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Come in...and be captivated...

Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:
Give writers suggested hints,
resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you
feel is most helpful and derive
inspiration from it- most importantly,
HAVE FUN!

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say
you're doing an art project and you want
to spice it up a bit. You reach into a
seemingly bottomless box full of
colorful art/craft supplies and
choose only the things that speak to
you. You take only what you need to feel
that you've fully expressed yourself.
Then, you go about doing your individual
project adding just the right amount of
everything you've chosen until you reach
a product that suits you completely. So,
this is on that concept. Reach in, find
the things that inspire you, use the tools



"Arts and Crafts" N.M.B Copyright 2008

that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Craft Box Contributor Bio: Denise Powell is the Founding Editor of *The Voices Project*, an online literary publication to promote self-expression and encourage social change (www.thevoicesproject.org). She holds dual B.A. degrees in English and Journalism from the University of Iowa and was a student of the university's Undergraduate Poetry Workshop. Her writing has appeared in various publications including: *The Pulchritudinous Review*, *Principles of Water Resources* (Wiley Publishers), Nigel Barker's *Beauty Equation*, *Poetry Pacific*, and *Women, Work, and the Web: How the Web Creates Entrepreneurial Opportunities* (Scarecrow Press). Recent works can be found on her poetry blog: www.writingsbydcp.blogspot.com.

Denise has 10 years of experience in the publishing industry, particularly in higher education, as Associate Editor for Wiley Publishers and Senior Project Manager for Partner in Publishing. She is a member of the U.S. Board of Directors for OrphanAid Africa (www.oafrica.org), a non-profit organization based in Ghana, West Africa, which provides support to the

families of vulnerable children. An avid traveler and impassioned risk-taker, Denise has visited 43 countries and believes in promoting human rights internationally and domestically. She currently resides in Boulder, Colorado.

Unleashing Creativity Through Travel: A Brief Guide

by Denise Powell

May 2008

Ghana, West Africa

Onlookers gawked at the edge of a red dirt soccer pitch replete with deep divots that threaten to sprain the ankles of barefoot players. This was a big game—the village kids against the OAfrica team. The furious footwork and determination of each of the teenage players was impressive, despite the poor condition of the field and total lack of footwear. Watching the impassioned crowd, it was obvious that soccer is more than a beloved sport in Ghana—it's a source of great pride and identity.

My husband and I came to Ghana to work at OAfrica, a center that helps reunite orphans and vulnerable children with their families. The center housed children in transition and we had gotten to know many of them quite well after a few weeks.

Amid the loud cheers from the sidelines, Patience, a 15-year-old girl who lived at the center, came and sat next to me with her notebook in-hand. Behind her quiet, kind façade was a fearless nature. She had a heart-shaped face and a wide smile. It was obvious she felt comfortable around me. She held out her notebook, and sheepishly asked me to help edit her poems for her English class and told me how she loved to write poetry. I quickly lost interest in the game and turned my attention to the young girl standing in front of me, as I discovered my passion for poetry at her age. While I did not know the full details of Patience's background, I did know that her life thus far had not been easy. However, despite all the loss and turmoil she had endured at her tender age, Patience was bravely optimistic about her direction in life and her place in the world.

How Travel Inspired Me

Working with Patience was the catalyst for me to start *The Voices Project* (www.thevoicesproject.org), an international online platform for women to express their personal stories and observations through poetry to help promote social change. She was among my very first contributors with her piece “Poverty Poem.” In her poem, she writes, “*If you gain success, do not abandon your friends. Help them too and food shall bless you.*” Seeing through her lenses serves as a gentle, yet powerful, reminder to remain grateful—a message that has the potential to benefit everyone.

My work with vulnerable children in Ghana was a significant inspiration for me. It was creatively beneficial to be completely outside my element in order to shift my perspective of the world and see how there is a large part of the world’s population that struggles to survive. One surprising observation was that despite all the hardship that the individual children living at OAfrica endured, such as abuse, parental absence, and their limited material possessions, they were happy and also admirably strong-minded.

Courage, a young boy of about 7-years-old, was undergoing rehabilitation after being rescued by OAfrica. He had Cerebral Palsy and was an orphan who had been residing at an orphanage where he essentially spent his days underneath a bed, was never mentally or physically stimulated, so he could not walk or talk when he came to our organization. As a licensed massage therapist, I was privileged to work alongside the physical therapist on-site to assist in his remarkable rehabilitation. He is currently thriving, walking with a walker, and talking.

Below is a poem I was moved to write about my experience with Courage:

~Unraveled~

*An arrow is drawn in the sand
leading toward a mud hut
on the left side of the compound.
I enter the octagonal room
strewn with second-hand rag dolls,
wooden blocks, and a toy piano.
Courage lies motionless
on a hand-woven mat
chestnut eyes fixed
on the cone-shaped ceiling.*

*Legs fold into his body
like an accordion snapped shut.
Fingers glisten with saliva
hand-to-mouth.
The Shea butter melting in my hands
smells like the west African coast
after the rainy season.
Hand under knee,
I begin to uncoil the seven-year-old
from his cocoon
stretching and kneading atrophied body
in succinct rhythm
with the low hum of crickets
the corners of his lips
tilting gently up.*

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While my stay in Ghana initially inspired my work at *The Voices Project*, there were other experiences during my year abroad that also fed my inclinations to share others' stories through poetry and write them as well. As a woman, some countries were easier to travel in than others. Witnessing the inequality in various parts of the world riled me up. I became angry for the women that happened to be born into a particular culture that labeled them as secondary citizens. There appeared to be distinct roles that women played in certain cultures, and the rules did not make sense to me coming from a modern, western society. However, there were cases where a handful of women residing in small villages in developing countries *were* empowered to get an education or to work. These women certainly changed the stereotype in my mind. They were tough and often handled the money at home. Unfortunately, this scenario was an anomaly.

When talking to various women in developing nations, educated or not, they all had something to say but no motivation or platform in which to share their stories. And these women had a lot to say. What was consistent across the board is that they wanted to be heard. I hold a firm belief that when our unique individual perspectives are articulated on a page, it opens up an opportunity to educate and be educated, helping us all to be a little more well-rounded.

How Might Travel Trigger Creativity for You?

The answer may be different for everyone. By default, the very act of travel awakens the awareness of the present within us. Therefore, being in transit can bring our consciousness to an observatory, almost meditative state if we allow the mental chatter of normal everyday tasks to fade into memory. Free from the mundane daily distractions that seduce us at home, the creative process has space to manifest. Be warned, however, that travel is not always the Zen experience we want it to be. You may be disturbed by what you see, by how people are treated, or by how you are treated. For the writer, this is actually a good thing. Having traveled to 43 countries, the challenges I endured (i.e., dangerous border crossings, close encounters, accidents, hardships, relationships...) tend to make better stories. Thus, I recommend travelers find calm within the chaos to get the creative juices flowing.

Below are a few questions and tips to help you begin thinking about your next trip as well as when you are at your destination. There are also three short exercises included to get you writing!

How, Where and with Whom?

How, where, and who you will travel with are big questions. Exercise 1 can help get you started before you leave. Exercises 2, 3 and 4 are great for when you're there to help ignite your personal writing process.

Exercise 1:

Make a list of top 5 places you've always wanted to go and list them in order, the most desired place as number 1. Answer the following questions about your most desired location:

1. When would you go and for how long?
2. What inspires you about this location?
3. With whom, or anyone?
4. What is your budget and is it doable?
5. How would you get there?
6. What inspires you about this place?
7. What would the theme of your writing look like with regard to this place?
8. How will you be able to immerse yourself in a local culture?
9. Will you volunteer? If so, what kind of work interests you and why?

Traveling alone often affords you the best opportunity to meet interesting people. If you've determined it's not safe to travel alone, or if you wish not to, there are a few things to consider when choosing a travel companion. Number one: they need to give you space to write! A few questions to consider when choosing a travel partner, should you not want to go it alone, follow:

- Who have you traveled with in the past that you know will be good travel companion?
- Who is open to meeting new people and giving you your alone time to write?
- Do they have similar travel goals to yours?

After determining your travel companion(s), if any, how do you manage the logistics while still giving yourself some calm creative space to write? Below are some tips to make the most of your time abroad.

General Tips When In-Country

- Observe everything around you.
- Learn to say “hello,” “goodbye,” and “thank you” in the local language. People will likely be nicer to you and offer up more local advice. Even if you don't speak the language, Charades works quite well to get a recommendation or tip from a local on where to go and what to see in order to have a more authentic experience.
- Carry a small notebook with you at all times. Use that notebook to record the interesting things you hear around you including conversations, experiences, and observations.
- Take with you some inspiring reading by your favorite author(s).
- Talk to the locals.
- Be daring. Avoid other tourists and tourist attractions as much as possible.
- Don't fall into the “Guide Book Curse”—which limits you to only doing what is in your guidebook.

- Find a quiet spot to write for at least one hour per day. Your writing does not have to be cohesive. Give yourself the freedom to “brain dump,” writing without judgment or order. Later, those ideas may bloom into something bigger. The ideas/thoughts/observations might leave you completely if you don’t write them down!

Exercise Two:

Find a local newspaper or magazine in the country you are traveling. Look at the photos. Pick one that interests you and tell the story you see in the photograph. What is the theme? Imagine the characters. Imagine the conflict. Let your imagination run wild and don’t hold back. Write at least one full page.

Exercise Three:

Sit out in an open plaza or in a café where there are many locals in the country you are traveling. Observe a person you find interesting for 10-20 minutes. Watch their actions, look at their dress, their companions (if there are any). Imagine what their story might be. Write 2 paragraphs answering the following questions:

- Where did this person come from?
- Where is this person going?
- What happens next for this person? Who might they meet? What adventures arise for them?

Exercise Four:

Many travelers are natural observers. During my year abroad, I wrote in my journal everyday. My entries were not extremely cohesive or well-written. What was important in completing at least one journal entry per day was that I did not lose the memory of what happened. If I had not written down all the small and not so small things that happened to me, good or bad, I never would have remembered them. Many of those journal entries have inspired poems and short stories.

Write a journal entry for 3 consecutive days (at least a half page each day) on your observations/experiences from that day. If you’re a poet, perhaps write one poem each day. Choose one of the following topics that pertained to your day including:

- Chaos
- Perspective shift
- Fear
- Hardship
- Peace

Conclusion:

Sometimes all we need to spur creativity is to physically take ourselves out of our element. That might mean choosing a place to go that is slightly outside of our comfort zone. Perhaps you are used to traveling places with a companion but for the purposes of writing, you'll need to go it alone—and this makes you slightly anxious. Or perhaps you choose a place where they don't speak your language, or where you might be slightly uncomfortable.

I lived in a mud hut where there was no electricity or running water. There were also many large hairy spiders, poisonous snakes, and Malaria. I was hardly ever “comfortable.” However, I did adjust. What stands out in my mind are the relationships I gained while living in those places, not feeling too hot, too cold, too dirty, too scared, or covered with mosquito bites. Good writing is challenging, as are some experiences. Putting ourselves in (hopefully safe) situations that challenge us and push us over our own invisible line of comfort is often a great source of inspiration. Find humor amid the chaos. Great works of art are often made from some kind of discomfort.

So, I encourage you to think outside the box when thinking of a place that will inspire and challenge you. And, while you are in that place, give yourself equal time to get out and observe, get out and talk, and retreat back so you can peacefully write about all the incredible things you witnessed.

Travel inspired!





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