

**Trust the Process**

1

Recently, I read an article written by Joel Embiid, an NBA player who is the Center on the Philadelphia 76ers. A Cameroon teenager who barely knew how to play basketball—the only skill he had was dunking—Embiid “accidentally” got a basketball scholarship in the United States, and eventually became a famous NBA player. Embiid dubbed himself “The Process” after he missed his first two NBA seasons due to injury, and his Twitter slogan is, “Trust the Process.”

Professional sports make me think of writing. An NBA team plays eighty-two games a season. Each game lasts two hours, including resting time. The key player on a team might play thirty-five to forty minutes a game. For that player, joining the game is like facing a blank Word file. Sometimes, you observe the player create a masterpiece. Each game gradually sets the player’s style. After a period of years, if he keeps playing well, people will recognize him as a good player. This process is not unlike the writing process: after words and pages, after stories and books, if you keep delivering good work, then people will recognize you as a good writer.

When professional players don’t play, what do they do? They do weight training to make their body strong enough to outrun other players for at least eighty-two games a year. They practice basic skills over and over, until they can dribble, shoot, and pass without any hesitation. They watch game videos, learn how to handle various tactics and moves. They study how the legendary players interpret and control the game.

When writers don’t write, what do we do? We don’t have the professional team to give us training programs. We have to figure a way to train ourselves. From my perspective, a writer must read important works thoroughly (just as Embiid studied his idol, Kobe Bryant)—we must examine how a great author chose his words, how he composed and created a whole universe. Perhaps we should all follow the advice Kobe gave Embiid after they finally met: “O.K., young fella. Keep working. Keep working.”

2

After two weeks in Iowa City, the Mongolian poet Bayasgalan Batsuuri asked me, “Have you written anything here?” I told her that I had jetlag and had to fight the flu in the first week—in other words, I did nothing. The Armenian writer Aram Pachyan, the Argentinian writer Yamila Bêgné, and the Israeli writer Tehila Hakimi all asked me the same question, and I repeated the answer that I gave Bayasgalan.

At the bar—electronic music, beers on the table—the Lithuanian poet Aušra Kaziliūnaitė asked all of us, “What did you do on the day before you came to Iowa?” I said I finished a short story and revised it until deep into the night. This short story is my 26<sup>th</sup> and last piece of the collaborative project Alphabet Lab, three years in the making. After a long night of editing, I got up to catch the high-speed train to the airport, the first train of the day. Traveling from Taiwan to Tokyo Narita to Dallas Fort Worth airport took over twenty-five hours, then I waited in a long customs line, passed the security check, and waited for my delayed flight to Iowa. I kept napping and waking myself. Then, I noticed there was a man nearby, writing—he typed from top to bottom, line by line, right

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ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 21, 2018

Abani (Nigeria/USA), Bêgné (Argentina), Huang (Taiwan), Takiguchi (Japan), Okolo (Nigeria)

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to left in a blank Word document. I checked the IWP website, and found out this man is my fellow panelist, Takiguchi Yusho. I secretly admired him in my heart, for he could write while exhausted and traveling.

The writing process starts by conquering all kinds of limitations—then, you get an opportunity to discover something by writing. Writing may be the best self-education: when you want to know something deeper, you write. Therefore, you begin with what you don't know. You might not even know you've begun writing. This is the best and briefest moment of the process, when you are completely in the world that you create, living in another space, a waking dream.

No matter how you write—every writer has a different tempo—the work itself witnesses the process. I recommend following the example of Portuguese novelist José Saramago: he writes two pages a day. It might take several months or years to complete your work this way, but your health has to withstand long-term self-exploitation. Even if you feel no progress had been made, even if you can't write a good sentence, at least you've trained your determination.

One last thing: do not trust inspiration. We cannot work with something which doesn't promise to show up everyday. As the American painter and photographer Chuck Close said, "Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work."

In other words, *trust the process*.