



*On Writing **The Practice of Embodying Emotions: A Guide for Improving Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes***

By Raja Selvam, PhD

**One thing I have learned** about myself is that I am intuitive. An idea appears to spring forth from the depth of my unconscious, without much form but with enough felt sense conviction to pursue it. It acquires shape and clarity and is reality tested in the process of expressing it, teaching it, or writing about it. It is not unlike the process that a painter might undergo in bringing an inspired image in one's mind's eye to the canvas. This I now understand and accept as my creative process. I am sure that others have their own ways of creating. It would indeed be very odd if creativity, that by the very word connotes infinite possibilities, is confined to just one way of manifesting!

**I have not always had** the benefit of the current functional understanding of my creative process, the one I have outlined above. The dominant, unconscious, and rather dysfunctional understanding of the process that has held sway for much of my life is a punishing delusional perfectionistic fantasy, probably shaped by abuse in childhood. That it flows or should flow perfectly from one's mind to paper with no mistakes whatsoever. Delusional as it is, it is an emotionally compelling conditioning, that is always there like my very shadow causing much suffering and carnage in every birthing process, big and small.

I once nearly failed a university exam in a favorite subject because I had to tear up the answer paper forty five minutes into a three hour exam to start all over again because I could not bear the imperfection of what I had written! That this reflection piece could have been written earlier, that I had trouble finding motivation to write it this morning, is a testament to its staying power. However, once I started to type, despite the resistance from the anticipated suffering from the unrealistic performance standards imposed on the creative process by the critic, it lost its power in the joy of the reality of the intuitive creative process I have come to increasingly own and enjoy as my own. Thank God!

**I often wonder how** I have managed to achieve as much as I have in this life, two graduate degrees and two doctoral degrees, licensure as a clinical psychologist, and now a book, despite having such an annihilating critic looking over my shoulders all the time. (I often joke that I should go back and get another undergraduate degree to make up the asymmetric imperfection in my academic record). I am sure that there are many alternative explanations for my achievements including the illusion of free will that would suggest that it could not have been otherwise. I have also a more down-to-earth explanation. When the fear of absolute failure exceeds the fear of failure from the imperfection in the outcome of any effort, I am emotionally compelled to act, no matter the consequence, despite the critic. In a way, I am glad that I have this enormous fear of absolute failure, whatever it might be, rearing its ugly head to become a dominant motivating force in different stages of my life. In those moments of pure abandon, akin to moments of dashing across the freeway with one's eyes closed as though pursued on the one side by a starving tiger, yet somehow unconstrained by the usual hyenas of the inner critic, I find my creative process unfold, despite myself. And however imperfect the outcome might be, there is no mistaking the gratification felt in having spontaneously created something, a gratification I long for.





**The challenge for me** all along has been how to be consistent with my creative output to enjoy the attendant gratification of embodied creativity. In other words, how to keep the critic at bay to ensure that the experience of creating is not unbearably unpleasant that one loses the motivation to stay with the effort. The common strategy of sitting in front of the computer for a fixed amount of time no matter what the outcome might be did not help much at the beginning. What did help is the habit of journaling my dreams every morning before I wrote anything else. The dreams were already there. I was not creating anything new. I was just recording them. The critic had little to say other than perhaps that I should be doing real work instead. Dreams flow from our unconscious where our creativity resides. Journaling one's dreams is also known to be therapeutic. I found the ritual of journaling cleansed the pathway between the unconscious and the conscious. However, it is the act of teaching without notes in hand that really helped me to silence the critic and create consistently for longer stretches of time. It worked out in the following way. When I taught in front of a live audience, the instantaneous positive reaction of the audience was strong enough to counter the critic to allow the creativity and the gratification it generated to continue to flow. When one is alone in front of a computer, the loud voice of the critic is not contradicted by such external feedback. With positive experiences of creating through teaching accumulated in my psyche, I adopted the writing strategy of pretending that I was actually teaching whenever I sat down to write. You might notice that engaging style in my book, that I am actually talking to the readers from time to time. Now that I have gone as far as having my first book published, I look forward to keeping the flame of creativity burning more consistently than I have been able to so far.

**So far**, I have talked about some of the ways I have used to overcome the hurdles in the process of creation. For a successful act of creation, there has to be a substantive personal motivation as well. For me, I have written elsewhere about how I needed to know more about emotion and its relationship to the body and embody them in order to grow personally as well as spiritually because I lost both in the process of a difficult childhood. Through learning, teaching, and writing about these two topics, I gained greater personal access to both emotion and body. And when I observed that these two pieces, emotions and their embodiment, were extremely beneficial to many others in improving their thinking, feeling, and behavior as well as in transforming their lives in different ways, the substantive motivation to write a book to reach more people with the knowledge I have acquired became reinforced. In the year since I turned the manuscript in to the publisher, I have grown so much more in my understanding of emotion and its embodiment in myself and speaks to the self-generating nature of the creative process and the gratification it is capable of bestowing upon those who challenge themselves to engage it.

**That emotional embodiment** itself is intrinsic to creativity is important to take note of. Creativity is ultimately a cognitive act, at least in writing. The science of embodied cognition has left no doubt that cognition depends not only on the brain but also on the body and the environment. The body that is shut down to cope with emotional overwhelm makes itself less available to the brain as well as the environment, compromising all acts of cognition. In addition, the body and the brain that are thus less connected to the environment are less connected to its fountainhead of their creativity, the collective unconscious. The body that has the capacity to bear overwhelming emotional experiences without shutting down is not only more capable of regulating cognitions, emotions, and behaviors but also more capable of tapping into the infinite creativity of the collective unconscious and manifesting them in various acts of creativity including writing.

**As I mentioned earlier**, people create in vastly different ways. That is, there is no one formula. I have shared some factors that have played a role in facilitating as well as frustrating my creative process. If it were to help at least some in finding their way to fruitfully engage their creativity, I would be most gratified.

With best wishes, Raja Selvam, PhD.

Photo credits

Hyenna: Chuttersnap on Unsplash

Flame: Myriam's-Fotos from Pixabay

