



Being Kind to Myself

Developing a Compassionate Writing Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the benefits of applying a compassionate approach to the practice of writing. Compassion is seen through the lens of mindfulness and the paper considers its definitions, origins as a Buddhist practice and its practical applications in the West. A review of the literature synthesizes approaches from the fields of mindfulness studies, psychology, creative writing and therapeutic writing. The paper considers the inner critic as an obstacle to writing and goes on to consider the benefits of seeking safe and compassionate space, both tangible and imagined, in which to write. As a writer, tutor and workshop facilitator, I draw on my auto-ethnographic research of compassionate meditation by sharing reflections from my journals.

KEYWORDS

Compassion, mindfulness, therapeutic writing, inner critic, meditation, visualization, auto-ethnography, psychology, wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Compassion is “a state of mind that is nonviolent, nonharming, and nonaggressive [...] associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards each other” (Dalai Lama and Cutler 1998: 93). Compassion also embodies “the wish for others to be free of suffering and its causes” (Gilbert and Choden 2013: xxviii). At its simplest, compassion means “to be with, feel with, suffer with” (Brach 2003: 200).

I came to consider the integration of compassion as a part of my writing practice and workshop facilitation through the study of mindfulness meditation for my own wellbeing; “[m]indfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, or in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994: 4). The cultivation of compassion is essential to the practice of mindfulness meditation. Meditation aids the cultivation of “deep and compassionate awareness” (Williams and Penman 2011: 7); it helps to “bring about the bone-deep peace that comes from cultivating mindfulness [...] sustain it in the light of the stresses that life throws at you” (Williams and Penman 2011: 194).

I had some initial misgivings about what the practice of compassion might entail within the context of mindfulness. Compassion is characterized as being motivated by virtues of kindness, honesty and love. It is regarded as “action orientated” in its aim to alleviate suffering in others and the self (Sinclair, Beamer, Hack, et al. 2017: 444). I doubted my commitment to maintain a compassionate morality and act on it. I wondered if this practice might require me to dig more deeply than I had so far into the essence of who I am, question how I think and behave, and I was scared at what I might find. My own forays into the “learn to love yourself” doctrine of Western culture with its “obsessive focus on wellness and happiness” (Purser 2019: 77), seemed to chime with the notion of self-compassion, but felt very shallow in comparison.

Self-compassion is a fundamental aspect of compassion, characterized as the “cultivating [of] friendship towards yourself” (Williams and Penman 2011: 203). It “liberates you from pain and worry, in their place arises a true sense of happiness that spills over into daily life” (Williams and Penman 2011: 45-46). The cultivation of self-compassion may be beneficial for the writer experiencing blocks to their writing. It may “facilitate higher levels of creative

originality” (Zabelina and Robinson 2010: 208). A correlation has been found between individuals with notable levels of self-compassion and their engagement in creative tasks for more intrinsic reasons (Neff 2003).

This paper explores how the writer can draw on self-compassion techniques from the field of mindfulness compassion in order to overcome writer’s block. After an initial exploration of the origins and definitions of compassion, it will examine how the writer can gain awareness of their inner critic and work within a compassionate safe space. Alongside evidence drawn from existing literature in the fields of mindfulness studies and therapeutic writing, it will also offer autoethnographic accounts of my own experiences of compassionate practice excerpted from reflective journals.

DEFINITIONS OF COMPASSION

Compassion (‘*Karuna*’) emerged from the practices and concepts of Buddhism (Kornfield and Walsh 1993). It is integral to the Buddhist spiritual path (Dalai Lama and Cutler 1998: 91). Buddhist tradition describes it as “the quivering of the heart, a visceral tenderness in the face of suffering” (Brach 2003: 200). In his early twentieth-century study of Mahayana Buddhism, the humanist, Sylvain Levi, identified compassion as “one great universalizing factor in the higher life of man” (Hamilton 1950: 145). He saw the concept deeply embedded in Buddhist traditions but lying “outside the thought patterns of the West.” He saw potential in compassion as a fundamental principle for bringing about change in the West, calling it “Buddhism’s most relevant contribution to the problem of our age” (Hamilton 1950: 151). From a secular stance, the physicist Einstein believed that the “widening [of] our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty” would foster clarity and greater productivity in the lives of humans (1950).

Armstrong suggests there are universal similarities across world traditions with regard to compassion. The principle is embedded in civilizations and belief systems across the world throughout history; it is a central principle in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Confucianist and Daoist philosophies and also features in later traditions, such as Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Armstrong believes this universal principle ensures that: “every person had the ability to reform himself or herself and become an icon of kindness and selfless empathy” (2011: 57).

However, cross-cultural differences have been found in the ways in which compassion is experienced and expressed (Koopmann-Holm and Tsai 2017). It has been demonstrated that American culture compared to some East Asian cultures places a higher value on “excitement states” than “calm states”, and therefore each culture may associate compassion with a different responsive state (Tsai, Knutson and Fung 2006: 6). Armstrong acknowledges that her review of compassion as a universal mindset is not exhaustive. She encourages individuals to: “explore your own tradition, be it religious or secular, and seek out its teaching about compassion” (2011: 22).

The subsumption of compassion into Western culture through mindfulness practice has its critics. Gomez believes compassion has developed a misleading reputation as a “wonder-working panacea” (1978: 33). Despite this, a number of Western models of mindful compassion have developed in recent years. Gilbert and Choden suggest that there are two psychologies of compassion: the first comes from our recognition and engagement with suffering in ourselves and others; the second comes out of the ways that we skilfully work to alleviate this suffering (2013: xxvi-xxvii).

The translation of self-compassion from its Buddhist roots into Western understanding is problematic (Gilbert & Choden 2013: 45). In Tibetan, Pali and Sanskrit, the definition of compassion naturally encompasses the idea of compassion for the self. It is aligned to the Buddhist principle of “discriminating wisdom”, which demands that all actions are experienced with a compassionate understanding for the self and others (Wong and Mak 2016: 74). However, in the West “[s]elf-compassion is a relatively new psychological construct [with] little research attention [...] focused on its origins” (Dragan 2020: 1).

Neff is considered “the primary pioneer” in developing self-compassion as an aspect of Western psychology (Murn 2008: 13). For her, self-compassion does not necessarily mean over-concern for the self. There is a disregard of the concept of self-esteem. Attention is not focused on either positive or negative aspects of the self (Neff, Hsieh and DeJitterat 2005). Self-compassion is distinct from self-interest; as Gomez asserts, “[t]rue concern for others is the fruit of total unconcern for oneself; without such unconcern, love is covert egotism” (1978: 38).

Compassion can be a difficult quality to recognize, accept and cultivate. Condon and Makransky identify a number of barriers to practising compassion through mindfulness in the West: “the lack of a secure base, aversion to suffering, feeling alone in suffering, and reductive impressions of others.” They suggest that these are “exacerbated by modernist conceptions that present meditation as an autonomous, self-help practice” (2020: 1346).

Rather than being a solitary and self-obsessed practice, it could be argued that mindful compassion offers itself as a binding force in communities. It can be nurtured and promoted through social groups and “driven by a sense of shared identity” (Stavrova and Schlosser 2015: 2). Gilbert and Choden assert that compassion is “linked to our connectedness with others and the social conditions we grew up in” (2013: 17). These connections ensure that compassion is sustained into the future, that it will “ripple on into generations to come” (2013: 18). Chodron takes this further suggesting that compassion relates to “our kinship with all beings” (2005: xiii).

The social aspects of compassion chime with Neff’s principle of Common Humanity as one of the pillars of self-compassion. She talks of “feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering” (2011: 41). Neff brings us back to self-compassion, encouraging us to “treat ourselves with the same kindness, caring, and compassion we would show to a good friend or even a stranger for that matter” (2011: 6).

A COMPASSIONATE APPROACH TO WRITER’S BLOCK AND THE INNER CRITIC

Writer’s block is characterized as: “that frustrating, self-defeating inability to generate the next line, the right phrase, the sentence that will release the flow of words once again” (Rose 1980: 389). Moore identifies three types of writer’s block. The first is a “classic form”, in which the writer feels paralyzed and unable to commit words to the page. A second type finds the writer struggling to produce work in their own specialist form. A third type occurs when the writer is able to write, but experiences “an acute sense of dissatisfaction” with what they produce (2018: 350-351). Chintamani labels the writer a “victim” of this condition, as they “suffer from blocked ideas, feel as if stuck somewhere, or may simply run out of motivation and desire to write” (2014: 4).

Blocks can happen to all writers at whatever stage of their writing career. “[H]umility’ and ‘self-consciousness” may hold back those new to writing (Brande 1983: 29). Established writers also “suffer” from “sterile periods” (Brande 1983: 31). Some identify their own obstacles to writing: for Ted Hughes it was his “own inner police system” (1982: 7); for Virginia Woolf, her “invisible censors” (Rainier 1978: 216).

Researchers in this field have identified a range of root causes for writer’s block. As well as a censor, there is a fear of failure, perfectionism, and trauma from earlier negative writing experiences (Boice 1993). Writers can be “too self-critical” (Pennebaker and Evans 2014: 55); be driven to “delete almost everything as soon as it is written” (Chintamani 2014: 4); and be wracked with writing anxiety (Hjortshoj 2001). Whatever terminology is employed, the consensus tends to be that blocks in writing demonstrate “the critic in action” (Wolton 2006: 178).

My inner critic has a very loud voice. Only I can hear it and sometimes it is deafening. I grew up into a perfectionist and learned to view this as a positive quality, living with the mantra that ‘I must always do my best and more and I must never let standards slip’. In my adult years, I have realized how my perfectionism has at times become toxic and crippling. It has been suggested that high-levels of perfectionism can impact psychologically on wellbeing and lead to depression. Cultivating self-compassion may help to alleviate perfectionism (Ferrari, Yap, Scott, et al. 2018). Alongside my tendency to feel ‘not good enough’, I experience a sense of shame at having previously prized my perfectionist tendencies. Gilbert and Choden’s personification of a sense of shame as “[t]he big monster” seems appropriate here (2013: 140).

I work with guided compassion meditation to summon my inner critic through a powerful visualization exercise. Labelling it and noting it has been a revelation for me – physically, mentally and emotionally. I reflect on this practice in my reflective journals:

Settling-in to the meditation often invokes a feeling of anticipation, manifesting itself through a light fluttering in my belly. I begin to wonder what shape my inner critic will take. How will I respond to it? How will it respond to me? I worry

about finding a balance between self-obsession and self-disregard when setting an intention for my meditation. Self-compassion suggests that there is an opportunity for me to wallow in self-pity. But instead I have retuned my focus and take heed of Geshe Tashi Tsering’s advice: “rather than dwelling on the awfulness of suffering, our focus should also be on the joy we would feel to actually see others relieved of suffering” (2008: 1).

Being present in my body, anchoring myself through the breath, I determine to take a gentle approach to myself. I often feel tension in my neck and an ache in the arch of my back as I sit on the cushion. I could use the chair, but I am determined to sit on the floor. I like to be able to feel the coarse weave of the carpet beneath my hand. I feel more grounded. I soften the tense areas of my body that frequently run from my shoulders up into the back of my head, often a hangover from a day of writing at my desk. Sometimes I angle my neck and imagine a big soft pillow gently supporting my head.

I feel unsure when identifying with the compassionate part of myself. I think about adopting a soothing gesture and am drawn back to childhood – where so much of my writing comes from – and the image of a comfort blanket that I used to have. I work with this and imagine I am stroking its soft texture. The soothing gesture of “placing hands on heart” (Brach 2003: 201), feels uncomfortable: for some reason, the inner-workings of the body induce a queasiness in me. I have a distinct aversion to the sound of a heart beating, and to the felt sense of blood pumping beneath my hand. Instead, I link my hands, palms together, gently caress one palm with a thumb. This is a gesture of kindness, the contact creates a circuit and the gentle movement of my thumb synchronizes with the rhythm of my breathing as I begin to pay attention to it and bring it deeper into my body. As the ground supports my weight, I feel warm and secure and ready to meet my inner critic.

He appears as an awkward, misshapen character. Older than me. I think. More a collection of mannerisms: haughtiness, arrogance. Rigid with lack of emotion, I see him strut, proud and arrogant. He is disapproving. He is right and I am wrong. Although my inner critic has emerged from my imagination, I feel a separateness from him: ‘He’ is not part of me’. And then, he speaks.

He talks over me, never to me; he talks about me; never makes eye-contact. His voice is deep, monotonous. It's not important what he's saying, although it's stuff about me, it's how he's saying it. As if I am insignificant, as if he doesn't even know my name. I try to feel compassion for my inner critic but I'm struggling [...] because I have 'othered' him too much.

When he turns away, I see how he stoops, how his head hangs with misery. He's lonely. And something tells me that in his clumsy and inept way he is not patronizing me, he is trying to parent me, to fill a void that existed then and exists now. I feel choked. I pity him! He seems exhausted. Desperate to have a place and a purpose. My inner critic is insecure, trying to protect his own capabilities and his own achievements. He seems angry as he kicks out and fights for recognition, pushing me away. I recognize myself. These are my own insecurities. This is my own exhaustion.

Acceptance has been a key factor in understanding my inner critic (Goleman and Davidson 2018: 106).

I reach out to him, bring him close and hold him. He's smaller than I expected. He smiles and the worry lines diminish. I want him to find peace, to stop striving to prove something.

When this practice ends, I feel residual emotions in my body. The anticipation I often feel at the start of the practice has turned into a sense of excitement. I feel potential and a desire to be proactive and take positive action in my writing.

The inner critic can manifest to writers in many ways. Moore asks "[w]hat internal voices are whispering 'You're not good enough?'" (2018: 353). For Pennebaker and Evans "that little censor in their head is telling them that they need to write artistically or perfectly" (2014: 55). McCutcheon also hears the voice of a critic: "a harsh inner voice that criticizes, compares, judges and undermines our self-belief. [It] fans the flames of self-doubt and leaves us feeling disempowered and completely lacking in confidence" (2015: 178).

The blocked writer suffers from a range of negative emotions and "typically spends energy on self-hatred, on regret, on grief, and on jealousy [...] and] self-doubt" (Cameron 1995: 151). Some writers form an

attachment to this suffering and carry it "as a burden they dare not set down. They do not face suffering with awareness, but rather clutch at their suffering, secretly transfixed with spasms of martyrdom" (Wilber 2001: 76).

The emotions experienced by the suffering writer may "stimulate many of the defences of submissive behaviour or even the sense of defeat" (Gilbert 2014: 31). The writer may just give up. For some, suffering is fundamental to the creative process: it "smashes to pieces the complacency of our normal fictions about reality [...], it marks the birth of creative insight" (Wilber 2001: 76). This fits with the archetype of the suffering artist who rather than give up, uses their emotional response as an impetus to create. McCutcheon takes this further in considering that the act of writing itself is a tool which enables the suffering writer to explore their trauma and find healing. It holds a transformative potential if we can "learn to transform all kinds of resistance into fuels for our creative fire" (McCutcheon 2015: 180).

Recognition of the inner critic through self-compassion can be a first step towards working positively with it. Some writers readily bring an awareness of their critic to their writing. Others may use writing as a therapeutic tool to help them uncover and work with their inner critic (Wolton 2006: 178).

A compassionate approach towards the inner critic is shown through the work of Gilbert and Choden, whose first psychology of compassion requires us to turn towards suffering and recognize it. They encourage a more self-compassionate approach to engaging with the inner critic through meditation, to "come to land [and] disengage from the tendency to resist and struggle" (2013: 235).

The inner critic can be identified as one aspect of a self that is multifaceted and ever-changing. Bolton sees writing as a way of engaging with these many selves:

an expression of different aspects of myself and an encouragement of these disparate voices within me to communicate with each other, and with other people. This can lead to greater understanding and greater respect for the diverse aspects of myself, and an increased ability to listen attentively and fruitfully to them (1999: 197).

Where these ideas diverge is in the idea of 'self' in mindfulness practice. For Brach "[w]hat we experience as the 'self' is an aggregate of familiar thoughts, emotions and patterns of behavior." The mind brings these components together and "storifies" a self. This feeling of "being a self, separate from others" traps us in cycles of negative emotions and behaviours and leads to self-doubt, often heard as "a background whisper that keeps me anxious" and which may be the voice of the inner critic (2003: 19).

Once recognized, the inner critic, as we have seen, is often personified: seen as a malevolent power or heard as an intrusive "voice" (McCutcheon 2015: 208). For some writers these internal messages can be "overwhelming" (Wolton 2006: 178) and there may be a compulsion to "quieten" them (Strong 2009: 208).

Germer suggests that the inner critic should be labelled: giving it "a specific title [...] draws us further into the experience, but it can also provide distance and perspective" (2009: 70). The language used to describe the inner critic and the writer's relationship with it is imbued with conflict imagery: McCutcheon urges the writer to "stop, take a step back and turn to face the dragon's fire" (2015: 208). Overcoming the inner critic to generate creativity can involve a level of risk-taking (Tierney and Farmer 2002). The writer must demonstrate bravery in putting their work on show: "[i]t begins with the courage to reach into oneself and offer to the world a creative work that may be criticized or praised" (McCutcheon 2015: 208). This lexicon is far from the gentleness that self-compassion suggests. Germer urges us to "adopt a gentle, accepting tone [...] [to help] the mind escape the tendency to wish away unpleasant experience" (2009: 71).

The writer could be encouraged to engage with their inner critic through mindfulness meditation to help alleviate self-judgement (Kabat-Zinn 2014). Compassionate imagery and visualization through meditation can "help us to let go of disturbing thoughts" (Germer 2009: 105). A writer can engage with their "imaginative inclination" by bringing visualization into the writing practice itself as "an imaginative practice [which] shows interconnection and leads to increased compassion for ourselves and other writers and readers" (Peary 2018: 116).

Goldberg visualizes a scenario around her inner critic whose voice she perceives as "the jabbering of an old drunk fool." She distances herself from this "prattle in the background" and imagines it "as distant white laundry flapping in the breeze" (1986: 26). Virginia Woolf visualized her inner critic as a woman driven to censor her as a female writer:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. [...] And when I came to write, her wings fell on my page: I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room [...]. She slipped behind me and whispered [...] [n]ever let anyone guess you have a mind of your own. [...] I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. [...] Had I not killed her, she would have killed me' (1943).

Engaging in dialogue with your inner critic may help writers to understand it. Wolton suggests directly questioning it: "What do you want? How could you be useful to me? How could we work together? What is your wisdom? What is your secret?" Writers could develop a "sense of enquiry [...] to discover [...] alternatives other than destroying the Critic or being destroyed by it" (2006: 179-180). For Rainier "[i]f you can get to know [the inner critic] in yourself, focus them, talk to them, and get them to assist you, you will have taken an essential step in freeing your creativity" (1978: 216).

Following up meditation practice with reflective journaling can also be beneficial. Studies show that putting our emotions into words, either vocalizing or writing them down, has a positive calming effect on the brain (Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, et al. 2007). As well as enhancing writing skills, personalizing a syntax to describe your emotions can also be beneficial (Germer 2009).

Creative writing is one of many arts therapies that can be used as a compassionate intervention. Recognized as a therapeutic tool for personal development (Bolton, Field and Thompson 2006), practitioners in this field use:

the practice of autobiography and creative writing as a means of gaining insight into oneself, of coping with difficult emotional or psychological problems, or as a way of dealing with difficult life experiences (Hunt and Sampson 1998: 10).

Writing can "resonate with the nature of mindfulness [...] connecting with inner spaciousness, compassionate values and creativity" (Barrett, Harris

and Nixon 2019: 85). It can cultivate compassion, sparking “the ability to imagine what the experience of another might be like” (Nussbaum 2010: 97). A number of forms of writing and writing techniques can be employed with an attitude of compassion. Expressive writing may decrease self-criticism (Troop, Chilcot, Hutchings et al. 2013: 374). It can be cathartic: putting our “experiences into words, we tend to be less concerned with the emotional events that have been weighing us down” (Pennebaker and Evans 2014: 4). Expressive writing viewed as an act of self-compassion can result in lower negative emotional responses to stressful experiences (Leary, Tate, Adams, et al. 2007).

Transactional writing, such as writing a compassionate letter to yourself or to someone else, can be a healing process. It can foster a shift of perspective, particularly if participants have become “stuck in one viewpoint and in habitual thinking.” (Pennebaker and Evans 2014: 122).

Poetry is often used in mindfulness practice. It is felt to “give space and self-compassion for feelings of anger and sorrow that have led sometimes to a sense of common humanity and compassion for others” (Barrett, Harris and Nixon 2019: 74). Poetry Therapy practitioners use literature for personal development and therapeutic purposes (Mazza 2017) and often integrate mindfulness into their workshops (Fox 2014). Poetry can instigate exploration of the “intimate relationship between inner and outer landscapes” (Kabat-Zinn 2015: 27). Germer likens the act of meditation to poetry: “you can’t read poetry in a rush and have it evoke something new within you” (2009: 146). Writers who employ mindful writing techniques report profound results: “[i]t was as if the writing wrote itself” (Trevitt 2011: 195); and “[p]oetry writes itself through me” (Oldham 2011: 190).

Using performative techniques in writing such as emotion memory can also be a creative way of developing a sense of compassion for the self (Germer 2009; Gilbert and Choden 2013). Emotion memory, first described by the dramaturg Stanislavski, involves an actor engaging with the “inner truth of emotion and feeling” of a character as well as the “external historical truth” (Hodgson 1972: 91). Being in the present moment, the writer uses their imagination to allow emotions to arise which can help to cultivate compassion.

CULTIVATING A COMPASSIONATE WRITING SPACE

Writing is a solitary practice. Creative writing as a “self-expressive” activity, has led to its reputation as a “self-centred” occupation. Western society with its emphasis on competition between individuals may perpetuate the view of writers as “individualized, autonomous and de-socialized agents” (Alacovska 2020: 728-729). “Western individualism”, therefore, could be seen as an obstacle to compassion (Gomez 1978: 35). The writer working in isolation may be able to develop self-compassion through simple techniques such as Neff’s Hugging Practice, to help them to engage with their physical responses to self-criticism. This practice advocates self-hugging, wrapping the arms around the body, rocking and soothing the self and engaging with physical and emotional responses that arise. The soothing gesture of touch aids the release of oxytocin in the body, calms the cardiovascular system and generates feelings of security (Neff 2011: 49). For the writer, tuning into these physical feelings may ground them and prove an antidote to a busy mind occupied with the inner critic. It may also enable the writer to gain an awareness of physical stresses that an attitude of self-criticism may induce on the body. If we recognize the vicious cycle of self-criticism blocking our ability for self-compassion, whilst we need self-compassion to deal with our inner critic, a move of focus to the soothing / affiliation system can be beneficial (Gilbert and Choden 2013: 278).

The sense of writer isolation can be addressed by considering one of Neff’s tenets of self-compassion, Common Humanity (2011). Connecting with other writers and sharing their experiences in “a shared community of creativity” can help the blocked writer to realize they are not alone in their suffering (Strong 2009: 208). The writer could be encouraged to shift focus “from the self” to consider instead “how the self is connected to others” (Dreisoerner, Junker and Van Dick 2020: 25). McCutcheon suggests that engaging with other writers can be supportive, particularly if one offers an “empathic ear” to help others overcome their resistance to writing fuelled by their inner critic (2015: 182). This can foster a sense of belonging. It can be realized through membership of writing groups and other peer support groups, or on a one-to-one basis with a mentor, peer or friend (Chintamani 2014). Connectedness also alleviates loneliness, which may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy perpetuated by the writer’s battle

with the inner critic (Gilbert 2014: 26). The idea of a writing community may not be appropriate for all writers; some may struggle with the ability to “process social cues, understand the perspective of others, and work cooperatively within the social milieu” (Hou, Allen, Wei, et al. 2017: 1).

The classic Writing Workshop, where students critique each other’s work, has become a core feature of creative writing pedagogy in writing courses, particularly in higher education. This approach has been identified as an impediment to creativity as students leave workshops with “a more developed inner critic”; they develop “a deleterious habit of mind, internalizing evaluation to a stifling degree” (Stukenberg 2017: 287).

A compassionate writing space could be created for the writer wracked with self-criticism and battling their inner critic. This could be a space for playful writing, experimentation and approaching writing with a sense of humour. Affiliative and self-enhancing humour has been found to promote subjective well-being (Jiang, Lu, Jiang, et al. 2020). Chodron also calls for a gentle approach:

the main instruction is simply to lighten up. By taking that attitude towards one’s practice and one’s life, by taking that more gentle and appreciative attitude towards oneself and others, the sense of burden that all of us carry around begins to decrease (2005: 19).

I drew on a guided compassionate visualization to create my own imagined compassionate writing space. The idea of a refuge and a sanctuary came to mind. Perhaps subconsciously, I was coming to this practice with an underlying sense of fear. I reflected on this practice in my journals:

Often, as I settle-in and deepen the breath, create more space in my body and my mind, I feel as if I am about to embark on a journey. Needing to ground myself, I anchor my breath, bring myself to the present; I observe my thoughts that want to take me away into the future and start planning my safe space and I try to let them go. I open my body to sensations, let gravity give me weight and feel a connection with the ground, which in turn makes me feel more present.

When I allow an image of my safe space to emerge, it again comes from my childhood imagination:

I’m inside a spaceship. A small capsule, just for me. It’s built out of Lego – either I’ve shrunk or it’s giant Lego: but the colours are muted, silver-greys. It smells new, clean, like freshly washed sheets, like the smell of the blossom on the hedgerows outside.

This is a recurring image of something I would have built as a child. I remember playing alone with my building bricks, hiding away in a corner, lost in my imagination. That to me then was a safe space, a place to let my imagination run free. I explore the detail in my meditation:

Out of the large windows, I see emptiness – not quite black – studded with stars. There’s light in the darkness. There’s possibilities. It’s vast. My ship is small and contained. There’s no sound. The ticking of a clock comes in and then I let it go. I don’t want the hours to be ticked off. I feel a gentle warmth against my skin. I’m cocooned in my ship. I can go wherever I want. I lie still and float, weightless, free.

My body feels at ease after this meditation. The hollow murmurs of anxiety in my stomach that I bring into the practice from earlier in the day, tend to unknot as I embrace the experience of being here now, floating and weightless. I am excited about working with visualizations; my imagination is integral to my writing practice. However, I realize my tendency to take ‘flights of fancy’ doesn’t sit well with mindfulness practice. I look for the story rather than working with ‘the feelings’. To develop my practice I have begun to cultivate the idea that “Connecting to the felt sense is more important than having clear visual images” (Gilbert and Choden 2013: 239).

A sense of soothing often arises in this practice and I wonder if this ‘felt sense’ is a ‘remembered sense’ of comfort and security from childhood. I wonder if working with compassionate imagery is encouraging me to daydream rather than meditate. I take on board the experiences of Bachelor from the Zen Buddhist tradition. When she realised that her meditations were turning into daydreams, she was prompted to re-engage with and cultivate the essence of her practice and “restore the mental energy [...] spent daydreaming to its original purpose: creative imagination” (2010). Although mindfulness and mind-wandering can be viewed as opposing activities (Mrazek, Smallwood and Schooler 2014), certain forms of mind-wandering in conjunction with

mindfulness have been reported to “allow the mental wanderer more awareness and potential to imagine and think creatively” (Henriksen, Richardson and Shack 2020: 6). I anchor myself with the mindful breath to reduce mind-wandering (Mrazek, Smallwood and Schooler 2014) and bring myself back to the present when I feel daydreams are taking over. I also tune in to physical sensations to ground myself:

Warmth of the sunlight coming through the window, roughness of the rug beneath my bare feet. A lump in my throat. Nostalgia in my veins as the coo of wood pigeons resonates with past memories of a safe place.

I feel welcome in my safe space. I note that Gilbert and Choden emphasize the important distinction between “safety” and “safeness” (2013: 240). When I began this practice, I saw my safe space as a place of “safety”, somewhere to run away and hide. As my practice has developed, I now have a sense of it as a place of “safeness”, a place in which to flourish and grow, and emerge revived.

Coming back to mindfulness compassion at the root of this perspective, the writer could pare back their writing practice and approach it with a “beginner’s mind” which, according to Goldberg, starts with:

an empty page and a heart unsure, a famine of thoughts, a fear of no feeling – just begin from

there [...] writing from that place, will eventually break us and open us to the world as it is. Out of this tornado of fear will come a genuine writing voice’ (1983: 106).

This mind-set may help to remove layers of inadequacy created by the inner-critic. As “[e]ach time is a new journey with no maps” (1983, 5), the writer is free to write without self-critical thoughts from previous work overshadowing them and without external expectations.

To conclude, it can be seen that the inner critic is a long recognized scourge of the writer, eliciting feelings of self-doubt and self-criticism. These can lead to writer’s block. The practice of compassion has a positive role to play: approaching your writing practice with self-compassion; drawing on the principle of common humanity by recognizing a community of writers and creating a compassionate space to work in; and approaching writing with a beginner’s mind. All these can help to alleviate the inner critic and unblock the writer. Visualizing the inner critic and gaining insight and understanding of what drives it and questioning and reflecting through journaling, can also lead to positive results. The myth of the writer suffering in solitude in their garret can be dispelled.

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Helen is interested in developing wellbeing approaches to story sharing and integrates this into her practice as a writing for wellbeing facilitator. She is working towards credentialling as a poetry therapy practitioner with the International Academy of Poetry Therapy and has been studying Mindfulness at postgraduate level with the University of Aberdeen. These practices will inform her process in her upcoming role as Research Lead with Otherhood, an Arts Council England funded performance project which aims to stage stories of living without children.

Helen writes fiction and experiments with poetry. She completed her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Strathclyde in 2019 - which produced a novel set against the backdrop of the Nottingham lace industry.