

## Helen Garner

### Keynote Lecture given at AAWP conference, UTS, 29 November 2008

Fretting pointlessly, as the date of this lecture approached, about what on earth I could find to talk about today in honour of my friend – not an intimate friend, but a regularly lunching and laughing friend – the late Glenda Adams of most happy memory, I thought that what I myself am interested in hearing about from other writers is really the matter of not writing: about the awfulness of this thing we share, this uncertainty; yet the absolute necessity of the awfulness of not yet writing, as a stage in the struggle towards writing; about how this uncertainty manifests itself; and how it can perhaps be – not mastered, because, for reasons I'm about to tackle, this is in my view the wrong approach to the matter – rather, how this uncertainty can perhaps be accepted, dealt with and ultimately put to good use.

- Dealing with it seems to have a lot to do with slowness and patience. I recently stumbled on an Italian writer called Antonio Porchia, who migrated to Argentina and in all his life published only one book, called *Voices*. He wrote this epigram:
  - 'Certainties are arrived at only on foot.'
- And in the *New York Review of Books* yesterday I read an article about a neurologist:

He possesses a highly original intelligence, plenty of horse sense, and an endurance for the ploddingly incremental tempo of progress that makes brain science a gamble comparable to that of spending half a lifetime writing a novel
- Let's use the word 'book', though; because what I've got to say, most of which I have probably said many times before in different configurations, applies to just as much to non-fiction and poetry as it does to the novel.
- When you want to write something, you don't know for the longest time when you're working and when you're not. You don't know what you're doing and you don't know how long it's going to take.
- You don't know what terrors you are going to have to expose yourself to, or what tests of nerve and character you're going to be confronted with. You don't know which form this dark thing wants you to write it in. You

don't know what sort of person you will have become, if you ever drag yourself out the other end of whatever it is you've started.

In 2000, after seven years in Sydney, I moved back to Melbourne.

- I'd done a lot of research for a book I wanted to write about two murder trials I'd sat through in Canberra. I got up every morning and sat at the desk to start. But I was paralysed. One day the Age newspaper called, and offered me a weekly column. I accepted, grateful to defer the dreaded moment of beginning.
- I established a manila folder neatly labelled IDEAS and put it in my filing cabinet. Every time I thought of something I might one day want to write about in the column, I scribbled it down and shoved it into this folder. When the day came to write my first column, I confidently opened the folder and looked inside. All my so-called ideas were lying there shrivelled, like dead moths in the bottom of a drawer.
- Ideas weren't what I needed. I needed matter.
- I used to have to file my column at noon every Tuesday. I realised at once that if I didn't get command of the shape of the week, I was going to go insane with anxiety and ruin the rest of my life, such as it was. So I made a rule: I would not look ahead or try to plan. I would not even think about the column till late on Sunday afternoon. And even then I would permit myself only a very brief and cursory flick of the eye back over my shoulder to the previous few days - just a casual glance, to check if anything usable was poking up. Not until Monday morning would I sit at the desk and bring my mind to bear on this inescapable duty - to find something fresh in myself.
- To my amazement I found, week after week, that there was always something there. I never knew it was there until I sat down at the desk. Mostly it was something rather small. But once I started work on it, it would open up like one of those Japanese paper flowers we used to buy at the Show when we were children - when you plunged it into a glass of water, it blossomed astonishingly. I'd knock out a draft every Monday and let it sit for a while, then on Tuesday morning I would hack it back to size. I loved trying to make it exactly the required 770 words, so it would be bursting out of its skin.

- I believe now that a double mechanism was at work in me, over the two years I spent writing that weekly column. First, the tiny pattern of this weekly discipline. During the days of the week when I forbade myself to think at all about the column, my unconscious mind was working away busily in the dark, noticing and collecting and amassing; so that on Monday, when I allowed myself to look, a lot of the preliminary work had already been done.
- Second, on a broader scale: working on the columns kept the murder story area of my mind shielded from the intrusion of my anxious, bossy, driven intellect. That material, about the killing of Joe Cinque and the questions of responsibility and law that were raised by his death and by the murder trials, needed another couple of years to seethe in the dark before I was ready to haul it out and start contemplating it and trying to shape it into a story.
- Of course, during these two years of not writing Joe Cinque's story, I was completely blind to the purpose of my uncertainty. Indeed I was tortured with guilt and panic and shame. Although I was still capable of turning out that weekly column with its fierce little challenges and disciplines, on the Joe Cinque level I was a haunted, paralysed mess.
- Just last week I stumbled on an image of that paralysis in Philip Roth's beautiful memoir Patrimony, about the final illness and death of his father. His widowed father has just learnt he has a large brain tumour, and has come to stay a few days with Philip Roth and his wife at their house in rural Connecticut. One day the old man leaves the lunch table and hurries upstairs. In a while Roth follows, to see if he's all right. He finds his poor father in the bathroom, naked and in tears, whispering, 'I beshat myself.'
- Roth gives us a detailed description of the shit, how his father's frantic attempts to clean it up have caused it to splatter and stain and permeate every corner and crack of the room. There is even some of it on the bristles of his toothbrush. Roth helps his father to wash, and tenderly puts him into bed: 'I lowered the shades to darken the room.' Then he turns to deal with the mess.
- 'The bathroom looked as though some spiteful thug had left his calling card after having robbed the house. As my father was tended to and he was what counted, I would just as soon have nailed the door shut and forgotten that bathroom forever. "It's like writing a book", I thought – "I have no idea where to begin".'

- Philip Roth has no idea where to begin? Philip Roth would rather nail the door shut and forget the mess forever? We are in fine company here.
- To read such a frank acknowledgment of helplessness gives me the same feeling I get from those photos they run in New Weekly, of movie stars looking ugly and spotty and fat and covered in cellulite - a powerful rush of comradeship.
- How on earth do we learn to do it?
- My late father was a good ballroom dancer. One day I asked him how he had learnt the steps: 'Did you take lessons?' 'Course not', he replied. 'We just used to go down to the Palais de Danse in Geelong on a Friday night. We looked at what everyone else was doing, and then we copied them.'
- Years ago, when my daughter was a baby and my sister would mind her for the odd afternoon, I used to go down to an ice- skating rink in St Kilda called St Moritz, hire myself a pair of skates, and venture out on to the ice. I went by myself, I can't remember why. I was pretty hopeless at it, clumsy and timid, but there was something about the adventure of it that I loved. One day, when the rink was almost empty, I noticed a tall, slim, strong young bloke in an RAAF tracksuit who was skating on his own, with his hands folded behind his back, just gliding along slowly for the pleasure of it. I thought he must have been a member of an ice hockey team, he was so relaxed and confident. It occurred to me to get behind him and watch how he did it. He didn't even know I was there. Stumbling and staggering along in his wake, I soon saw that his whole relationship with the ice was different from mine. Even skating slowly, he leaned forward into each stroke, and drove the blades of his skates into the ice with authority, rather than skittering fearfully across the surface as I did. So I tried to copy him. I leaned, I dug, and suddenly I could feel it – I was getting a grip. I never did achieve much as a skater – in fact not long after that day I fell flat on my face on the ice and winded myself so badly that I crawled off in humiliation and never went back - but that day I picked up by imitation the knowledge that there was a masterly way the thing could be done, if only I could maintain my nerve and control my anxiety about making a fool of myself.
- This memory leads me to the interesting matter of play.
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- Being a grandparent, as I now am, gives you a second and much more privileged entrée to the world of children's play. You're older, you're not the parent, you're not where the buck stops. You're no longer in the outward-directed, professionally ambitious, striving, middle years of life, as you were when your own children were small. For all these reasons you have, as a grandparent, a different quality of time, a new quality of attention, to offer to a child. As the great British child psychologist D.W. Winnicott says, 'Children play more easily when the other person is able and free to be playful.'
- This is not simply a matter of returning to the endless repetitions that small kids enjoy, or of the stories they want you to tell, over and over, with minimal variations. It's more to do with letting go your urge to be in command of the game, and allowing the child to be the leader. Up from your own lost childhood comes floating the ability to forget the passing of time and the idea that all activity must have conscious point, purpose and duration.

My youngest grandchild, Ambrose, is nearly two. Often when I'm spending an hour or so in charge of him, I start off nervy, scratchy, jumpy and impatient. I feel like saying, 'Come on, Amby. Get to the point, man. I'm bored. I've got a house to clean, taxes to do, emails to answer, and bloody hell, look at you, you're filthy again, you stink, I'll have to take you inside and scrub you.'

But if I can hold myself there, on the ground beside the child, after a while a switch seems to click in my brain. Everything slows down, and becomes calm, and rich, and brilliant. We sit in the dirt and poke at it with sticks. I can hear pigeons on the neighbour's roof. I can smell the tomato plants. The child gives me a companionable smile and passes me a crumb of broken brick. I don't have to do anything with it, or say anything clever or analytical about it. The form of the game has not yet been crystallised, and it's not my job to crystallise it.

We're not trying or striving or battling to achieve anything. We're just sitting together in the dirt, fiddling with rubbish, and looking around.

Several peaceable centuries later, when the little boy's father comes home and takes over, I go into my house and get down my copy of Winnicott's book Playing and Reality, that he wrote not long before he died. I open it at random and find his account of a very, very long session with a deeply troubled woman patient. During this session Winnicott resolves to follow his patient rather than to lead. He refrains from offering interpretations of her rambling monologue, and simply is with her in the room, mostly silent, offering her his full attention.

- 'My reward for withholding interpretation comes when the patient makes the interpretation herself, perhaps an hour or two later. My description (of this session) amounts to a plea to every therapist to allow for a patient's capacity to play, that is, to be creative in the analytic work. The patient's creativity can be only too easily stolen by a therapist who knows too much. It does not really matter, of course, how much the therapist knows, provided he can hide this knowledge or refrain from advertising what he knows.'
- It struck me, as I read this in the context of our topic here today, creativity and uncertainty, that in this account the therapist is rather like a writer's intellect, while the rambling, helplessly searching, suffering patient is like the part of the writer's psyche that is dark, hidden, barely conscious – like, for example, the part of me that it took me two years to allow into the light, when I wanted to write Joe Cinque's story.
- 'The searching,' Winnicott goes on, 'can come only from desultory formless functioning, or perhaps from rudimentary playing, as if in a neutral zone.'
- Perhaps it's the refusal to trust ourselves to a sojourn without a parole date, in this neutral zone, that becomes what's commonly known as writer's block.
- I have a vivid memory of the day when my paralysed sojourn in that particular Joe Cinque neutral zone drew to an end. It came about through a strange process of displacement.
- My grand-daughter was one of those kids who like to hold a scrap of velvet against their nose while they suck their thumb. She called this thing her wovie. Months before the incident I'm going relate, I had bought a length of midnight blue velvet and some flannelette. My fantasy was to make her a wovie bedspread with flannelette backing, for Christmas.
- One morning, after two years of not being able to get the Joe Cinque story started, I woke up possessed by a crazed desire to make the bedspread. I could no longer tolerate the fact that the fabric pieces were lying there in their dark corner, unattended to, unassembled, wasted and formless. I'd thought my sewing machine was broken, but I hauled it out and fiddled with it ignorantly until it ran.

- I don't really know how to sew. Twenty years ago I went to a WEA sewing class and under a teacher's guidance made two skirts that were wearable; but on my own I had no idea how you made a bedspread with backing. Yet this felt like an emergency. I grabbed the big scissors. I cut up the fabric and pinned it and sewed it in a sort of rage. I cursed and snivelled as I worked. I kept muttering, 'This is fucked, it's hopeless, it's a disaster!' But I kept going because giving up would have been even more stupid and humiliating than blundering on.
- I sewed the flannelette on to the velvet in the shape of an inside-out bag. And when I turned it right way out, and ran a line of stitches along the fourth side to close it, I saw with stupefaction that what I'd made, in my despair, was good. The thing was flat. The edges matched. It worked. A kid would be able to sleep under it. It was going to be useful. It was even—almost—beautiful.
- And not only that, but my paroxysm of making seemed to have relaxed something in me. I hope you'll believe me when I say that that morning, when I sat down at my desk, I found I was able to see a starting point for the story I wanted to write, and to begin to put one word after another. A sentence, a paragraph, a page. A sentence is better than not a sentence. But before you can make your sentence, you have to live with the state of not-sentence-ness.
- Twenty years ago, a woman in a writing class I taught gave me a copy of a book by another British psychoanalyst, Marion Milner. It's called An Experiment in Leisure. At the time I had no idea what the writer was on about, and lacked the patience to find out. But years later, when I had come up against a lot more of life's pains and uncertainties, I read the book and found it to be a cornucopia of eccentric beauty and practical good sense.
- Marion Milner writes about what she calls her 'gesture of poverty.' Her account of it is so appealing, I'd like to read it aloud:

I began to experiment. Whenever I felt the clutch of anxiety, particularly in relation to my work, whenever I felt a flood of inferiority lest I should never be able to reach the good I was aiming at, I tried a ritual sacrifice of all my plans and strivings. Instead of straining harder, as I always felt an impulse to do when things were getting difficult, I said, 'I am nothing, I know nothing, I want nothing,' and with a momentary gesture wiped away all sense of my own

existence. The result surprised me so that I could not for the first few times believe it; for not only would all my anxiety fall away, leaving me serene and happy, but also, within a short period, sometimes after only a few minutes, my mind would begin, entirely of itself, throwing up useful ideas on the very problem which I had been struggling with...

...( As a child, reading) Kipling's Jungle Book, I had especially loved the story of ... a king who set aside his riches and embraced poverty, wandering with a begging bowl ... The animals had come close to him without fear. Just in the same way, the ideas I needed for my work would now come silently nosing into my mind after I had given up all attempt to look for them.

How curious this process of writing is, I must have no enthusiasm, no pride in whether I can do it. There seems always to be a feeling of futility, that I have nothing to say, and usually I try to get away from this by force, by looking for something to say, and then my head begins to ache; but if I accept this futility, give up my purpose to write, and yet don't run away into some other activity, just sit still and feel myself to be no good – then the crystallisation begins – after the ... blackness (and) despair.

- Earlier I talked about D.W. Winnicott and his account of the three-hour, meandering, anguished psychoanalytic session during which he did not make interpretations, but quietly followed his patient in her distress. At the end of his account he writes a single, simple sentence about how his patient returned to herself. The patient has been lying on the consulting room floor, abject and sobbing.
- 'The work of the session,' Winnicott writes, 'had been done. Here she pulled herself together by various means characteristic of her, and knelt up.'
- I found this sentence quite lovely – un-self-consciously discreet and respectful. Winnicott is pointing out that each of us must find his own characteristic means of kneeling up, after the necessary collapse of purpose into the potentially creative darkness of uncertainty and despair.
- This abandonment into uncertainty, we must acknowledge and accept, is a necessary stage. The problem is that knowing it's essential, and a stage, doesn't make it any easier to endure. For every truly new piece of work, large or small, we have to work our way through the same dumb, dark, complex process. We can know this intellectually, we can talk about it and



give lectures about it till we're blue in the face, but nothing relieves us of its power or its necessity.

- The awfulness of uncertainty is redeemed each time by what happens when we manage to get up on to our knees again, and then on to our feet. The process is old, but it ends in something new, though mysteriously we can never seem to remember this.
- I'm going to finish today with a remark of Marion Milner's, once again from her book An Experiment in Leisure, that I find strangely comforting, which is why I'm always trying to draw it to people's attention:
- 'Everything that one thinks one understands has to be understood over and over again, in its different aspects, each time with the same new shock of discovery.'

c Helen Garner, 29 November 2008