

Practising, teaching and researching medicine occupied most of my waking consciousness for 37 years. The “creative writing” slot was 5 am to 7 am. Driving to the hospital was a time to switch from philosophical to clinical consciousness, from pondering the nature of humanity to wondering what on earth to do for Mrs Smith or Mr Jones. I still start writing early, while there is dew on the consciousness. The difference is that now I can carry on as long as I like and, 10 years into retirement from all-consuming medicine, I still cannot believe my luck at being able to devote most days to uninterrupted writing.

With such freedom, a replacement office is essential. I therefore usually go out of the house for long morning and afternoon sessions in pubs and cafes, preferably where my emails and I cannot get at each other. A well-lit table, a seat at the right height and no, or inaudible, music are all I ask. In my favourite pub, where I wrote much of *Of Time and Lamentation*, the staff now turn down the speaker in my writing corner in anticipation of my request.

A lifelong habit of using spare moments to catch glimmers of thought has also carried on from the hectic years of medical practice. My books therefore begin in notebooks, emerging by a process akin to crystallisation. Eventually a provisional title announces itself, signalling and reinforcing commitment to a topic, to a line of inquiry. The lineaments of a structure loom through the fog in the form of chapter headings that both provoke ideas and give them a home. Thus the journey from initial tingles – the whoosh of a connection, the micro-illumination of a phrase, the sudden sense of an expanding cognitive space – to a completed work.

With successive drafts, writing becomes an increasingly clerical activity – synopses, cross-referencing, footnotes. Paul Valéry spoke of the conflict between the process of thinking and the products of thought. Teasing out an idea is fundamentally different from seeing where it might fit into a publishable book. Since I wrote for 25 years and received 138 rejections before having anything substantial accepted, the knowledge that what I am writing will be published more than compensates for the descent from vision to revision.

Writing in public spaces checks any inclination to preciousness about “the creative process”. Being used to practising medicine in the noisy setting of a hospital, I can be distracted only by loud solipsists on mobile phones. Their mind-curdling monologues have unique powers to penetrate a cognitive balaclava that can exclude everything else. The chastening presence of humanity beyond the computer screen is a constant reminder that the luxury of “the examined life” is possible only for those who are not being examined too rigorously by life or relentlessly interrupted by the needs of others – the woman coping with the effects of a stroke, the parent whose consciousness is divided into 10-second epochs by a demanding toddler.

We are changed as much by writing books as by reading them. This has been especially true of *Of Time and Lamentation*. By far the most ambitious of my books, and over a decade in the making, it has altered me more than any of its 30 or more predecessors. Consequently, by the time its final sentence was revised for the last time, the seeds of the next book were already sprouting in the notebooks.

Borges’s characterisation of the aesthetic experience as the “perpetual imminence of a revelation that never comes” seems to apply equally to philosophy. An essential something – between an intuition and an idea that has toyed with me since I was a teenager – remains unexpressed. I sometimes suspect that I have been defeated by an idleness disguised as industry. I should have struggled harder, paused longer before sliding off into fluency. This fear is compounded by the discouraging actuarial probabilities haunting the life of a 70-year-old. I imagine that the unexpressed thought is out there after all, in the contrail of publications, and it will be visible to the ideal reader (note the realism of the singular) whom writers address.

My day often ends with feeding the shredder. I am at present working through the accumulated manuscripts of half a century. Liberated from the loft where they have been turning to peat, pages are allocated to either the archive or the council tip. It is chastening to think that paper spaghetti harvested in black bags once carried the hopes and excitements of other writing days when the revelation seemed close.

(Raymond Tallis, philosopher, creative writer, cultural critic, and retired medical physician, talks about his writing day. *The Guardian*, 29 April 2017)