



My Most Treasured Moments as a Writer

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I THINK EVERY WRITER TREASURES those rare times in the process of writing a long piece of work when you lose yourself in the writing so completely that you forget yourself. You don't hear the phone ringing and you don't feel hunger's gnaw. Unaware of your surroundings, you are deaf to the world and its intrusions, oblivious to passing time. Inoculated in this way against distraction, your mind is one-pointed – your focus honed to a needle sharpness – and your thoughts start pouring onto the page almost as if bypassing consciousness itself. At such times, concentrating is not something you *do*. It's more like something you *are*.

Writers often refer to this state as being in 'the zone'. They long to reach it, because once inside it one feels effortlessly productive, all conquering, masterful. But it is not a biddable state of mind. If you are lucky it will descend upon you and submerge you, but you cannot click your fingers and summon it into being. You cannot *think* your way into it, either, only *sink* into it, becoming so absorbed in the work at hand it's as if the words you write are not being actively thought up so much as channelled.

There is a technical term for this kind of whole body experience, and that is 'Flow'. Named in the mid-twentieth century by the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, it describes a mental state characterised by an intense absorption, the loss of self-consciousness and an altered perception of time.

Flow experiences are deeply rewarding because they arise when our skill



level is perfectly matched to the challenge we've set ourselves. Too big a challenge and we become anxious, too little, and we become apathetic. But when the means is equal to the task it gives rise to a glowing satisfaction. And the glow is literal, because when a person is inside 'flow' their capillaries dilate, their face flushes, heat radiates off them in smug little waves.

Csikszentmihalyi was interested in the 'Philosophy of Optimal Experience' and its links to happiness. But I am more interested in flow as a creative state – the way it merges action and awareness, the clarity it brings, how you are both in control of your output – which seems to spring fully-formed onto the page – and yet somehow, at the same time, out of control. Flow is a profoundly ego-less experience.

I wonder sometimes if the concept of flow explains those states of automacity that characterise the 'inspired' writings of religious mystics, when reams of spiritual work are produced in a matter of weeks or days. The cultural critic Jonathan Rowson points out that, at root, flow is less a virtue than a form of pleasure. He cautions that it might not always lead to desirable qualities of character but might just as likely yield atomized feelings of hedonism – disconnected, disorientated and alienated – not unlike the zoned-out state of online gamers, glued to their screens for hours. He may be right, but if you can get into a state of zoned-out pleasure and actually produce something worthwhile, I can't really see the problem.