Write, Write, Write!
***or* Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway**
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At our NMCOP conference last March (2004), I felt like a child let loose in a candy store. There was so much that was delicious to choose from, so many stimulating choices that it was hard to choose. Returning home, my mind was buzzing with ideas, some of which were about writing; I had attended two excellent programs on writing, and both were percolating within me.

I came to professional writing quite late in my career. I have had several papers and a book published (Farber 1991, 1997, 2002, 2003, two in press) and several other papers and a second book in progress. Had anyone told me ten years ago that I would do this, I would have laughed in disbelief. Write a book? Me? I could write a book the same way I could be an astronaut or a prima ballerina! I say this because unconscious conflicts about writing, especially writing for publication, had stood in my way for many years. I thought I would share some of my thoughts and experiences with my colleagues who may be considering writing, who have been struggling with writing, who think about writing but simply avoid it, or who write but never send anything out for publication, as I did for so many years. There are some very good reasons to write. First, even if what is written is not very good, the very act of writing allows one a certain freedom to play with ideas that can be not only satisfying but exhilarating. If you write without expecting it to be good or publishable, then you have nothing to lose but a lot to gain. As Janis Joplin sang in *Me and Molly Magee*, freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. When we can let ourselves play with ideas, without judgment or expectation, then we can begin to take these same ideas seriously. When we begin to take our ideas seriously, quite naturally we would want to communicate them to others, and this is where getting editorial help, presenting papers, and submitting them for publication come in. When we do not allow ourselves to write, theory building does not advance and the literature is impoverished.

Although I have been in the field since 1970 when I got my MSW at Hunter, I have been a budding writer ever since adolescence when a neighbor gave me a dime store diary with lock and key (yes, Virginia, there were dime stores then) and told me to write something in it every day—my thoughts, feelings, observations. I was twelve or thirteen at the time, and having come from a family in which what I thought or felt was not valued, the idea that my thoughts and feelings were important enough to record was a novel and exciting idea. I rode the New York subways home from high school and jotted down observations about people on the train, or my thoughts and feelings. I slipped the little volume under my mattress to keep it safe from eyes not meant to see it, until the next morning when I would slip it back into my book bag and take it with me. I had joined the ranks of teenage girls who confide in a journal or diary, and although I did not know it then, I came to realize in retrospect that I was writing for an Other, an idealized reader (Mallon 1984) who would read and accept without judging.

In a high school writing class, a very talented teacher introduced me to the stream of consciousness or free writing technique used by many writers of fiction and poetry, of which James Joyce's *Ulysses* is probably the best-known example. He told us to allow our minds to wander wherever they wanted, not censoring anything that we might ordinarily censor. (Those of you who attended Kent Jaratt's and Madelon Sprengnether's workshop "Where Does Writing Begin and How Does it Develop?" have already had a taste of this.) I began to write in that mode, which I came to know later was akin to the process of free association. I was astounded and intrigued by the primitive, strange things I was writing, so very different from what my usually logical mind produced. I wanted to understand it and kept a journal until I entered psychoanalysis while in college. I found in my analyst an ideal listener. I gave up journal writing but as an English major concentrating on writing, I went on to write poems, stories, and even short plays. I wanted to be a writer and so after graduation, I looked for a job in the publishing field, but was told to come back after I had built up my typing speed, and there would be a job waiting for me. While practicing touch typing and becoming bored to death, I looked elsewhere for an interim job and took a position doing recreational therapy in a small private psychiatric hospital in New York, which was in those days an "electroshock factory." That is how my career in the mental health field was launched, and I never did learn touch-typing.

I found the patients fascinating. Immediately I recognized one man as a well-known novelist; in fact, I had read one or two of his books. How exciting it was to get to know him and to learn so much from

talking with him. I discovered that there was a certain pattern to his illness. He would enjoy, as many writers and other creative people do, a mild hypomanic state while writing, but after completing and submitting the manuscript, he would sink into a deep depression and have to be hospitalized, something which had occurred several times. That was the beginning of my long-standing interest in the relationship between creativity and mental illness and my career in the mental health field. I thought that my wish to be a writer was not to be fulfilled.

Some time later I got my MSW, then some years later trained with Gertrude and Ruben Blanck, Patsy Turrini, Joyce Edward, and Donald Kaplan. I loved writing papers, and at this time, began to develop a conception of the therapeutic action of psychoanalytic treatment. I jotted down some ideas but did not have the confidence to develop them further. I read many professional papers, and some of them were written by people I knew. I envied them their status as published authors and did not like the hateful way my envy made me feel and think. But still, I never submitted anything I had written for publication. After several years in a psychoanalytic study group led by Martin Bergmann, I decided to get my doctorate in clinical social work. Included in the application was an essay I had to write about why I wanted to get the doctorate, and I wrote that the primary motivation was to resolve a conflict or inhibition about writing professionally. (*Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, the title of a pop psychology book that I never read, came to mind.) I had struggled with my anxieties about writing over and over in my analysis, but I suspected that if I were required to write lots of papers and a dissertation, that experience might get me to do some more self-analysis to face and resolve the conflict. It was much the same as what Freud (1926) recommended to patients who were phobic; put yourself in the situation that elicits anxiety and observe the thoughts that emerge. At around that time, a colleague had a paper published in the *Clinical Social Work Journal*, and there I was, envious once again. Not only that, but I found her paper faulty along several critical lines, so I sat down and wrote a long letter to the editor about it. To my great surprise, it was published in the next issue of the journal as a short paper (Farber 1991). That was my first professional publication, painless for me because I did not send it out with the intention of being published.

In a research course for my doctorate, I discovered something that fascinated me, a very strong correlation between bulimic and self-mutilating behavior, but found nothing that might explain this correlation. In requirement for the degree, I had to design and conduct an empirical study and decided upon a study that might explain how and why these two self-harm symptoms were related. This very complex study took several years and became the adventure of a lifetime. My findings and their implications were, I knew, valuable, and I wanted them known, but the study was far too complex to write up as a journal article. I knew that dissertations are usually read only by the three people on ones dissertation committee, and once mine was defended, would sit on a shelf in the N.Y.U. library gathering dust. This dissertation (Farber 1995) deserved more and I began to play with the idea of turning it into a book. I had always wanted to write a book, but never really took that wish seriously. It was in the nature of a wishful fantasy that would never be realized. But I began to take it seriously. I had gotten my PhD late in life, and realizing the passage of time, I wanted it to have real meaning and functional value for others in the field. That meant writing for others to read, which translated into writing a book. Two publishing companies were interested and I signed a contract with Jason Aronson in September 1995, agreeing to submit the finished manuscript by September 1996. Once signing the contract I found myself so intimidated by what I had done that I wrote nothing for that year other than the book's title and an outline. Then I wrote a clinical paper on the same subject (Farber 1997) and submitted it to the *Clinical Social Work Journal*. This publication was not nearly as painless as the first, but fortunately Carolyn Saari, editor of the journal, came to my rescue with very clear direction and useful criticism for revision. After two revisions, it was finally ready for publication.

I had already joined a group for artists and writers, not yet identifying myself as a writer but as a psychotherapist with a personal and professional interest in the creative process. I soon began to realize that maybe I was a writer, but an "in the closet" writer. Coming out as a writer was a strange process. This group met monthly, and at each meeting, one member would present a current project, reading from a chapter he had written, or demonstrating a new painting technique. Some of them had well-established careers, with shows in galleries and books on the shelf at Barnes and Noble. The meetings were fascinating and fun. When I got my book contract, the support I received was wonderful. Finally it was my turn to speak about my project, this book I was supposed to be writing but was not writing. I had even begun very tentatively to identify myself as a writer, half expecting someone in the group to contradict me. "You're no

writer! Who do you think you're fooling?" The day before my presentation, I panicked. There was not even the beginning of a first chapter to tell them about. Would I open my mouth only to reveal myself publicly, not as a writer, but as a fraud or a liar? That thought was just what I needed to begin my first chapter the day before the presentation. Years of free association have made me pretty honest and straightforward, so the following day, I told them the story just as it happened, a true confession. To my surprise, they howled with laughter, the laughter of recognition. I discovered that so many of them had thought of themselves as frauds early on, and had the same difficulty in thinking of themselves as artists or writers. I had joined the fellowship.

While writing my book, I imagined that no one would ever read it or buy it, alternating with fantasies that it would sell like hotcakes, or at least like *Gone With the Wind*. The writing took around three years, three years that turned my life upside down as I found that I loved writing, that it made me feel happier than just about anything else. I stayed up late writing when I was on a roll. (I recently discovered that I have a case of what Edgar Allan Poe called "the midnight disease" or hypergraphia, when the urge to write could strike late at night or the wee hours [Flaherty 2004]). I loved the process of writing even more than the idea of being published, which made me anxious. I really did not want the writing to end, and so I procrastinated submitting the final manuscript. I wanted to remain pregnant with the book but did not want to deliver this baby into the world. Perhaps not everyone would love it as I did. Perhaps I would be harshly criticized. Despite my best efforts to deal with the very complex issues of writing about one's patients, I worried that writing about them might affect them adversely. I worried that perhaps some colleagues would envy and hate me for having written a book, just as I had envied and hated others who were published. I identified with the novelist patient who took a nosedive into a major depression when he delivered his "baby," and I was afraid.

But finally I submitted the extremely long manuscript. This was a very big baby. (When you've had a lot to say for so long, but never get to write it, it builds up.) There was a sadness, a feeling of loss, but along with it great pride. I had had so much to say for so long, and finally could articulate it on the page. I had even included and further elaborated on my concept of the therapeutic action of psychoanalytic treatment (Farber 2000, pp. 493-496), the concept I had been thinking about since 1977, when I trained with Gertrude and Ruben Blanck, Patsy Turrini, Joyce Edward, and Donald Kaplan. The publisher edited out four whole chapters, telling me that I really had two books there. Puzzled, I asked what the second one was but he said that I would have to figure that one out myself. After awhile I did
and decided that I would write a second book on ecstatic experience, which is in the works. And in the midst of all this, I realized that I really had been a writer all along, but now had become a published writer.

I came across a paper by Jill Scharff (2000) that just astonished me. It was as if she had been alongside me throughout this personal evolution and had written the paper just for me. It may speak to some of you in the same way. In considering the preconscious and unconscious constraints about clinical writing that clinicians impose upon ourselves, she said:

> They may rework a piece of writing endlessly in the hope that it will be perfect. Having finished it, they may hold it too dear to let it go to the publisher. They may foreclose the possibility of writing a good enough paper or book by unrealistically expecting their written work to make them rich, famous, respected, admired, loved, on the one hand, or criticized, envied, and hated on the other. Worst of all, perhaps, is the fear that after going through all it takes to produce a text, they (and their work) may be ignored. (Scharff 2000, p. 433)

Scharff concluded that writing has many and varied meanings, conscious and unconscious, for the analyst who would also be a writer. She also stated that "thinking about the impact of writing, preparing for it, evaluating social constraints, and analyzing internal inhibitions can free clinicians to take their place as contributors to the literature, to the benefit of present and future analyses and therapies." Then I read another paper that just about took my breath away, Caroline Ellman's (2000) paper, "The empty mother: women's fear of their destructive envy." Ellman maintains that envy is a universal part of female development with more or less destructive effects on a woman's personality. She has found that guilt about these envious feelings often leads to profound inhibitions and masochistic behavior, but that interpreting a woman's fear of her destructive envy can free her to be more creative. Ellman too was speaking to me. As I had become more consciously aware of my destructive envy, I felt less guilty and more entitled to my

creativity and ambition. And with this, I felt less envious of others; a lighter, wonderful freedom, and it became easier for me to tolerate others' envy of me. (For an absolutely hilarious laugh-out-loud account of a writer's envy of other writers, read the chapter that Anne Lamott (1994) calls "Jealousy" in her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*.)

Despite having gotten a late start, I write a lot professionally, more than I ever imagined I would. I have even written a paper about the process of writing and about introducing writing into psychoanalytic treatment (in press). After all the years of writing in relative isolation, one of the wonderful pleasures of publication is that it has brought me in contact with so many interesting people I would otherwise not have known and has opened up some lovely opportunities. I enjoy being a mentor of sorts to others who have begun to write, a new role which I welcome. As I get older, it is a comfort to know that my publications will remain after I am gone. And I hope that sharing my struggle to write will tap into yours to help ease the anxiety about writing. I welcome your response (Sharon_Farber@psychoanalysis.net).

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