

Write to the Heart of Motherhood  
*connecting to our true voice in the middle of our messy lives*

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## Week 3. THEME AND GUIDANCE



### PRIVACY AND COMPANY

*Greetings dear, brave friend!*

Welcome to week 3 of our course together. I hope this moment finds you well - anchored in your breath, heart, and deepest intentions. I want to start by sharing a little story as a warm-up to this week's theme: PRIVACY AND COMPANY.

We all need both solitude and connection in order to thrive, especially in creativity — it's just a matter of what proportion will best suit our unique self and situation. I remember a couple years ago when my first son, Lundin, was 3, he needed to go to the bathroom somewhere out in public. As he entered the stall, he said, "Mama, can you come in? I want some company." So I went in with him and he jumped up on the potty. Then he looked at me and said, "Can you turn around? I need some privacy." So I turned around, still inside the stall, kind of cramped, facing the door and smiling to myself. Then he said, "Mama, can you face me again? I want some company." I turned around. "Here I am!" I said. "Can you turn around again, Mama? I need some privacy." I laughed, and turned around to face the stall door. And then he just giggled and said, "Company!" (Turn to face him.) And then again, "Privacy!" (Turn away.) "Company!" (Turn.) "Privacy!" (Turn.) "Company!" "Privacy!" And on and on and on. I was touched by the tender profundity of the game, thinking how we all desire both privacy and company, in

different moments and in different moods, throughout our days. In fact, I could relate even to the speed at which he announced his changing desires; sometimes from moment to moment, my longings for true aloneness and true connection flicker back and forth.

Let's shift gears now: slow down, get quiet and dive in to a poem together, as a tuning fork for this territory of privacy and company. Please take a moment to stretch and breathe in a way that is invigorating to you, interrupting habitual foggiess or tension with movement and oxygen. Fantastic. Now, slowly settle into an alive, dynamic stillness, in which your body-mind is both alert and relaxed, finding a posture that invites both steadiness and sweetness. Soften your gaze. Take three full, deep, enjoyable breaths in and out. Allow your attention to softly expand, *in* and *as* silence, *in* and *as* full presence. Now, simply read, feel, and receive...

### **I AM TOO ALONE IN THIS WORLD, YET NOT ALONE ENOUGH**

– Rainer Maria Rilke

I am too alone in this world, yet not alone enough  
to make each hour sacred.

I am too small in this world, yet not small enough  
to stand before you as a simple thing,  
mysterious and wise.

I want my will, and I want to be with my will  
until its fulfillment;  
and in the still, somehow hesitating times  
when something else is approaching,  
I want to be among those with vision  
or else alone.

I want to reflect your form flawlessly,  
and never be too blind or old

to hold your swaying, heavy image.

I want to unfold.

I want no crease anywhere in me,  
for where I am bent, there I am untrue.

And I want my meaning  
to be true for you too.

I want to describe myself  
like a picture I once saw,  
up close, for very long,  
like a word I finally grasped,  
like the pitcher of water I clasp each day,  
like my mother's face,  
like a ship  
that carried me  
through the deadliest storm.

*Translated from German by Paul Weinfield, © 2014*

Thank you for listening so fully. Before you shift out of stillness, notice and savor any new qualities of sensation, thought, emotion, or imagery coursing through or around you after hearing Rilke's words. Without needing to label anything you notice or feel, simply inhabit your experience fully and intimately. Engage the capacities of whole-bodied, deep listening to meet, taste, and perhaps merge with new textures of experience in your body, mind and heart. Breathe the poem's essence, beyond concepts, through the pathways of your unique human vehicle. Let it ripple, flow and surge through you like an injection or feast of ineffable transmission. Take a couple more deep breaths, and then go ahead and gently shift out of stillness when you're ready.

I don't know what you're left with, or most touched by, in that poem, but for me it is these two strong flavors of Rilke's longing: for profound self-knowledge (experiential, not mental, knowledge), and for intimacy with the forms and experiences he encounters as he unfolds himself in this life. Self-knowledge, and intimacy with reality. The poem unlocks a stream of bittersweet longing through my head, heart, and belly, as I so long for the depth and fullness I feel beaming from Rilke's words.

Our practice of writing can help cultivate this depth and fullness, this profound self-knowledge and vital intimacy with our lives, because it engages and exercises those two core human needs for privacy and for company. We plunge deeply into our solitude and privacy in order to realize authentic self- and Self-awareness, to claim the gems of our own histories, perspectives, imaginations, and unique truths. And then, after spelunking through the tunnels, caverns, and vistas of our unique experience, we reach out for connection via our writing: we take healthy risks (when we are ready!) to share our writing with others, to see how our loot and treasures from our writing adventures flow into and out of other people's experience, sometimes forging connections more intimate and sturdy than by any other means we have. Both the freedom and expanse possible in our aloneness as we write, as well as the fullness and resonance possible in our connection to others through sharing our writing, have the potential to grow us into more of who we truly are.

Alone, we excavate our own memories, visions, and idiosyncrasies at the threshold between what we conceive of as our *self* and an infinite unknown openness - *our unique self*. Together, we establish and cultivate a web of connections with others - *our interdependent, communal self*. Alone, together. Together, alone. "Privacy! Company! Privacy! Company!" Our unique self pours forth to nourish and transform our relations, and our relations flow back to nourish and transform our unique self. Our solitude and our web of communion continuously and mutually impact each other — in general and especially through our writing practice — and we can affect how and to what degree this interplay manifests by paying exquisite attention, activating our deepest intentions, and studying our experience and the feedback we receive from reality.

We can develop facility with these two gestures - of plunging into privacy and then blossoming into community - by exploring and understanding the capacities that each one requires and trains. We can notice the ways our particular nature, personality, and soul, values and benefits from aloneness and values and benefits from communion, and (at least attempt to) calibrate our writing practice and sharing practice to best nurture our needs and desires as mother-writers. It is absolutely worth mentioning and naming that these two facets of writing: privacy and company, do not always get cleanly teased apart. Not for any writer, but *especially* not for us mother-writers! There is certainly a spectrum wherein we must learn to access our aloneness right in the middle of the noise, movement, and responsibilities of our mothering (sensing for it and touching it internally), and also where we find real and tangible connections when we are alone, connections either between various parts of ourselves coming into conversation, or connections between our solitary self and the sense of some ineffable other - an ancestor, a spirit guide, the Divine, or perhaps a baby in utero if writing during pregnancy.

So, our understanding and experience of privacy and company are not always black and white. But, they are worth tracking, studying, and exploring as they separate into distinct experiences as well as when they bloom within each other, because as we study these dimensions of our nature, we unlock *power* and *fuel* for our self-knowledge and intimacy with our lives. We *BECOME* more of who are already are, both in the facet of our unique self and the facet of our interdependent, communal self. We enact the injunction in Rilke's words: "I want to unfold. / I want no crease anywhere in me, /for where I am bent, there I am untrue." Through the clarification and courageous exploration of our aloneness and our togetherness with others on this path, we foster deep roots as well as simultaneously blossom like the unique and stunningly gorgeous flowers within a field of flowers, which we were born to become.

So, this week, let us practice attuning ourselves to how we work optimally with regard to solitude and communion — knowing, of course, that our desires change all the time, and also that we're not trying to create some utopia free of discomfort, but instead looking for a balance of support and challenge to help us grow as artists, mamas, and humans. We can remember

together that development sometimes requires a healthy disruption of homeostasis, even as we seek out the privacy and company we so long for. Your assignment and prompts this week will offer some specific questions to help you explore the fertile thresholds and contours in your solitude and your connecting.

Until then, I want to name some capacities available in each of us that are worth tending and training as we explore. The act of diving inward to aloneness is different than the act of opening outward to exchange and connect with others, each requiring and strengthening distinct qualities in us. If we're aware of what qualities to dial up or dial down in particular circumstances, we can more effectively grow our agility, virtuosity, and resilience as mother-writers.

Let's start with the capacities and qualities necessary for *both* solitude and communion in our writing practice: in my view, a foundation for creating in solitude, *and* sharing our work in connection, includes concentration, courage, and playfulness. Whatever we're up to, our ability to concentrate — literally to join and amplify our bodies, minds, and hearts with our breath and intention — makes us simply more available to perceive clearly, and then improvise and collaborate with whatever the moment brings. A Dutch Zen master I've had the joy to learn from named Tenkei Roshi describes the joining of body, mind and breath at the beginning of meditation as “bringing all hands on deck,” so that our ship is able to begin coherently and powerfully sailing forth. And, one of my past yoga teachers, River Cummings, once shared a definition of yogic concentration as “bringing the strands of the mind together.” So, however you understand and practice concentration, I encourage you to engage your concentrative powers as a prerequisite for your writing practice, both alone and together. To avoid too much pressure or intensity around this point, though, I'd like to also point out that writing is itself a concentration practice, and sometimes simply sitting down to work or beginning to put words to the page is exactly the doorway in to the concentration that will usher us exactly where we long to go.

Courage and playfulness are also required — and also strengthened — in our solitary writing and connected sharing, and these two are a nice pair, as they keep each other in check. We must be courageous to look into nooks and crannies previously unexamined in ourselves, as well as in handing forth our creations to others. Both practices can be scary sometimes! But keeping a little lilt in our hearts, a light playfulness and sense of humor that seek novelty, risk, and aliveness allows us the energy and buoyancy to keep being brave. We'll look more in depth into the rich subject of Play next week. For now, we all have the best mentors on the topic quite close by: our children (or, if they're grown, the memories of when they were young). We can simply turn our gaze toward them or our memories of them to catch a whiff of the spritely, outrageous, sometimes earnest and sometimes free-wheelin' spirit of play, and invite ourselves to enter that energy.

Concentration, Courage, and Play — check. Any or all three can be dialed up in our creating and sharing practices as mother-writers. Now, what capacities can we proactively, purposefully turn on in ourselves as we enter our moments of aloneness in writing? From my perspective, the most important is what we addressed last week: wholehearted listening, making ourselves fully available and receptive for what wants to come through us into words. But listening is just one side of what needs to be engaged in our solitary creative endeavors; it is the yin, receptive side. We also need to practice the yang, active side, and turn on our vision and imagination. Sometimes we will listen wholeheartedly and nothing will come, and that is fine. But sometimes we will listen, nothing will come, and we can and will create anyway — we will turn on a floodlight of vision and imagination and... make shit up. We'll invent something to say. We'll build phrases and lines out of thin air, stack and braid and unfurl and sculpt images and ideas and energy into a *thing* — purely out of our inner vision and will. And sometimes — the best times, in my opinion — we will get alone to write, we'll listen, something will start to flow, and then we'll add just the right dose of imagination and vision, and we'll listen more till something else flows, and we'll press in some more imagination and vision, and so on and so forth. The receptive and active aspects of the process will pulse and surge in and out of each other, whisper and call to each other, buttress and bolster and seduce each other, excite and inspire each other, and for lack of a better metaphor, we'll be making love with our own creativity.

So:

Concentration, Courage, and Play (to practice in privacy *and* company).

Listening, Imagination, and Vision (to practice especially in privacy).

Now let's finish with an exploration of what's needed as we mother-writers engage our interdependent, communal selves, sharing our work, giving and receiving feedback. In my view, interestingly enough, one capacity we need is actually cultivated through our practice of aloneness: self-knowledge. As we bring our work forward into connection, it helps to know our own selves subtly and well: to know what sensations are cues we're feeling grounded and resourced, open to the impact and feedback of others. What sensations and thoughts signal to us that we're hearing something difficult, but true and ultimately helpful to hear. What cues tell us we're hearing something that's actually more about the other person than our work, and we can respectfully let that feedback go. How do we know when our ego is contracting and defending? How do we know when we're hearing something trustable? Self-knowledge will help us navigate what feedback to allow through our filters and boundaries in order to chisel, revision, and rebuild our work for the better.

Within the capacity of self-knowledge, we also need two more capacities as our allies in the terrain of connection and community. We need conviction and presence-beyond-ego. Self-knowledge is not a solid, unchanging thing, so it will adapt and evolve with every experience, but — using it as a compass for how, when and to what extent to open to merging, and how when, and to what extent to establish or protect healthy boundaries, we can then wield our conviction or presence-beyond-ego. For example, if I trust that I know myself pretty well, and someone gives me feedback that my poem would be better if I removed the entire second half, and I feel the signals and sensations in myself of discord and lack of resonance with the feedback, I can utilize my conviction, and respectfully decline merging with that feedback. If, on the other hand, someone gives me the feedback that my poem would be stronger if I removed



the entire second half, and I feel a little sad or defensive, but underneath that resonant and enlivened, I can soften into a sense of presence-beyond-ego to metabolize the discomfort of the feedback and of changing my work. I can trust the process of connection to dismantle what was, for the sake of something more realized to come to form.

So, again:

Concentration, Courage, and Play (to practice in privacy *and* company).

Listening, Imagination, and Vision (to practice especially in privacy).

And also, Self-knowledge, Conviction, and Presence-beyond-ego (to practice especially in connection).

You can use these as a map to guide you in how you engage, alone and together, if it's helpful. And — find what's true for you. What are the capacities and methods that most skillfully sculpt you into the mother-writer you long to be, experiencing her craft with rigor and abandon, risk and delight, discipline and freedom? Let me know what you discover. Let us all know if you come upon gems for navigating this exciting, endless adventure, one that Pema Chodron, Buddhist author and teacher, so exquisitely captures in these words:

“When you begin to touch your heart or let your heart be touched, you begin to discover that it's bottomless, that it doesn't have any resolution, that this heart is huge, vast, and limitless. You begin to discover how much warmth and gentleness is there, as well as how much space.”

I wish you deep peace and boisterous passion this week as you move further along your own pathways of writing, mothering, and being, alone and together.