



# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### Living Words: Sustaining Your Writing While Making a Living Margot Henderson

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#### About the author

Margot Henderson is a Scots-Irish Poet, Storyteller and Community Artist. Much of her work is socially engaged and site specific, celebrating community and our connection to the natural environment. Since returning to Scotland in 2002, she has been the Storytelling Fellow for Aberdeen, Writer in Residence for The Cromarty Arts Trust and Reader in Residence for Inverness. She runs creative writing workshops for the writing for health and wellbeing organisation Lapidus and leads an expressive writing group at Maggie's Highlands. She practises and teaches Mindfulness Meditation in the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and is a Cultural Creative specialist with The Art of Mentoring UK.

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Ever since I can remember I have been sustained by words. From way back, I can remember being a baby (honest, it's true), being wrapped in a plaid shawl by a 'granny' in our street, being shoogled and sung to sleep. I can remember sitting at my mother's feet holding out my arms while she wound her wool and spun her yarns, as she told me stories of my family.



I can remember sitting on my daddy's knee while he sang a song to me about a poet and a tree...  
...and writing half baked novels stored in the plush velvet secrecy of an old canteen of cutlery,  
...and gathering the local children in my garden hut and making stories on rainy days and on summer holidays, making plays for the neighbours to come and see,  
...and being a teenager writing moody, melancholic poems in the graveyard,  
...and attempting to read them to my friends at our Friday evening record sessions, even after they laughed at me, because you see  
...ever since I can remember I have been sustained by words.

Years later, I realise how much my life has been shaped by those early encounters with 'the word'. How many thousands of children have I shoogled literally or metaphorically in my work as a poet and storyteller in schools, using the rhythm of the words to comfort and console, stimulate their imagination, support their confidence and nourish their dreams. How deeply have I understood the gift of my mother's stories and the importance of finding our sense of belonging and self-worth through sharing our stories in community. How I came to realise, years later, that I grew my freelance arts practice 'The Poet Tree' from the seed of a song I was given on my father's knee. How so much of my work in community arts has been a continuation of that play begun in my own back yard, which grows larger as the years go by. How I still seek out quiet places and a pen and paper when I want to be with myself. And how I keep on writing because I know somehow it is essential for my health.

So writing sustains me in so many ways. (Then why is it so hard to sit myself down at my desk and write about writing I wonder?) It has been a lifelong companion, a way of working through feelings and experiences, making some kind of sense of things, creating something out of raw experience, finding a voice, following my inspiration. Whether it is taking time to journal at the beginning or the end of the day to gather my thoughts and feelings or making a performance piece or simply writing poetry, sitting on a beach trying to find words for the way a heron moves me:

*"If you want to call yourself a poet  
then simply strip yourself of every skin  
until you are  
the slate grey  
sky, sea  
of this heron  
drawing in his wings  
head bent in contemplation  
like a monk in meditation"*

(from *Heron Zen*)

or sitting in the station and writing sketches of the passengers:

*"The cowboy in the café  
at Buchanan St Bus Station  
a lone ranger at the last outpost  
a suitcase for a saddle  
he's pushing 60  
travelled further than the rest  
another West of Scotland desperado  
shoots his mouth off  
bites the dust"*

(from *Stations*)

or sitting simply in the present moment with what is:

*This is it  
There's nothing else for it  
Never mind yesterday  
Never mind tomorrow  
This is it  
Whatever it is  
It is what it is  
It's all there is  
So let's make the most of it  
There is no being happy  
Some time somewhere else  
There's only this  
The only possibility of happiness there is*

*So here it is  
Breathe it in  
This one and only precious minute  
There's no repeat  
All it takes for this now to be complete  
Is for us to be  
Us to be  
Really truly in it*

(From *Plum poems*)

Writing has always been a way of touching in to the core of myself in relationships and making something from it that speaks for itself. It is a way of getting up close and personal with life moment by moment. Some people take photos as a way of capturing those moments in time. I write mine.

So writing sustains me primarily in that very personal sense, it's like eating or brushing my teeth. It's second nature now. I can't go anywhere without paper and pen just in case one of those moments comes over me where I have to stop and write something down. I keep some by my bed in case I wake up in the middle of the night with fragments of a dream or lines of a poem or story in my head. Sometimes when I'm cycling a rhythm starts to run in time and a song line then another line and I have to keep singing them to keep the melody and lyrics in my mind.

When I was young and adults would ask me what I wanted to be I would change my mind from time to time and alternate between "a writer", "a dancer", "a teacher", "an actress". Over these last 30 something years I have managed to combine all of these. Though it has taken many forms, writing has been my main way of making a living through performance poetry, storytelling theatre, publications and recordings and through an ongoing, engaged community arts practice.

So, as well as creating my own work, I have led workshops for people of all ages and abilities, cultures and ethnicities in a wide range of settings including schools and colleges, museums and galleries, prisons and hospitals, homeless shelters and psychiatric units, day centres and universities, theatres and festivals, fields and forests, historic ruins and quarries, beaches and conferences. I have worked therapeutically one-to-one, with small groups and with whole villages, with a wide range of client groups ranging from cancer patients to marine biologists and mostly I have loved every minute of it.

Unlike some writers who feel that the community aspect of their work is a necessary supplement to their income as a real writer, I have always felt the community element of my work to be an essential integral part of my art as a writer. It calls on a whole set of skills approaching a theme, researching, responding to people's needs and interests, collaborating with other artists, shaping a project that brings people, place, themes together in original and creative ways. It is always challenging and satisfying. It sustains me in that it puts food on the table and it is soul food also. It keeps me close to life, to people in all walks of life. It keeps me in touch with our humanity in all its diversity and commonality.

This is also what helps sustain me as a writer. It helps me to stay in touch with what matters, to keep it real... Working with a community brief or with a commission as a writer or a storyteller in residence is a wonderful way to research and explore a place or a theme that I might never have thought of if left to my own devices. Often such residencies give rise to performance pieces or poetry collections such as *The Story of Jean Carr* for the Forestry Commission and *Freedom Bound* for the Cromarty Arts Trust.

It can also be a way of ensuring I keep up my own writing practice. When I work with groups on a theme, I will always do a few 'Blue Peter' pieces 'here's one I made earlier' pieces. When I am working with adult groups, I will often write with the group, so I am with them in the moment and in the 'empty space' of the blank page. I feel this is a

companionable way of participating in the process and of nourishing my own creative juices.

Seeing how writing sustains others helps me keep the faith that writing is worthwhile. It can be transformative in people's lives to find the words to express and contain their feelings, to communicate and have their innermost thoughts and feelings received and valued. It can be life changing and life saving.

As I look over these last 35 years of my community arts practice, I can see that sustainability has been a central theme in my work. Yes, in the sense that there is always the 'feast or famine' dance when you are freelance, either 'How will I manage, where is the next bit of work going to come from? Or How on earth can I do everything that I am being asked to do when I am snowed under with work?' But I also mean it in a much deeper sense. I see that what has always interested and inspired me is writing for resilience, celebrating nurture and nature. I can see how the different aspects of my work with people over the years, from writing as personal development and well-being, arts therapy, community building, local history and heritage, ecology and environment are all linked to sustainability in some sense.

Here are some ways to help sustain your own writing:

- Make writing a daily practice in whatever way that works for you.
- Pay attention. Notice things, people, places.
- Don't pay attention to the critic in your head (at least not till you come to re-drafting.)
- Have a sit spot somewhere in nature and just be, frequently.
- Get inspired. Read. Play music. See stuff.
- Meet up with other writers and peers and share some of your work, ideas, questions and concerns.
- Get curious.
- Make sure you get to be on the receiving end sometimes. Take a writing workshop from time to time.
- Join Lapidus (OK that was a plug!)

There are so many ways to keep your writing alive and so many ways to earn a living doing so (at least as long as the arts continue to be funded) If you are thinking of working as a writer in community, go for it. Get out there. Get engaged. The world needs us.

There is that wonderful quote from Martha Graham (not sure if she wrote it but she often said it.)

“Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what it is that makes you feel truly alive and do it, for what the world needs is people who are fully alive.”

For my last word, I want to share a piece I wrote some years ago rapping with some disaffected young people on a Youth Job Creation Scheme in an attempt to inspire them to write. The letters might have changed, but the need is greater than ever. I hope it expresses something of the need for socially engaged arts practitioners and the potential of writing to affect change.

*MSC and YTS  
they’re in the business of Job Creation  
but you can bet your alphabet  
they’ll make sure you keep to your station*

*Now I don’t know that much about it  
I’ve only worked here for 3 years  
but if you listen to the trainees  
it’s amazing what you hear*

*‘My mum’s got a new boyfriend Miss  
and he beats me round the head.’  
‘See me I’ll never get a job  
I’d be better off dead.’*

*In the face of this reality  
my task here seems absurd  
I don’t know where to put myself  
or my misplaced passion for ‘the word.’*

*So I say  
‘Spelling can be magic  
it’s a way to make your mark.  
Words can be powerful  
they can illuminate the dark.’*

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**Turning the Next Page** is a programme of work being undertaken by literature organisations in Scotland with investment from Creative Scotland to support writers living and working in Scotland, especially those who are at an early stage of their careers.