Remembering to Play

Have you had the experience of sitting down to work on your dissertation, only to find yourself still staring at a mostly blank screen hours later? Ideas crowd your mind but can’t seem to make their way onto the page? You feel stuck, and the inner critic’s voice takes over: “You’ll never finish this work.”

For me, this Work is a noun with a capital W, implying a vocation, a calling to an important inquiry. The Work may be hard but it is exciting; the calling itself alchemically participates in getting words onto the manuscript page. But when we think of work as a verb—the laborious “doing” of writing—work may become activity to “fulfill duties.” We “exert” ourselves “physically or mentally in a sustained effort for a purpose or under compulsion or necessity” (Work, 2019). Duty? Compulsion? Necessity? No wonder we get stuck.

Who is visiting when we get stuck? I asked myself this question once when I was hopelessly stopped at the beginning of a term paper. I realized that I could ask the stuckness itself, a feminine figure whom I named Stoppage, what message her visit held for me. I noticed that Hermes was with her. They explained, “We are here to stop you, and remind you of the delight of simply noticing. Just notice who is in the transferential field. They have come to play.” (I literally typed their words into my document.) I had forgotten about the importance of play. Pat Berry (1982) then surfaced in memory, recalling that “within stasis we find movement; in that awe-full image of stopping there is a rush of wings.” Stoppage disappeared soon after I realized that my writing wings were taking me in a different direction from the duty of getting the paper written to the play of engaging the images in the Work. As I imaginally chatted with figures from the topic of the paper, words began to dance onto the manuscript page.

When you play with the visitors in your Work, notice their unorthodox advice: talk to everybody, seen and unseen—you are not going crazy; let go of linearity—start typing in the middle of a thought (organize later); appreciate small advances—two pages a day become an entire proposal in two or three months; notice funny, even uncanny, mistakes and typos—they can lead to profound insights; go see that frivolous movie—it may connect to the Work in ways you never expected.

—Sabine Oishi, PhD, Faculty and Associate Research Coordinator of Depth Psychology Integrative Therapy and Healing Practices


Gods in the Wound of Dissertation

Since Jung reminded us that, "Zeus no longer rules Olympus but rather the solar plexus," one has to ask: Which gods have you in their grips as you wrestle with your dissertation? Romanyshyn's wounded researcher trying to produce wounded research tends to constellate a dissertation wound which means a god (or gods) will reside at the archetypal core of your endeavor. You are doing the work and the work is working on you, whether you want it to or not.

It seems that most Pacifica students successfully complete their studies in their program of choice, many against formidable odds and obstacles (e.g., cross country travels, juggling job and family pressures, illnesses, finances, inner demons, etc.). And yet, despite that tempering, many of us, perhaps more than we want to admit, become lost at sea during the dissertation writing period after formal academic classes at Pacifica end.

Is this perhaps a Dionysian dismembering of our best intentions to complete the dissertation? A heavy Saturnine quality of lead holding down the work? What subterranean forces hold you captive during this trying time? What voices do you hear?

If Pacifica has constellated itself as a "good enough mother," are you now forsaken with the full emergence of the orphan archetype? Who is at the core of that wound for you?

Like Orpheus, will you fail to rescue your dissertation from your own underworld? Will you be unable to just keep walking forward without looking back in order to bring her out into the light of day?

Which gods may need to be invoked or honored in order to actually finish your work?

Perhaps our old friends Apollo and Vulcan are in need of some recognition? I call them old friends because they are most present in our first half lives, and often they are the first two left at the door as we immerse ourselves in the underworld work at Pacifica.

Be careful that an Apollonic or Vulcanic invocation does not also invite Icarus, whose dissertation, I suspect, would have touched the sun if he'd had his druthers. Ask to be just waxy and Moxy enough to stand at the forge, hammer the base metals, purify the ores, and craft your words. Seek just enough ego strength to forge just a good enough piece of work, and save the sun touching for another day!

— Tony Delmedico, PhD, is a 2018 Depth Psychology with an Emphasis in Psychotherapy graduate. Dr. Delmedico is a Marriage and Family Therapist and an AAMFT Supervisor in private practice in North Carolina.
Making the Most of Your Dissertation Committee

Know Your Committee
If you have a committee that is formed and functional, it’s largely due to their interest in your topic and/or method. The easiest way to keep your committee engaged is by appealing to their interests. How do you do that? By knowing who your committee members are and what they are researching or have researched. Where do their passions lie? . . . While you are doing your research you might just uncover something of interest to one or more of your committee members. The easiest way to engage your committee is to get them discussing what they are passionate about. Which, conveniently, should be what you’re passionate about.

Keep the Committee Informed of Your Progress
Become a critically reflective practitioner. Make it a point to periodically update your committee concerning where you are most engaged currently, where you’re struggling and what you’re doing to overcome that, what has surprised you most in your research and/or its development, and what major benchmarks or accomplishments have been achieved.

Ask for Focused Help
Knowing your committee and their interest and research allows the doctoral candidate to know the content and methodological resources and knowledge base resting within the committee. It allows the candidate to smartly query the committee for help when it becomes necessary. This is not manipulation, this is developing a working relationship through taking the time to know their work and interests.

Be a Professional
Your committee is likely populated by engaged scholars and practitioners in their field. These are people who are often in high demand, who hold engaged and often aggressive work agendas. Be respectful of their time—honor it! Don’t ignore their advice even if you disagree with it. The easiest way to shut down a committee member is to not value their efforts. If you do not agree then this is the place to support and defend your position. Not by opinion, but through diligent research. I guarantee that, while they may not agree with you or your assertions, they will respect you for the thoughtful effort. Keep in mind that, when you walk across that stage on graduation day, what we are saying to you is, “welcome colleague.” Begin your journey towards becoming my colleague today.

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View from Pacifica’s Ladera Lane Campus. Photo by John Ziegler.