



Peter Wayne Moe

Grocery Shopping with Leonardo DiCaprio: On Time, Routines, & Writing

I was in time again, bearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reductor absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it.

William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury

A special thank you to Danielle Daligdig, whose work I quote with permission.

We are at a coffee shop, my brother and I, his pocket watch on the table, mine in my jacket. That night, he'd made us bok choy and salmon. We are reading now, Faulkner. My brother moved to Colorado a few years ago to climb and soon after became an English teacher. He has no television, and when I stepped off the plane, he handed me a copy of *The Sound and the Fury*, showed me his, and said, "We'll read this while you're in town."

And so we do. Over breakfast. In the mountains, sitting on a rock, taking a break from the hike. At the bar. In his living room. I get to know Benji, Caddy, Quentin, and Dilsey during my four days in Yoknapatawpha County.

The watches were from our father when he passed. My brothers and I each received a cigar box with three gifts: a Leatherman, a pocket watch, and a CD of Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, my grandfather's favorite album. On the back of the watch are two dates—March 27, 1927 and January 6, 1996.

I think of all this now, this morning—Faulkner, my brother, my father, my grandfather, those timepieces—as I stand before my dresser, winding my wristwatch. I bring it to my ear, listening to its 26

gears spinning on their jewels. I pop the crown, turn it a dozen times, set the date, swing the hands into place. The second hand begins its sweep and I my day.

When a watch has additional features on its face—the date, a chronograph, a moon phase dial, a tourbillon—it’s called a “complication.” I love that term for how it calls up the mechanical. The case can only hold so much, and adding a feature—a subsidiary dial, say—means more gears must squeeze into that tight space. It *complicates* things. The watch case and its limitations seem an apt metaphor for time itself: limited. And this is the wisdom from Faulkner, the need to be within time without trying to conquer it.

How Writers Write

“And above all I must take my time,” writes John Steinbeck, in *Working Days*, a diary he kept while writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. “Take it easy. I don’t mean to write less or less forcefully but to keep the frantic quality out of my approach.” He does so through music. “I think I’ll play *The Swan*” (31). Steinbeck listens to Tchaikovsky each day, the rhythm and intonation and harmony helpful as he pieces together his sentences.

I figure that if Steinbeck wrote longhand, I should give it a shot. Worked well for him. I am writing this draft longhand, the first time I’ve written an essay longhand since, I believe, 1997. And I’m listening to *Swan Lake*. Steinbeck would have listened on vinyl; I’ve got a performance playing on YouTube. *Swan Lake* is almost three hours. He would have had to get up every 20 minutes or so to flip his record; I’m interrupted by ads. I suspect his speakers were better than the tinny ones on my nearby laptop.

I find Steinbeck fascinating for his many accounts of the daily rituals of a writer. In a series of letters he wrote to his editor while drafting *East of Eden*, Steinbeck reveals he begins each day by sharpening at least 60 pencils (36). He’s smitten by the Blackwing—“they really glide over the paper” (34)—so I’ve got eight Blackwings at my side now. And though Matthew Kirschenbaum calls

Microsoft Word the No. 2 pencil of the digital age” (237), when writing longhand Stephen King prefers a Waterman fountain pen, the world’s finest word processor” (*Dreamcatcher* 868).

King writes 2,000 words a day. Anne Lamott: 300. John Krakauer: 600-700. King devotes his mornings to writing, his afternoons to reading, and the evenings to the Red Sox. Journalist Jane Kramer begins her day with juice, coffee, the crossword, and a dog walk before settling in to write. Toni Morrison wrote late into the night, after she put her kids to sleep; later in her career, she wrote in the early morning, watching the sun rise.

Such accounts are readily available in books like Mason Currey’s *Daily Rituals*, which gathers the working routines of some 160 writers, composers, architects, and other artists. The *New York Times* runs a regular column on how various people spend their Sundays. In 1985, Tom Waldrep edited a collection of essays, *Writers on Writing*, wherein 31 college writing teachers detail their writing routines. (In 2018, Christine Tulley published a follow up, *How Writing Faculty Write*.) In an afterword to Waldrep’s collection, Michael Ray Taylor speaks to the appeal of these accounts of how writers spend time. He’s talking about Waldrep’s book, but his comments apply to all those collections of daily routines listed above:

The essayists show themselves as real people who ate and slept and taught and watched TV, who had to sit down and struggle with writing like the rest of us. (349-50)

Real people. Like the rest of us. It’s comforting to know other writers get stuck. Here’s journalist Ted Conover, saying much the same:

A couple of years ago I read a terrific profile of Leonardo DiCaprio in which the journalist convinced DiCaprio to allow him to go grocery shopping with him. We got to see Leo picking out his mesclun and tomatoes and Stim-U-Dents. (Boynton 10)

There’s a sense of intimacy in watching DiCaprio shop, like the rest of us, putting down one bruised pepper and picking up another. It’s the ordinariness of it, how mundane it is.

Mason Currey puts it like this. These “grand creative visions”—whether a movie, or a book, or a poem, any artistic endeavor, really—“translate to small daily increments.” He continues: routine “connotes ordinariness and even a lack of thought; to follow a routine is to be on autopilot” (xiv). This is true. Matthew Crawford likens routines to a jig in carpentry; rituals “answer for us the question ‘What is to be done next?’ and thereby relieve us of the burden of choice and reflection, as when we recite a liturgy” (23). Note that Crawford calls choice a *burden*. Creative work is all about choice. But a routine limits those choices, creating, as Currey says, a “well-worn groove for one’s mental engines” that also “stave[s] off the tyranny of moods (xiv).

Jigs, liturgy, well-worn grooves—Helen Sword offers another metaphor: “Rituals offer comfort and ballast in a chaotic world” (53). Writers need that ballast to stay on course. In 1988 Susan Lee Wyche-Smith wrote her dissertation on *Writers and Ritual*, and she speaks to this need for comfort multiple times: rituals help us achieve a state of mind conducive for writing; they “impos[e] a set of limitations which provide space and time in which to work” and “[help] the writer to relax” (116); they “provide control and predictability to the invention process” (159); they lessen anxiety because they “mitigate the destructive elements of a writer’s life” (160). Rituals, she writes, give us “creative control” (160).

Even as I love accounts of how writers write, I am skeptical of this notion that routines offer control. The genre seems a bit like those ubiquitous life hack blog posts and books—the 8 Things Successful People Do before 8 AM, 50 Great Tips You’ll Wish You Knew Earlier. Every time I read a ritual, I think *Wow, maybe if I took a two-hour walk every day like Tchaikovsky, I would write better*. If only I had the right routine the pieces would fall into place. Writing would become easy.

Such thinking is harmful. It can lead to comparisons between how I write and how others do, either bolstering pride (I write more words a day than Lamott!) or bringing shame (but she’s so much better than I!). And if I can’t keep pace with routines—Joyce Carol Oates spends eight hours a day at her writing desk—it’s easy to feel insufficient, lacking.

And yet I keep reading these accounts, keep tweaking my own routine in response (writing longhand is proving a great joy) because I have a sense that these routines are more than the sum of their parts.

This is because routines are formative. Here's how James K. A. Smith explains it. In his book *You Are What You Love*, Smith claims, "To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as 'flourishing'" (11). And whatever it is we think constitutes this good life, we "want, crave, and desire." "Our most fundamental mode of orientation to the world," Smith writes, "is love." He explains: "We are oriented by our longings, directed by our desires. We adopt ways of life that are indexed to such visions of the good life" (11).

Our ways of life point to what we most want. So, if I want to be a musician, I practice my trumpet hours a day. If I want to run a marathon, I run seven days a week, pay attention to my diet, take lots of naps. If I dream of quitting my job to become a nurse, I reorient my schedule to allow for night classes and studying on the weekend. These routines are means of chasing a dream, chasing a vision of what we think the good life is. Smith quotes from Geoff Dyer, who says it so well: "Your deepest desire is the one manifested by your daily life and habits" (qtd. in Smith 29).

And so, if I want to be a writer, my daily life and habits are important. Writing teachers have long known this. Our routines and habits shape us into a particular kind of person—if I do 200 push-ups a day, I will be a very different person than if I don't; so too if I read 50 books a year—and this is why so much of classical writing instruction was built around imitation and practice. The ancient Romans had the *Progymnasmata*, a series of 14 writing exercises, the majority imitation of famous speeches, this prolonged practice over several years teaching what it means to, and how one might, be a rhetor.

Imitation and practice as the cornerstones of a writing pedagogy make a lot of sense, because imitation and practice are how one acquires any virtue. Here's how Aristotle explains it:

The virtues ... we acquire by first having put them into action, and the same is also true of the arts. For the things which we have to learn before we can do them we learn by doing: men become builders by building houses, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage. (1103a-1103b)

And we become writers by writing, readers by reading. My wife's paraphrase: fake it until you make it. This emphasis on habit, on practice, on a daily devotion to some routine prompts Quintilian to teach, "The greatest fruit of our studies [in rhetoric], the richest harvest of our long labours, is the power of improvisation" (10.7.1). Improvisation. Thinking on your toes. When the moment demands, the student is able to write and speak well because of an ingrained automatic response, an ingrained rhetorical awareness. (I think of Currey's "autopilot.") It's embodied through much practice. It becomes second nature. Rhetoric trains us to be a certain person in a certain moment, or, as Laurie Gries puts it, "Rhetoricians have long been interested in the ontology of becoming" (155).

Becoming Aware of How We Spend Our Days

Kathleen Norris is a poet and a Benedictine oblate. She spends a lot of time at monasteries, and she is surprised, she admits, by "how much correspondence I've found between monastic practice and the discipline of writing." Both, she says, "require periods of apprenticeship and formation" (116). Writing and monasticism, she says,

are not so much subjects to be mastered as ways of life that require continual conversion. For example, no matter how much I've written or published, I always return to the blank page; and even more important, from a monastic point of view, I return to the blankness within, the fears, the laziness, and cowardice that, without fail, will mess up whatever I'm currently writing and, in turn, require me to revise it. The spiritual dimension of this process is humility, not a quality often

associated with writers, but lurking there, in our nagging sense of the need to revise, to weed out the lies you've told yourself and get real. (116-17)

There is a sanctification that happens through revision, this continual process of self-reflection, finding fault, working to make peace within and on the page. "In our relentlessly utilitarian society," Norris writes, "structuring a life around writing is as crazy as structuring a life around prayer, yet that is what writers and monks *do*" (120). bell hooks, in chorus with Norris: "When writing is a desired and accepted calling, the writer is devoted, constant, and committed in a manner that is akin to monastic spiritual practice" (37-38).

I'm drawn to Norris's comment about structuring a life around writing. It sends me to Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*. "I have been looking into schedules," Dillard writes. "What shall I do this morning?" That's the question for all of us, writers or not. Dillard continues—the first line here is the most famous, but I'm going to quote the full paragraph, her insistence that schedules are resistance to chaos and whim so telling, suggesting we are drawn to disorder, that we must somehow create order from the chaos:

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends against chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time. A schedule is a mock-up of reason and order—willed, faked, and so brought into being; it is a peace and a haven set into the wreck of time; it is a lifeboat on which you find yourself, decades later, still living. Each day is the same, so you remember the series afterword as a blurred and powerful pattern. (31-32)

At a faculty writing retreat a few years ago, I gave participants copies of Currey's *Daily Rituals* and said a few words on the importance of routines, quoting the above from Dillard. A theology professor at the back of the room muttered, "Well, shit." He shared that he was squandering away his time in so many meetings. He wants to write a book but he serves on three university committees. How we spend our days

is how we spend our lives, and he wondered whether he wanted to spend his career doing committee work. This can be an unsettling realization when we see, as that professor did, that we're spending our days in ways we'd rather not. "There are words to be put on the page," Amitava Kumar writes, "but the only way that is going to happen is if I stick to my rituals."

The question, then, is what those rituals are, and whether we are aware of them. This is why Helen Sword, in her book *Air & Light & Time & Space*, recommends writers take an audit of how they spend their time. "Chronicle your writing rhythms and rituals over several days or weeks," she writes, "paying particular attention to unconscious or habitual behaviors" (54). Only once a person sees how time is being spent can changes be made. Smith recommends the same: tallying our hours will tell us what we value, where we are putting our efforts, how these rituals—those we are aware of, those we are not—are forming us into a particular kind of person.

I do have an objection with Smith here: I spend eight, nine, ten hours a day at the university; I spend three or four a day with my wife and son. By hours alone, it would seem the job is more important than family, but of course it's not. This suggests, then, that all hours are not equal, that some carry more weight—emotional, spiritual, social—than others and are therefore more valuable.

That being said, Sword and Smith are on to something. Our routines are revealing. And so, taken by this idea of an audit, I asked my students to do just that: for one week, track how they spend their time. In preparation for this assignment, we read Smith and Currey and some articles on the quantified self. I then gave my first-year students the following:

Your next essay assignment comes from a line in Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." That's a profound claim, and a troubling one, too, if we feel we are squandering our days. But we see Dillard's claim enacted in Currey's *Daily Rituals*, and, prompted by them, I'd like you to think about how you spend your own days.

For a week, you are to track how you spend your time. The more detailed, the better. You can do this on paper or use an app. After you have seven days of data, sort the time into categories that are helpful for you in seeing how you spend your time (grooming, eating, sleeping, work, working out, friends, studying, classes, etc.) I would like you to make a graphic representation

of this data, either a pie chart or a graph with columns or an infographic. Something visual.

Then, using this data, write an essay where you address the questions Smith asks: What do your hours suggest you value? What vision of the good life is carried out in these routines? What kind of person are these rituals shaping you to become? What do these patterns suggest you love? Does how you spend your days align with how you want to spend your life?

This essay is to be four pages, double spaced, with a title, and in MLA format. I would like it to engage at least two of our course readings, and your essay should include your visual representation of your data. You can think of this assignment as an exercise in gathering and writing from data.

Some additional questions you could consider as you write:

- What's the first thing you do in the morning? Why?
- What's the last thing you do before going to bed? Why?
- Do you try to structure your day around certain priorities? Which ones? Why?
- Where are you spending time in ways you'd rather not?
- What's the most valuable chunk of time in your day?
- When are you your best (are you a morning person? A night owl?) and what do you do during that time?
- Where does your screentime fit into this life, and is it what you want it to be?
- If your audit were to accurately reflect who you want to be, what would need to change in it? What practices would you need to include, and which would you need to cut?

I did the activity too and found I don't spend as much time reading as I think I do, and I spend more time than I would like on email. One student was distressed she averages five hours a day on Netflix. Though the university advises students spend two hours on homework for every hour in class, many students spent much less than that. The athletes were pleased at how much time they spent in the gym (much more than the student spent on Netflix) working with the trainer, doing squats, running sprints, taking ice baths, stretching. One musician was pleased he's fairly consistent in practicing his clarinet three hours a day. One student, Danielle Daligdig, had this to say about her routines:

For the past five months or so, every morning, I would wake up to the sound of my facetime call with my boyfriend. Opening my eyes around 8:30–9:00 am, checking my notifications on my phone for about an hour or so. Then I would go to the bathroom, wash my face with water, brush my teeth, and use the restroom. After that I would change my clothes and head to class, eat lunch,

head to work, come back to my dorm around 9 pm, shower, call my boyfriend and start doing my homework. Looking at my life, I will have to do this continually for the next four years of my life. Sounds boring to me.

The last two sentences here recall, for me, Dillard writing about routine as a way to catch the days, to fend off chaos, to create a blurred and powerful pattern. It's powerful for Dillard, a good thing; for Daligdig, it's stifling. Her use of "will have to" speaks to the drudgery of her routine.

Daligdig uses to Smith to establish the idea of routines as pointing toward what we love and then asks herself what her own routine might suggest she values. Midway through her paper, she writes this:

I try to schedule my day around certain priorities. My top priorities are talking with my boyfriend and work. Everything else is happening in my day is placed around these times. The only time I would not be on the phone with my boyfriend is when I'm in class, at work, or in the bathroom. I spend about 18 hours on the phone with him, may not be always having a conversation with him but he we couldn't want to hang up the phone unless we had to. Another chunk of time I spend on is at work. I work about 15 hours+ a week, which consist of serving food, washing dishes, wiping tables, vacuuming, and cleaning up the counters.

I'll cut in here: 18 hours a day on Facetime with the boyfriend—that's more hours per day with him than hours per week at work. Daligdig hadn't realized this until taking an audit of her time, and she finds it disconcerting.

My habits are what shapes me, by looking at my time audit, I prioritize money and my boyfriend.

Just comes to be being greedy and looking for lust.

It's tempting to scoff at how Daligdig spends her time, but I'm sympathetic. I find myself struck by her frankness. Money and lust. She's seeking what most of us do. She just names it.

The paper continues, and here I read a tension not unlike the one I voiced earlier, where a quantity of hours doesn't necessary mean that time is the best spent or the most valuable:

The most valuable chunk of time in my day is when I'm pampering myself. Most of the time is not more than 45 minutes, but that's the best 45 minutes in my day. When I'm in the shower I can stop time by reflecting, setting goals, and do my 'deep thinking'. When I'm not in the shower I'm always on the move.

Daligdig is "always on the move," but the best time of her day, the most valuable time, isn't when she's working or on the phone with her boyfriend: it's when she's alone, washing her face, scrubbing her back, blow-drying her hair—activities that cannot be done while at work or on Facetime 18 hours a day. And this is how she "can stop time." When Daligdig writes this, I hear the Faulkner of my epigraph, Jason Compson's wish that his son Quentin "might forget [time] now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it" (76).

Daligdig, too, wants to conquer time. Later in the essay she writes that she would like to explore Seattle, go out with her friends more, and meet new people, but her current routines don't allow for this. "I don't have time," she says. Our class spent three weeks working on this assignment, and toward the end of it, Daligdig caught me after class. "I dumped my boyfriend," she told me. "I need to get off my phone and live a real life."

Changing Routines

Daligdig's essay is compelling for its frank assessment of how she spends her days and, consequently, how she spends her life, this data-driven assessment of her time prompting a significant change in her routines and her habits. I don't write assignments with the intent of creating turmoil in my students' personal lives—but I was pleased with Daligdig's swift action in response to her audit.

Such self-assessment is vital for writers. Last semester, a student told me she wants to be a poet; she also told me she spends four hours a day on YouTube. You can't be a poet, I told her, if you're not reading a book a week. And the only way to make that happen is to be intentional with time—to set aside

an hour a day to be immersed in the craft, immersed in sentences and their sounds and their rhythms, immersed in the work of those who have come before. I told her of another student of mine, from a few years prior, deeply invested in film. He wants to become a critic, and so he watched 400 movies in 2022; his goal for 2023 was 450. That's a lot of screentime, but for this student and his vision of the good life, it is time purposefully spent within a long apprenticeship, one film at a time. He's learning the craft, learning what the long take, the magic hour, the match cut, the Steadicam make possible for filmmakers and for viewers.

Do that, I said. Immerse yourself in the craft. To become a poet—or a film critic, or a college graduate, or a professor, an athlete, philosopher, musician, scientist, engineer—to become a particular kind of person takes time. Attention to our routines and their formative potential enables us to do our work—whatever the work is—better. And the only way we can change those routines, and, in turn, change who we are becoming, is if we know what those routines are.

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