonattachment presented in the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

Life is full of discontent, the Buddha told us, and that discontent (sometimes translated as suffering) comes about due to our grasping at things, our craving and clinging — the desire to make permanent what will always be fleeting. There is, however, a way to make the inescapability of discontent less

problematic in our lives. The Way, the Path, is through right action, right speech, right livelihood; through living a deliberate and intentional life in service to the good of all living beings.

As a writer, I had learned the power of releasing my control of a story, of letting the words, the characters, the images, the mysterious underpinnings of a piece of prose take me in unexpected directions. The less I grasped at and choked my writing, the more it seemed to expand into areas that surprised and pleased not just me but the reader as well. Even my “noncreative” writing — business memos, application letters, proposals, and reports — were strengthened by this realization.

From the other end, I had seen how my ego and desires would inevitably lead me toward writer’s block and self-loathing, how worrying about critical responses or negative reactions would eventually dry up whatever creative flow I had managed to bring forth.

I had come too to understand the importance of examining my motives for writing, of rooting out insincerity. Dishonest motives, such as writing to “get back” at someone who wronged you or pretending to be more decent or devout on the page than you are in real life, are as dangerous to a writer as just about anything I can name.

These lessons had already been learned and relearned many times over in my writing life, so when I first encountered the Four Noble Truths, they seemed familiar and true to my experience.

None of this is easy, of course. The deeper practice of intentional living and mindfulness remains an ongoing effort to be aware and awake, but at least I am not wondering if it all can work. I have seen with my own eyes, observed it directly, in my daily task.

## HOW DOES MINDFULNESS WORK?

Practicing mindfulness teaches us to slow down, to listen, to hear what is actually there to be heard rather than what we expect to hear, and to then slow down even more and listen more deeply.

We listen to the world certainly: the birds outside our window, or the distant rumble of highway traffic. But we also listen to, and observe closely, those around us, seeing what they are doing, or saying, or not saying, or what they are indicating with their eyes and bodies, rather than merely seeing or hearing what's on the surface.

How many times have you had this conversation?

*"Hey, how are you doing today?"*

*"Just great."*

If we took those words at face value, we would assume the second person to speak is in fact feeling *just great*, but as we all know, that may or may not be the case. Part of mindfulness is hearing what is behind the words, perhaps something in the sound of the voice, or an expression on your friend's face, her body language, a certain hesitation or pause.

Finally, mindfulness teaches us to listen to ourselves, to the thoughts that pop up in our minds, even the thoughts that make us sad or uncomfortable. Perhaps especially those thoughts.

We also listen to, and watch, our reactions to those thoughts. Because it is here we will find the difficult questions, the unanswered concerns, the conundrums of what it is to be human in this complicated world.

Because that's where we need to go in our writing. That's the part where we might illuminate the darkness.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has written and lectured



often on the subject of mindfulness, and he remains one of my most valued teachers because his message is so beautifully simple: if you want to promote peace, be peaceful as you walk across the room; if you want to promote love, love yourself and those immediately around you; if you want to reach enlightenment, be entirely awake and in the moment, whether awash in an oceanfront sunrise or merely washing the dinner dishes. Mindfulness begins with an awareness of the simplest action: breathing in, know that you are breathing in; breathing out, know that you are breathing out.

This may sound ridiculously basic, but this attentiveness is difficult — and it forms the heart of meditation. Through the simple awareness of breathing, you can eventually expand your mindfulness to the more complex and involuntary actions of your life.

For instance, when you are listening to your child, just home from school and crushed by the unkind teasing of a classmate, true mindfulness means that you are aware and present, hearing closely what your child is saying (not rushing to quickly dismiss the hurt feelings, or worrying that the problem is going to be a disruption in your busy day). Moreover, you remain alert, focused, listening — not distracted by the ringing telephone, the need for dinner preparation, or your own frustrations at the office.

In the context of writing, mindfulness means that at those moments when you are focusing on an elusive line of poetry or a stubborn plot obstacle in a story, you are able to remain attentive to the task at hand, seeing the words that are before you, hearing the possibilities in your mind, not succumbing to the thousands of other willing and ready distractions.

More than that, mindfulness means being aware of why you want to write, who you are writing for, and how to balance your desires for recognition with the demands of clear-

headedness and honesty.

Finally, mindfulness includes a conscientious and thorough consideration of who you are as a writer, where you are in your life, what you are feeling, and what is inside of you that wants (or needs) to be written.

Or to put it another way, consider the Four Noble Truths, transposed into a writer's credo:

## The Four Noble Truths for Writers

- The writing life is difficult, full of disappointment and dissatisfaction.
- Much of this dissatisfaction comes from the ego, from our insistence on controlling both the process of writing and how the world reacts to what we have written.
- There is a way to lessen the disappointment and dissatisfaction and to live a more fruitful writing life.
- The way to accomplish this is to make both the practice of writing and the work itself less about ourselves. To thrive, we must be mindful of our motives and our attachment to desired outcomes.

This book offers a series of quotations and brief responses to those quotations, illuminating how, in my view, writing and mindfulness can intersect in positive and productive ways.

The book is divided into four sections:

- **The Writer's Mind:** Where do writing and creativity originate?

- **The Writer's Desk:** What does mindfulness mean when you are directly at the task of writing?
- **The Writer's Vision:** How do writers mindfully engage their own writing, writing habits, and need for growth?
- **The Writer's Life:** What does it mean to be a writer in the world, to have dedicated oneself to the craft of writing?

You will find at the end of this book a few brief prompts aimed at helping us as writers to “see with fresh eyes,” “hear with open ears,” and “catch ourselves thinking.” You need not wait until the end to try them, and you need not try them just once. They are meant to be attempted at any time, in any order, and kept near the writing desk, to be attempted again when your writing life needs a push forward.

One more note: in researching this book, I ran across quotes from equally experienced and accomplished authors that appeared to be in total contradiction. In trying to reconcile the divergent perspectives, I inevitably decided both views were correct. Accordingly, in all cases, the advice offered should be taken in the spirit of suggestion, not edict.

And remember this as well: just as we should avoid unproductive attachment to our own thoughts or words, it is not a good idea to cling too fiercely to the advice of others . . .

**The advice I like to give young artists, or really anybody who'll listen to me, is not to wait around for inspiration. Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work.**

~ CHUCK CLOSE

LET'S DISPENSE with inspiration from the start, because nothing causes more dissatisfaction and disappointment in a writer's life than the myth of the thunderbolt.

I have met, through the years, so many frustrated writers who have spent hour upon hour waiting for inspiration to arrive, waiting for that One Big Idea to land in their frontal lobes and fulfill their fantasies of becoming geniuses. Oh, I know the feeling well enough. I am not immune to the vagaries of desire. But artist after artist, writer after writer, will tell you that this is simply not how it works — and I know from my own experience that they speak the truth.

Instead of the lightning bolt to the forehead, the million-dollar insight, a writer finds the best ideas in trial and error, in sentences that start out one way and surprisingly, uncontrollably, end up pulling in another direction, in the toppled mess of a third draft that tumbles into a pile of half-finished thoughts.

This is perhaps the first and most important application of mindfulness for a writer:

Show up and get to work, as Close suggests, and at the same time, listen to where the writing wants to take you. Understand that the writing itself will often provide far richer material than

Wisdom Publications  
199 Elm Street  
Somerville MA 02144 USA  
[wisdompubs.org](http://wisdompubs.org)

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Moore, Dinty W., 1955– author.

Title: The mindful writer / Dinty W. Moore.

Description: Somerville, MA : Wisdom Publications, 2016. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015041316 | ISBN 9781614293521 (paperback) | ISBN 161429352X (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Authorship — Miscellanea. | Authorship — Quotations, maxims, etc. | Authorship — Religious aspects — Buddhism. | BISAC: REFERENCE / Writing Skills. | LANGUAGE ARTS & DISCIPLINES / Composition & Creative Writing. | SELF-HELP / Creativity.

Classification: LCC PN165 .M66 2016 | DDC 808/.02 — dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015041316>

ISBN 978-1-61429-352-1 ebook ISBN 978-1-61429-370-5

20 19 18 17 16      5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Phil Pascuzzo. Illustrations by Phil Pascuzzo. Interior design by Gopa&Ted2. Set in Village 9.8/16.