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Zen and a Pen: Adventures in Writing and Yoga

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Recommended Citation

Drake, Hannah, "Zen and a Pen: Adventures in Writing and Yoga" (2014) Inquiry Journal 2014.
<http://www.unh.edu/inquiryjournal/spring-2014/zen-and-pen-adventures-writing-and-yoga>

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Inquiry Journal

Undergraduate Research Journal : Spring 2014

Commentaries

Zen and a Pen: Adventures in Writing and Yoga

—Hannah Drake (Editor: Sarah Bogert)

I have always been a writer. I know this is what all writers say, especially those whose debut work has just been published—this really doesn't feel like my first novel, I've been writing every day since I was six, the words just flow straight from my heart to the page, etc. My bookshelves are lined with journals, each filled to the final page with angsty poetry, philosophical musings, unfinished short stories and moments I want to remember. But I won't be so presumptuous as to say that I've written even close to every day since I was six, or to claim that my writing process is anything more sophisticated than me banging my head against a wall until the words come. Writing is my best friend, my worst enemy, my loyal spouse, and my jilted lover. It makes my life come alive. But it also drives me crazy.

By the end of my freshman year at the University of New Hampshire, I knew I wanted to declare an English major. I decided that I was going to be a writer who writes, not a writer who sits around and waits for "the perfect idea" or "a steady income." I needed an experience to develop my skills, with a structured schedule and an end goal to motivate me to write every day. I needed the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP).

The Project

The Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research established the REAP program for freshmen in the UNH Honors Program interested in pursuing research projects in their field of study. REAP applicants work with a faculty mentor to design a research proposal for a project to be carried out the summer after the student's freshman year. In the spring of 2013, my mentor, Leah Williams, and I set out to plan a project that would allow me to refine my creative nonfiction writing skills. After brainstorming ideas for nearly a week, we settled on a topic that I would be excited and willing to write about for ten weeks: yoga.

Just as I have always been a writer, I have never, ever been flexible. Yoga was something I was interested in, though not something I was particularly good at. But my project was not about the yoga itself. The heart of my research lay in the development of my creative nonfiction writing skills. The proposal that Leah and I designed called for weekly posts on a blog of my own design—short pieces of creative nonfiction that I would carefully draft and revise before

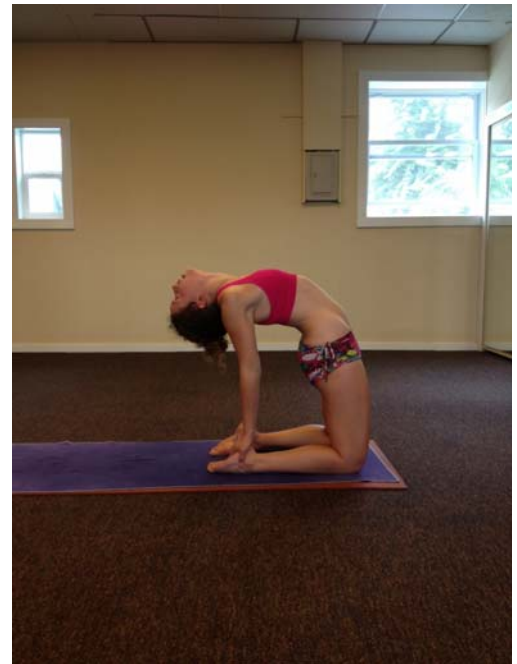
publishing them online. I was to gather information for these posts by reading yoga literature, interviewing yoga instructors and studio owners, and observing the practice firsthand through my own experience in the studio. The project would culminate in an extended research piece as well—ten to fifteen pages of positively masterful creative nonfiction writing.

At the start of the summer, I looked up the word “writer” in the dictionary: a person engaged in writing books, articles, stories, etc., especially as an occupation or profession. This project was my summer occupation.

I was officially going to be a writer.

The Challenge

The first part of my project called for my participation in a Bikram Yoga 30-Day Challenge. In case you’ve never heard of Bikram Yoga, let me break it down for you. The practice lasts for 90 minutes and is taught in a room heated to 105 degrees. Each class consists of the same twenty-six postures, meant to stretch, strengthen, and torture—did I say torture? I’m sorry, I meant rejuvenate—your body. Bikram Choudhury himself, the founder of the practice, calls the Bikram studios “torture chambers.”



The author in Camel pose, a yoga position that stretches, strengthens, re-energizes, and occasionally makes you want to vomit.



Bikram Yoga Nashua, the studio where the author completed the 30-Day Challenge.

For thirty consecutive days, I dragged myself into the Bikram hot room, and for thirty consecutive days, I came home and wrote. The first day of the challenge was absolutely miserable—the instructor kept telling me I should be “breathing normally,” which sounded only slightly less impossible than “stopping time” or “teleporting spontaneously”—but I figured that my own sweaty misery would make for some stellar writing material. I journaled, I read, I procrastinated on Facebook for a while, and then it was time to write my first blog post.

I knew my blog was going to be awesome. It was going to be groundbreaking. It was going to be hailed by TIME magazine as “a collection of short humor pieces to characterize a generation.” But after an entire day of failed drafts, frustrated sentences, and outpourings of self-hatred, I realized that standards like those could kill even Hemingway’s best idea. I had to lower my expectations a little bit.

So maybe my blog wasn’t going to be the voice of my generation, but it was going to be mine. After a week of writing, revising, and working with Leah, I hit “Publish” on my first post. Putting my writing on the Internet for everyone to see—friends, future employers, my grandmother—was more

terrifying than I ever could have expected. But as I wrote for my blog and posted throughout my project, it became easier to put my work out to be judged.

The Road Block

By the end of the 30-Day Challenge, I felt stronger, calmer, and more alive than I could remember ever feeling before. Writing became part of my daily schedule. The yoga positively affected my body and my health. After my experience with Bikram, I sampled Vinyasa, Kripalu, Yin, and Stand-Up Paddleboard Yoga, and I found that they all had the common goal of keeping me calm, strong, and present. I started to practice meditation. I conducted interviews, read articles, drafted blog posts, and kept a journal detailing the whole process. I was gaining confidence in my skills as a writer and a researcher.

But then it came time to draft my final research piece.

I had accomplished so much in eight weeks. I'd met so many people, written just under ten blog posts, read more yoga books than I ever would have thought existed, sweated so much... I wanted to write about everything. Which, of course, made it impossible to write about anything.

I floundered for a week and a half in the Barnes & Noble Cafe, convinced that my entire life as a writer had been a lie. All of my ideas were terrible, nothing I wrote would ever be good enough, I should probably have just quit and become a hobo, etc. My craft was failing me.



The author practicing Paddleboard Yoga on Cape Cod.

Releasing the Mind

Bikram yoga instructors and aficionados alike will tell you that the more you practice Bikram yoga, the less miserable the practice will become. At first, I did not believe these people. But experimenting with meditation—focusing on breathing normally in and out through the nose, keeping my thoughts on the present moment and nothing else—made the practices during my 30-Day Challenge bearable, enjoyable even.

As I desperately flipped through my journals for final-research-piece inspiration, I found a quote I had scribbled in the margins during the very first week of my Bikram 30-Day Challenge: “Breathe through it, and release everything that does not serve you.” The words stuck with me.

I inhaled, I exhaled. Release that which is not serving you.

The drafting process for my final piece wasn't easy, but when I gave my mind permission to stop fretting and simply write, the task seemed less impossible. I decided to write a second-person narrative on my experience with the Bikram 30-Day Challenge. The piece came together in time for my deadline. I wasn't going to have to quit and become a hobo—not yet anyway. All I had to do was breathe, and let the words flow.

Finding the Truth

As the project came to an end and I published what should have been my last post on the yoga blog, I realized that I

didn't want to stop. I didn't want to stop motivating myself to publish every week, writing and revising on a regular basis, sharing my thoughts with people who seemed to enjoy reading them. I wanted to continue blogging.

For the rest of the summer, I kept up with my weekly yoga posts. When I moved back to UNH for the fall, I finished posting on my yoga blog and created an entirely new blog with my roommate about college life and pop culture: www.hannahandjulie.com. We post creative nonfiction humor pieces on our blog each week; I am still using the skills I developed during my REAP project in every piece I publish.

I set out on this research project to improve my writing skills. But beyond simply refining my writing skills, my REAP experience with yoga helped me find truth within myself—a truth that has brought me peace as a writer. Writing is a tool we use to find our truths, to put them into words, to share them in the hopes of finding someone else who feels the same way. Yoga helped me create a place within myself where creativity and my own words have free reign. I have always been a writer, but thanks to this project, I am even more of a writer than I have ever been before.

I'd like to thank my mentor, Leah Williams, without whom this project never would have been possible. She guided me through my writing journey with wisdom and a fantastic sense of humor, and she didn't quit the project when I called to ask a drafting question after her bedtime. Leah, you rock! An enormous thank you to the generous donor who financially backed my project, Mr. Dana Hamel. I'd also like to thank Peter Akerman and all of the staff at the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for their patience and assistance. Thank you to all of the yoga communities that accepted me with open arms, especially Bikram Yoga Nashua, where I completed the majority of my 30-Day Challenge. And of course, thank you to my family for their love, encouragement, and support of my writing aspirations in uncertain economic times.

Author and Mentor Bios

Chocolate chip cookie fanatic **Hannah Drake** is presently working on a dual major in English and international affairs, as well as a minor in Spanish. A combination of an interest in yoga and a love of writing fueled her Research Experience Apprenticeship Program (REAP) project. She learned that "research isn't always test tubes and lab coats; it can be observation, experience, and practice." Hailing from Nashua, New Hampshire, Hannah lists this project as one of the greatest experiences she's ever had. She enjoyed posting about her yoga sessions in a blog format that would be read by a wide audience. Her satisfaction with the project has led to her continuation with blogging. After being contacted by a senior editor from Inquiry due to the interesting nature of her research, she determined that the journal was something she wanted to be a part of. Hannah, who will graduate with a bachelor of arts in 2016, is in the University Honors Program and has future career goals of working for a public relations firm, writing for a magazine, or working at a nonprofit. Whatever she ends up doing, it will entail writing.

Leah Williams is a lecturer specializing in composition and creative nonfiction in the English department at the University of New Hampshire. She has taught at UNH since 2005. Williams was approached by Hannah to work with her on a Research Experience and Apprenticeship (REAP) project and together they settled on blogging as a way to help further develop Hannah's writing skills, while also jumpstarting her career as a creative nonfiction writer. Williams states, "What was particularly rewarding to witness was Hannah's increased confidence about her writing and knowledge about what she needed to do to succeed as a professional writer." Williams previously mentored an

Undergraduate Research Award (URA) recipient, who also wrote about a journey she took over the summer. Being a mentor this year helped Williams experience the blogging process through Hannah, which will be invaluable as Williams plans to embark on some personal blogging of her own. "I love when I learn from my students," she enthuses. Williams believes that it is helpful for young creative nonfiction writers to get published early on and is pleased that Inquiry gives students this opportunity.

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