

RESEARCH, WRITING, AND CREATIVE
PROCESS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE
EDUCATION: TALES FROM THE FIELD

EDITED BY DIANNE CONRAD





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14. Born Curious and in Trouble: Making Sense of Writing

Paul Prinsloo

Where shall I start this reflection?

It is actually a much more difficult question than one thinks. Thinking about my writing processes — the joy, the excitement, the terror when words just don't want to come — I am not sure there ever was a *beginning*, a moment in time where I would record on a calendar, or to which people would refer when they introduce me to an eager audience who has gathered to listen to me speak — “ladies and gentleman, it all started when...” Most probably there was a beginning, but I don't want to start “in the beginning.” Starting with “in the beginning” would resemble a fairy tale with witches, dragons, a range of gods — big and small (with apologies to Terry Pratchett) — a happy ending for the princess (or so we are told), and a not-so-happy ending for the slain dragons. Not to mention the forces of darkness that must re-group and wait anxiously for another author to call them forth and make them visible.

Where was I? Oh, yes, providing a rationale for not starting at the beginning.

I also do not want to start at the end — as I (hopefully) have still some years to go before I will be spoken of in the past tense. The end will be when someone will pack up my study, curse me for the amount of dust on the bookshelves, look at my books, and either browse excitedly through the shelves selecting those books to keep and those books that will find their way to a second-hand bookshop, or worse, gifted to a local library where they will remain in a storeroom — where unwanted books go and die.

So, I will not start this reflection on my writing process at the end. Not yet.

I also did not want to approach this academically, in other words, provide a scholarly, referenced account of the different elements in academic authors' writing processes. It may have been an interesting and worthwhile study, but for now, that was not how I wanted to approach this reflection on my own processes. I would rather invite you, my dear reader, to accompany me on a journey in a conversation with Rainer Maria Rilke, a German poet born in 1875 and who died, of leukaemia, on 29 December 1928.

In Conversation with Rilke

A little book that made a huge impression on me as human, writer, and researcher, is Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Lewis Hyde (2011), in the Introduction, explains how the letters reflect communication between a Xaver Kappus who sent his poems to the twenty-six-year-old Rilke for feedback. Hyde provides a sub-title for the Introduction and calls it "A geography of solitude" (p. xix). Writing (poems) require(d), for Rilke, solitude, "not merely a matter of being alone: it is a territory to be entered and occupied" (Hyde, 2011, p. xxv). Being alone, for Rilke, was not only a persistent reality in his life (despite being married), but solitude was the starting point: "We are solitary. It is possible to deceive yourself and act as if it was not the case... How much better... to take it as our starting point" (Hyde, 2011, p. xxv). Interestingly, Hyde reflects on how Rilke, instead of fighting solitude and aloneness, embraced it and turned it into a tool — not only containing it, but actually enlarging it.

Loneliness and Solitude

Remember to use loneliness and solitude as tool, not fleeing from them but embracing the two, schooling them, making them serve you and your writing processes. So many writers reflect on how social media and our constant need for connection and being connected is actually a discomfort with solitude, with the emptiness of being and sitting still. The sense of being alone in the world as the only boy among three sisters,

has been a constant present in my life, and a leitmotif in searching for my identity — whether referring to my gender, or professional identity or on a deeper level, searching for a reason to be, and learning how to “be.”

Solitude was for Rilke the necessary enclosure within which he could begin to form an independent identity, a sense of himself free from the callings of family and convention. Solitude is the alembic of personhood” (Hyde 2011, pp. xxvii–xxviii). Rilke advises Kappus to embrace the moments when sadness and solitude enters us, and care for these feelings as we have a ‘duty’ towards them — “They are like the dragons in old myth that, when approached directly, turn out not to be dragons at all but helpless royalty in need of our attention.”

Hyde. 2011, p. xxviii

Once we embrace solitude, we must also let go of expectations of “time”: “Creative life contains its own temporality and the surest way to make it fail is to put it on an external clock. Mechanical time makes haste, as it were, but haste dissolves in solitude” (Hyde, 2011, p. xxix). Allowing oneself to descend into yourself and your solitariness, letting go of haste, and embracing patience opens a space where you “court the future. It belongs to becoming rather than being, to the unfinished rather than the completed. It is not so much suited to heroes as to invalids and convalescents, those who must wait” (Hyde, 2011, quoting Rilke, p. xxxi).

Patience

How much patience do I allow myself to have? Not only allowing myself the time to descend into solitude, but also allowing myself the luxury of not focusing on being constantly aware of the next deadline and dealing with the anxiety of the possibility that I may not reach my performance targets. While I own up to my impatience and discomfort with embracing solitude, and how my self-discipline just unravels at the slightest provocation or temptation, it will also be disingenuous not to confront and call out the madness of the quantification of scholarship, researcher rankings, and the constant hunt for funding and managing your personal “brand.” There is not much allowance for being unsure and appreciation of the unfinished in the increasingly celebrity

researcher culture of award ceremonies that look more like Oscars or Evenings at the Met, with “We are the champions” or “Eye of the tiger” blasting from speakers big enough to wake the dead.

Patience, solitude, and the darkness of self-doubt are not for heroes but for invalids and convalescents.

In Rilke’s first letter to the young poet, Rilke (2011) advises Kappus not to compare himself, his writing processes, and poems to others, or to crave affirmation from anyone. Instead, Rilke says,

Nobody can advise you and help you, nobody. There is only one way. *Go into yourself*. Examine the reason that bids you to write; check whether it reaches its roots into the deepest region of your heart, admit to yourself whether you would die if it should be denied you to write. (p. 7; emphasis added)

He adds:

This above all: ask yourself in your night’s quietest hour: *must* I write? Dig down into yourself for a deep answer. And if it should be in the affirmative, if it is given to you to respond to this serious question with a loud and simple ‘I must’, then construct your life according to this necessity; your life right into its most inconsequential and slightest hour must become a sign and witness to this urge. (pp. 7–8; emphasis in the original)

Writing from the middle of this Roman circus called academia. There, where researchers battle with themselves and with one another to increase h-indices; to win grants; to increase their impacts and rankings; to compare themselves constantly with one another; to look for affirmation or hide our jealousy when someone else gets the mention, the invitation for a keynote, and/or the grant.

I have to remind myself time and again of Rilke’s advice — do not compare yourself: to not look outside of yourself, *go into yourself*.

The question is not and should not be how I compare with others, but what will happen if I don’t write? The question is more loaded than it seems: *Must* I write?

The first part of the answer is the easiest. In my current position, I am contracted to do research as my main critical performance area and publish at least five articles in a three-year cycle. I can hear you saying — “that is not too bad. It is doable.” Of course, it is, but when you suddenly get an editor’s desk rejection for an article, it creates

havoc with your timelines and deliverables. There is also the issue of co-authorship; the number of outputs is divided by the number of authors. Therefore, a single-authored paper counts for an output of one (1), while a co-authored paper with another author leaves you with 50% of the output, therefore — 0.5. If you are collaborating with three authors, then the quantification game gets even more bizarre with you being awarded with only a 0.33 output.

Reaching five full output points in three years is therefore trickier when you collaborate with others. To give you an indication of how this plays out, here is an extract of one particular year:

Peer-reviewed conference proceeding with three authors (0.3); chapter as sole author (1); chapter with two authors (0.5); article as sole author (1); article with two authors (0.5); article with three authors (0.3); article with seven authors (0.14).

I do apologize for sharing these boring details with you, but it does illustrate the brutal reality of what it takes to reach five (5) articles in three (3) years. For the reporting cycle 2019 to 2021 I was “lucky” to have had just over ten (10) outputs. I emphasize the “lucky” because I have had five editors’ desk rejections for two articles during this period. I had three, yes, *three* editors’ desk rejections for one co-authored article and two editors’ desk rejections for another one article. What the above quantification of *being* a researcher also hides is the fact that two of the “outputs” during this cycle took more than two years to get past the reviewers.

So, you never know which one of your efforts are going to “RETURN TO SENDER,” like an unwanted child or a failed adoption.

I *must* write.

There is, however, a second part to this “must”; namely, an inner compulsion, something burning inside me. If you would wake me in the middle of the night and ask me whether I *must* write, I will, most probably curse you for waking me, and then confess that I have to write. I will simply die if I do not. My Twitter profile and all my other social media profiles have this short description of who I see myself as: I was born curious and in trouble and since then, nothing has changed.

Since childhood, I was a ferocious reader and I remember filling notebooks with essays and notes. I started journalling at a young age and have been keeping sporadic reflections inspired by what I read, a

Tarot reading or insights from the I Ching, finding love and losing love as I meandered, stumbled, cruised (in more than one way), losing and finding myself.

I must write.

After Rilke ensured that the young poet understands the importance of getting to the source of his own writing processes and the rationale for his being a poet, he advises Kappus to “flee general subjects and take refuge in those offered by your own day-to-day life; depict your sadnesses and desires, passing thoughts and faith in some kind of beauty” (Rilke 2011, p. 8). As if Rilke could sense a possible response from the young poet that he cannot think of something in his own life to write about, he states “If your everyday life seems to lack material, do not blame it, blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to summon up its riches, for there is no lack for him who creates and no poor, trivial place” (p. 8).

Research and Writing

I often stand amazed when someone would ask me “but what should I write about?” In academia, we have come to provide research questions to postgraduate students, but it is not *their* questions, questions that *they* own, and have wrestled with. They sit in front of us and ask us “what should I research?” We should send them away to find their questions, to read and learn to read the field, to immerse themselves till they wake up in the middle of the night knowing what is burning inside them. Likewise, if you are teaching and you don’t have a research question, I cannot help you.

When I joined my university, it was as an administrative officer and tutor. Though I had postgraduate qualifications, research and writing academic articles were not part of my job description. Every moment of every working day was filled with student experiences and journeys witnessing how students grappled with the complexities of unresponsive administrative systems, finding their way, and making sense of disciplinary epistemologies and ontologies, balancing the demands of studying while working. Looking them in their eyes, seeing their hopes and fears compelled me to start documenting what I witnessed. One of the ways I tried to cope with the limits of my own

understanding and awkward sense of agency was by reading scholarly articles and making notes, small case studies of the issues students faced and finding literature that could explain what was happening. Being confronted with the complexities of distance education awakened a curiosity in me that has not left me since.

Very interestingly, Rilke claims that once verses emerge from going inward, from the different layers of solitude, “then it will not occur to you to ask anyone whether they are good verses” or to send the poems to a magazine in the hope that they would be published (Rilke 2011, p. 9). It should be enough to see the poems as “your beloved possessions, a piece, and a voice, of your life” (p. 9). The worth of the artwork (or piece of writing) should be determined not by others, but by the response to an inner compulsion to write: “The verdict on it lies in this nature of its origin: there is no other” (p. 9). The value of one’s writing should not be determined by “the rewards that may come from the outside” (p. 9).

Writing as a Piece of the Self

Now, this is a difficult one. *Of course*, I would like to embrace the guidance Rilke provides for the young poet. I would love to see my academic articles as my “beloved possessions, a piece and a voice, of [my] life” (Rilke, p. 9). And they are. I think this is a given, for many, if not all researchers, that our research are pieces of ourselves. When I submit an article to a journal, or deliver a keynote, present a seminar or workshop, these are never *just* a PowerPoint, or a manuscript, or some rambling thoughts. These outputs, for whatever audience, are always, at least for me, pieces of myself. I know there may be others that see invited presentations or keynotes and workshops are “just” part of academic life where previous presentations and PowerPoints are rehashed and reworked to new audiences, almost as ready-made, from-the-shelf, drop-off-and-go, and just-in-time responses to a particular demand. These remind me of one-minute noodles or a quick cup-of-soup, where you just add water and there you have a meal.

When I write, and often it is not easy but a deeply uncomfortable process, the joy and effort in crafting a sentence, a paragraph, or a slide in a PowerPoint presentation, result in a feeling that these are not just sentences or paragraphs, or slides, but pieces of me.

In this highly competitive world of researcher rankings and reputation management, it is crucial *to return to the source* of why I write, why I love crafting sentences, paragraphs, and slides and acknowledge and affirm that these arise from an inner compulsion, that I can never cheapen to ready-mix recipes for whatever audience would be kind enough to read my work or listen to my sense-making.

Possibly this explains why critique and desk-rejections from journal articles hurt and disturb so much. Acknowledging that rejections, misunderstandings, and critique hurts and disturbs, however momentarily, because these manuscripts, drafts and presentations were more than “just,” but our possessions, pieces of our lives. Acknowledging the hurt and discomfort does not for one moment deter from the immense value that these rejections and critiques add to our thinking and writing. Often, after receiving critique, rejection, or request for a major revision, the feelings of hurt and discomfort dissipate as one attends to the comments and critique as guidance. But even then, there are often remnants of feeling misunderstood, or even under-valued, if not misrecognition. Which brings me back to Rilke.

While peer review and quality criteria are inherent to academic publishing (and should be, in one form or the other), I think it is crucial for authors who publish to treasure the words of Rilke: “The verdict on it lies in this nature of its origin: there is no other” (p. 9). Often in these moments when you hesitate before you press the submit button, or when you walk onto the stage (or more likely, switch on your microphone, camera and ask for permission to share your presentation), I remind myself that what I bring, what I submit, is the result of my own sensemaking, often emerging from deep within myself, and therefore, there is none other similar to what I am about to submit or present. I have to respect, love, and honour, my own processes — they are uniquely mine. No matter the outcome of the submission or the feedback after the presentation, I shared what I had to and could share.

As such, I keep Rilke’s advice very close to my heart — that the value of my thinking and writing should not be determined by “the rewards that may come from the outside” (p. 9). These words sound a warning in the context of the doxa of “publish or perish” and the ever-increasing push to apply for research funding, which, when successful,

result in additional pressures; and when unsuccessful, result in feelings of resentment, depression, and a questioning of one's own sense of self.

These words, however, are also a warning against being seduced by the constant lure of considering one's h-index as an indication of the value of one's research, thinking and being an author and researcher. Equally, the applause after the keynote, the compliments and handshakes should not deceive one to think that the appreciation and/or applause are unconditional, or permanent. On the contrary. I would be disingenuous to ignore how pleasurable is a good review on a manuscript submission, or applause after a presentation is. Of course, it is amazing and cause for gratitude, and often, celebration. Rilke's words are, however, a sober reminder to never forget the reason for writing, the reason for producing art; namely, because we simply have to.

Which brings me to the second part of his advice referred to above — comparing ourselves with others. Within the context of academic publishing, and possibly publishing as a whole, comparing oneself, and being compared with others, is an inherent characteristic of the field. Submitting applications to be rated as researcher, or to be considered for a research grant, implies being compared not only to other researchers and applications, but to specified criteria that do not, necessarily, acknowledge the internal processes, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities of researchers. Often the criteria emerge from other interests, despite being good in their intentions, such as measuring impact, while many researchers will testify that achieving impact is mostly outside of the locus of control or the researcher or project, and criteria for measuring impact often misrecognizes the complexities and entangle of projects with the nexus of structural and inter-personal power-plays, context, and unforeseen circumstances. Being awarded a grant does not grant the researcher(s) superpowers, possibly to the contrary, when researchers and the project become a prized possession and claimed by various interests.

Knowing that one's work will be compared to other works and applications, knowing that comparison is an inherent characteristic of scholarship and academic publishing, means assuming "this fate and bear it, its burden and its greatness, without ever asking after the rewards that may come from the outside" (Rilke, 2011, p. 9). It is crucial

to find one's inner compass and create our worlds and find the reason for being an artist, a scholar, and a writer, in ourselves.

Following through with his argument that the young poet should not find his rewards in the praises and demands of those who would read his work, Rilke states "Works of art are infinitely solitary and nothing is less likely to reach them than criticism, only love can grasp them and hold them and do them justice" (2011, p. 18). The young poet is advised to "trust yourself and your instincts; even if you go wrong in your judgement, the natural growth of your inner life will gradually, over time, lead you to other insights. Allow your verdicts their own quiet untroubled development which like all progress must come from deep within and cannot be forced or accelerated" (p. 18). Allowing time to take its course and time, itself, will not be hurried and the young poet should allow the natural maturation of his thinking and writing processes.

Everything must be carried to term before it is born. To let every impression and the germ of every feeling come to completion inside, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, in what is unattainable to one's own intellect, and to wait with deep humility and patience for the hour when a new clarity is delivered: that alone is to live as an artist, in the understanding and in one's creative work (Rilke, 2011, p. 18).

Addressing the impatience to grow as fast as possible, and to constantly look at how time passes, Rilke advises the young poet that "ten years are nothing" (2011, p. 18). We should not measure ourselves against time, as if our processes and thinking can be hurried, but rather grow and ripen like a tree which does not hurry the flow of its sap and stands at ease in the spring gales without fearing that no summer may follow. It will come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are simply there in their vast, quiet tranquillity, as if eternity lay before them. (p. 19).

Time

And patience. Not only patience with one's own processes and thinking, but also with how life evolves and unfolds outside of us.

Reflecting on these words, I cannot ignore the fact that I am in a hurry. While I was born curious and in trouble, I had, from the time that I became conscious of my own thinking, a deep sense that time and how my life would emerge and evolve, was, to a large extent,

out of my control. I was in a hurry to discover life, to read as much as possible, to experience as much as possible, driven by and living on a daily dose of adrenaline. Combined with the curiosity and my own hurriedness, it comes as no surprise that trouble was never far away. And trouble there was, possibly more than many would experience in two lifetimes. Not that I am proud of the trouble. To the contrary. I made some really stupid decisions in my life, the consequences of many of these will accompany me for the rest of my life, until the moment I hurry and hurl myself towards the big Unknown. I had to learn that the unfolding of the effects of those stupid decisions would not be hurried up. Not only could the effects of some of my decisions not be hurried up, the understanding and forgiveness of those affected by many of my decisions was not within my control. I had to let me go of my desire for reconciliation, for understanding and absolution. "Forgive and forget," the saying goes. I am afraid that no one can demand that of anyone, even less so for myself.

While these events taught me *slowness*, if not dealing with facing the impossibility of resolution, my inherent and insatiable curiosity in my scholarship continue to inform the hurriedness in my research. My hurry is most probably informed not only by an inner drive to know more and write more, but also by the fact that I consider myself a late bloomer, in more than just my scholarship.

By the time I started to work in a university setting as a student advisor and tutor, instructional designer, and later as full-time researcher, I had a permanent sense of arriving *late*. Very early on did I realize (and accept) that I am *behind* and had to catch up. Not only did my work require of me to be conversant with educational theory and the evolution of educational technology, but there was also so much that I wanted to know. My days did not have enough hours. I was relentlessly reading and catching up. Disregarding the advice Rilke (2011) provided to the young poet, I was comparing myself to others: those who knew more, wrote more, and were cited more. In mitigation, I did not know about Rilke's advice then, but I think even if I did, it would have had no effect on me. I would have justified my drive to know more and to write more by referring to the reality that I arrived late, and that I was catching up.

Making matters worse, outside of my intrinsic curiosity and drive, was a system (both in the institution and in the field of publishing) that

encouraged and rewarded quantity, often without considering quality. Very early in my current role as permanent researcher, I was made aware of researcher rankings, of its importance for the institution and my own scholarship. Needless to say, I accepted the challenge.

In retrospect, I don't regret the pace, the hunger, and the perpetual hurry. Yet, I am increasingly aware of the cost. Like someone who start long distance running relatively late in adulthood, the cost of the drive, the training routine, and competition creeps up on you in the late hours of the night and in waking up feeling as if a terrible alien has taken over your body and is consuming you slowly.

I am two years away from compulsory retirement. I am more aware than ever before of how hungry I am, how much more I want to know and write about, and how time is slipping away from me like my bank balance two weeks before the end of the month. So, when Rilke admonishes the young poet to not think about ten years as nothing, I want to cry out that I have even less than ten years. And yet, now more than ever before do I realize the wisdom in Rilke's words that trees do not "hurry the flow of its sap and stands at ease in the spring gales without fearing that no summer may follow" (2011, p. 19). Now, more than ever before, do I hear his words to embrace a "quiet tranquillity, as if eternity lay before [me]" (p. 19).

It is important to note that Rilke's (2011) advice also holds true for the process of writing or preparing a presentation. Often ideas and words will flow, impatiently, waiting to find expression on a screen, or in a PowerPoint. Writing is effortless, joyful, and experiencing this flow is a truly a gift. Most of the times, however, writing is difficult, almost as if one is looking in vain for a thought worthy to express on paper. Knowing that one cannot just walk away from the article due to having already expressed the invitation to submit the chapter or article, or just because of the external quantification of research, is not possible. You are chair-bound, staring at the screen, typing, and deleting what you have typed in a tango with self-doubt that maybe you attempted too much, should not have committed yourself, or that maybe you just have writer's block.

It is in moments like these that I need to embrace Rilke's (2011) words to trust not only the writing process like a tree trusts the sap to flow, but also to quietly wait for the season to change. This seems to be

easier than done with deadlines following your every waking moment like zombies craving for whatever you have left to offer them, before you, yourself, become a zombie.

I have not found a defence against these moments of sheer panic when my fingers hover directionless above the keyboard, and I doubt my ability to ever get the writing done. I have not found the magic words to shout to the zombies that would make them return to wherever they came from. Sometimes, just when I think I have found the “cure,” the cure disappears, and any intention to write a best-selling self-help book for struggling authors evaporates. At times, I would take solace in a long walk or jump into a pool of cold water and quiet down my restless spirit. Lately, I must confess, that the latter really brings me a lot of clarity, in general, and quiets down my monkey brain. When I get into the cold water, I do not get into the water with the expectation that I would be any closer to an answer afterwards. Any expectations for any possible result disappear the moment I jump in, catch my breath, and focuses on controlling my breathing. I must confess that the quietness that follows is the closest to an undefined sense of peace than I have experienced. Somehow the cold water slows down time, or at least my sense of time and hurriedness, and allows me to wait patiently for the season to change.

Other times I would go for a walk, change my focus to fix something that had been on my to-do list since I threw away my previous to-do list. Or I would attend to the thousand-and-one emails, which, most probably, include reminders for reviews, submissions, and student queries. I must confess that attending to emails often would bring back a sense of pure panic as I realize how far behind I actually am; but knowing the dangers of losing my peace, I just get them out of the way, one by one.

Maybe it is my age, of the stage of my life where I find myself while writing this chapter, but I am learning to be more caring to myself, more patient, and more forgiving. I am embracing Rilke more and more, practicing conscious eating and living, meditation and letting go of attachment... trusting the seasons.

This approach aligns well with Rilke’s advice to the young poet to embrace the simple, small things that people often overlook and don’t value, and not be disturbed by the unresolvedness of many of the questions that live in him.

... be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. Do not now strive to uncover answers: they cannot be given to you because you have not been able to live them. And what matters is to live everything. *Live* the questions for now. (p. 23; emphasis in the original)

Embracing not knowing the answers to the many questions has the promise, according to Rilke, that one may “without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future” (2011, p. 24). In a later letter, Rilke again refers to the difficulty of living with questions rather than answers and states, “People have tended (with the help of conventions) to resolve everything in the direction of easiness, of the light, and on the lightest side of the light; but it is clear we must hold on to the heavy, the difficult” (p. 42). Holding on to the difficult, and knowing that we know but little, is made bearable by “a certainty that will never forsake us” (p. 42), a certainty emerging from knowing why we write. In a follow-up letter, Rilke advises Kappus to “accept our existence in as wide a sense as can be; everything, even the unheard of” and that the “only kind of courage” that is required of us to have the courage “for the oddest, the most unexpected, the most inexplicable things that we may encounter” (p. 55). Rilke compares it to being open to explore more than just our own particular spaces with which we are acquainted, “a place by the window, a little area to pace up and down” (p. 56). Such spaces, however comfortable, also holds a certain security. We should not fear the unknown and that which is foreign to us, as these may, if we embrace them, “become our most intimate and most reliable experience” (p. 57). From Rilke’s letter, it seems as if the young poet shared with Rilke his loneliness, sadness, and insecurities; and Rilke responds by stating:

Why should you want to exclude from your life all unsettling, all pain, all depression of spirit, when you don’t know what work it is these states are performing within you? Why do you want to persecute yourself with the question of where it all comes from and where it is leading? (p. 58)

Instead of resisting these feelings and experiences and trying to look for reasons why something is happening, Rilke advises Kappus to allow the experience to run its course, to allow it to teach us whatever it has to teach us: “Do not draw over-rapid conclusions from what is happening to you. Simply let it happen. Otherwise, you will too readily

find yourself looking on your past, which is of course not uninvolved with everything that is going in you now, reproachfully (that is, moralistically)" (pp. 58–59).

Living the Questions

Research is about questions, and we often value the answers more than the quality of the questions. This is not to say that I underestimate the continuous strive for evidence to solve some of life's most difficult questions and dilemmas, such as a cure for HIV and cancer, or to find the solution to whatever question had been baffling scientists and scholars throughout the ages. I think what Rilke advises the young poet is to embrace not knowing, as a permanent state of being an author or an artist. Rilke states that we must love questions as if they were locked rooms or books written in a foreign language. I think this is powerful. Personally, it is the questions that drive my own processes, and where I don't find the answers, or where the answers are simply not forthcoming, Rilke's advice is that I am not yet ready to "live" the answer.

I take this advice of Rilke not only to refer to questions inspiring my writing and scholarly reflections, but broader questions about my life, the serendipities that characterise much of my life, and my choices and dealing with the effects of my choices. There are many locked rooms. I am surrounded by books written in foreign tongues. Understanding Rilke, these are givens and I am not yet ready to live the answers. For now, I must live the questions.

In stark contrast, Rilke refers to individuals who "resolve everything in the direction of easiness, of the light, and on the lightest side of the light" (Rilke, 2011, p. 24). I must confess that I would have loved more easiness, to live life and to write with the "lightest side of light." And yet, reading Rilke and his comparison of living securely in a little room, "a place by the window, a little area to pace up and down" (p. 56), in contrast to living in strange and uncomfortable spaces where one will encounter "the oddest, the most unexpected, the most inexplicable things that we may encounter" (p. 55); I opt for the latter. Not because of any masochistic tendencies, but because of an openness and curiosity to embrace life to the fullest, opening myself to what the discomfort, loneliness, and depression that "these states are performing within you"

(p. 59). Why should I persecute myself asking: “Where it all comes from and where it is leading?” (p. 58).

Possibly, it is easier at this stage of my life and career to embrace Rilke’s advice to embrace life in its widest sense. To embrace the locked rooms and the books written in foreign languages. And to embrace not knowing. Knowing that I may not be ready to live the answers to the questions.

In his second last letter to the young poet, Rilke advises that he should allow life to “take its course. Believe me: life is right, whatever happens” (2011, p. 62). He concludes his letter by reflecting how he spoke to the young poet about life and death “and of the greatness and splendour of both” (p. 63).

And this brings us, dear reader, to a tentative conclusion, but not the end.

Conclusion

I started this reflection by avoiding a beginning, a point of reference of where it all started. Somehow, I thought claiming a “beginning” would firstly mean that I know where it all started (which I frankly don’t know), and secondly, it was, at least for me, the most boring option.

In this reflection, I used Rilke’s (2011) *Letters to a Young Poet* as my point of reference and entered into a conversation with Rilke, reflecting on his view of inspiration, the challenges that artists and poets face, and although being an artist and poet are worlds away from being an academic researcher and scholar, his words and his advice to the young poet inspired and continue to inspire me.

In the end, and at the end of this reflection, I hope that my conversation with Rainer Maria Rilke allowed you some glimpses of the questions that inspire my writing, my despair and ecstasy and my living in awe of what I don’t know and don’t understand; and being seduced by the splendour of life and death.

References

- Hyde, L. (2011). Introduction. In Rilke, R. M. *Letters to a Young Poet* (pp. xix–xxxvii). Translated by Charlie Louth. Penguin.
- Rilke, R. M. (2011). *Letters to a Young Poet*. Translated by Charlie Louth. Penguin.