

Riding the Wave of Words: A Q & A with Virginia Frances
Schwartz
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How many times have you sat staring at a blank Word doc and thought, "I just have to get something on the page...anything"?

But getting "something" on the page isn't as easy as you tell yourself it should be. Your mind begins to wander, you're suddenly craving a Danish, or you need to get one more coffee refill, or pick up the dry cleaning. Distractions are endless it seems.

When I feel the impulse to reorganize my spice rack before I can sit down to write, I pick up the yoga schedule for the studio nearest to my apartment. After a yoga practice, I don't feel the tumble of thoughts from the day spinning around in my brain. I don't think so much about what I should be doing and most importantly, I can be present enough to sit down and get that "something" on the page.

So when Writers' Program instructor Virginia Frances Schwartz had the idea to form a course around the idea of a physical practice, I was intrigued. Generously, Virginia sat down to share some thoughts on yoga, writing, and her upcoming course, Moving into Stillness: A Yoga-Based Writing Workshop (Online).

How did you start practicing yoga? How has it helped your writing practice?

I began yoga in 1974 after a traumatic loss. My mind and emotions were reeling and I had no discipline of any kind. From the very first class, yoga challenged me to concentrate and heightened my awareness of all the ways I was tight, physically and mentally; it offered possibilities, pathways for my sorrow to transform itself. With practice, hatha yoga altered my internal

processes - mental attitudes, mood, and awareness. My emotions stopped fluctuating. I could finally sit still and focus. Natalie Goldberg says, "Writers need peace at their backs." After years of asana and meditation, I made the transition to a writing practice, something I wanted since I was very young. I viewed my restlessness, spinning thoughts and self-doubt with more attachment, creating enough internal space to allow myself to enter the river of creativity that I always sensed within. I stopped fighting myself and began to trust. The discipline and strength my body gained through yoga spilled into my writing practice. I showed up when I said I would. One hour stretched into five. I've been riding the wave of words ever since.

What was your impetus to create the course "Moving into Stillness: A Yoga-Based Writing Workshop"?

In the final week of "Meeting the Muse", a course I teach online for the Writers' Program about building a writing practice, I give students techniques to propel them to continue their writing. We discuss stillness, mindlessness, the artistic coma and meditation. Students, most of whom have never meditated or cultivated stillness, are intrigued by the ideas. But then the course ends. So that was the launch pad for "Moving Into Stillness". Now we have the opportunity to actually practice these techniques in a supportive environment.

But what really inspired me to teach these methods online comes from teaching a yoga-based writing course at the Sivananda ashram. My students there already have a yoga practice; they are very aware of the presence of stillness within them and eager to develop it. When I witnessed how receptive they were to mining yogic postures and philosophy to expand their writing practice, I knew I wanted to bring this course to my UCLA Extension students.

What aspects of Indian philosophy will the course focus on?

Ahimsa. Meaning we respect all beings, all things. When writers have compassion for themselves, they can begin to release the ego's doubts that paralyze them. They become aware of the many barriers that are self created. If we created them, we can undo them. That's freedom.

Surrendering. Non attachment. Meaning we release what we cannot control. This frees us to do what we can, the work at hand.

Prana. This is energy we can tap into, the force strong enough to create the whole universe. It's within all living things. It's embedded in words. Words are seeds, shining with story potential.

How do you think practicing a physical discipline helps writers access their "creative core"?

Physical discipline and using movement to still can, over time, allow us to distance ourselves from obstacles we all face. Whether it is restlessness, compulsive thinking, laziness or fear, a physical discipline like yoga, running or swimming can cut through the haze and allow us to renew, relax and energize. When we overcome our limitations, we contact our higher selves and draw in prana. Doing something physical is an easy way to access this. The body and mind are so interconnected that what we do to one affects the other.

You say in your syllabus, "This still center is the creative mind." Can you elaborate?

When we are centered like tall archers, our arrow strikes straight. As writers, when we sit in our center, our words are true. Fresh drafts flow from original mind, the creative core within us.

What will writers be able to take away from a course like this?

The barriers to writing are both internal and external. Time and obligations are seen as the writer's enemies. This course will teach simple techniques to harness activities we must do anyway and use them as ladders to access stillness. When we consciously and intentionally use movement, we can ready ourselves to listen to the voice buried within us. We'll also incorporate brief schedules of yoga or other physical disciplines to sharpen our minds and awaken our inner muse.

Anything else you'd like to add?

To be a writer is to enter a great training of mind and body. Writers are warriors. In Virabhadrasana 2 or Warrior 2, the yogi writer is rooted to the earth, but stretches their swordlike arms through self-doubt and turmoil to inform the universe they will stand their ground and write no matter what. But writers also need to surrender. In a Restorative or supported Child's Pose, the yogi opens their hearts and minds to the universal energies or prana to flow through them and bring soothing inspiration and perhaps, the next scene.

The new course *Moving into Stillness: A Yoga-Based Writing Workshop (Online)* is open for enrollment, no experience necessary.

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