

For MAWA Theory & Beer, “Action and Contemplation in Creative Practice”
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The following is a series of quotes for our consideration in relation to creative practice. See endnotes for works cited.

Hannah Arendtⁱ:

“For this short hour, I should like to raise an apparently odd question. My question is: What does an active life consist of? What do we do when we are active? In asking this question, I shall assume that the age-old distinction between two ways of life, between a *vita contemplativa* and a *vita activa*, which we encounter in our tradition of philosophical and religious thought up to the threshold of the modern age, is valid, and that when we speak of contemplation and action we speak not only of certain human faculties but of two distinct ways of life. Surely, the question is of some relevance. For even if we don't contest the traditional assumption that contemplation is of a higher order than action, or that all action actually is but a means whose true end is contemplation, we can't doubt- and no one ever doubted-- that it is quite possible for human beings to go through life without ever indulging in contemplation, while, on the other hand, no [one] can remain in the contemplative state throughout [their] life. Active life, in other words, is not only what most [people] are engaged in but even what no [one] can escape altogether. For it is in the nature of the human condition that contemplation remains dependent upon all sorts of activities -- it depends upon labor to produce whatever is necessary to keep the human organism alive, it depends upon work to create whatever is needed to house the human body, and it needs action in order to organize the living together of many human beings in such a way that peace, the condition for the quiet of contemplation is assured.”

Jenny Odellⁱⁱ

“As it turns out, my dad went through his own period of removal when he was my age and working as a technician in the Bay Area. He'd gotten fed up with his job and figured he had enough saved up to quit and live extremely cheaply for a while. That ended up being two years. When I asked him how he spent those years, he said he read a lot, rode his bike, studied math and electronics, went fishing, had long chats with his friend and roommate, and sat in the hills, where he taught himself the flute...that time also taught my dad about creativity, and the state of openness, and maybe even the boredom or nothingness, that it requires. I'm reminded of 1991 lecture by John Cleese (of Monty Python) on creativity, in which two of the five required factors he lists are time”

Annie Dillardⁱⁱⁱ

“At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your heart, your back, your brain, and then—and only then—it is handed to you. From the corner of your eye you see motion. Something is moving through the air and headed your way, on two white wings. It flies directly at you; you can read your name on it. If it were a baseball, you'd hit it out of the park. It is that one pitch in a thousand you see in slow motion; its wings beat slowly as a hawk's.”

Jenny Odell^{iv}

“...you could file what I've said so far under the heading of self-care. But if you do, make it the 'self-care' in the activist sense that Audre Lorde meant it in the 1980s, when she said that '[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' This is an important distinction to make these days, when the phrase 'self-care' is appropriated for commercial ends and

risks becoming a cliché. As Gabrielle Moss, author of *Glop: Nontoxic, Expensive Ideas That Will Make You Look Ridiculous and Feel Pretentious* (a book parodying goop, Gwyneth Paltrow's high-priced wellness empire), put it: self-care 'is poised to be wrenched away from activists and turned into an excuse to buy an expensive bath oil.' ”

Jenny Odell^v

“But beyond self-care and the ability to (really) listen, the practice of doing nothing has something broader to offer us: an antidote to the rhetoric of growth. In the context of health and ecology, things that grow unchecked are often considered parasitic or cancerous. Yet we inhabit a culture that privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and the regenerative. Our very idea of productivity is premised on the idea of producing something new, whereas we do not tend to see maintenance and care as productive in the same way.”

Annie Dillard^{vi}

“Earth sifts over things as dirt or dust. If you stay still, earth buries you, ready or not. The debris on the tops of your feet or shoes thickens, windblown dirt piles around it, and pretty soon your feet are underground. Then the ground rises over your ankles and up your shins. If the sergeant holds his platoon at attention long enough, he and his ranks will stand upright and buried like a Chinese emperor's army.

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The rate at which dirt buries us varies. New York City's street level rises every century. The Mexico City in which Cortés walked is now thirty feet underground. It would be farther underground except that Mexico City itself has started sinking. Digging a subway line there, workers found a temple. Debris lifts land an average of 4.7 feet per century. King Herod the Great rebuilt the Second Temple in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. The famous Western Wall is a top layer of old retaining wall near the peak of Mount Moriah. From the present bottom the Western Wall to bedrock is sixty feet.

Quick: Why aren't you dusting? On every continent, we sweep floors and wipe tabletops not only to shine the place but to forestall burial.”

Jenny Odell^{vii}

“If doing nothing requires space and time away from the unforgiving landscape of productivity, we might be tempted to conclude that the answer is to turn our backs to the world, temporarily or for good. But this response would be shortsighted. All too often, things like digital detox retreats are marketed as a kind of 'life hack' for increasing productivity upon our return to work. And the impulse to say goodbye to it all, *permanently*, doesn't just neglect our responsibility to the world that we live in, it is largely unfeasible, and for good reason.”

Annie Dillard^{viii}

“Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?”

- i Hannah Arendt. "Labour, Work, Action". In: Bernauer S.J.J.W. (eds) *Amor Mundi*. (Boston College Studies in Philosophy, vol 26. Springer, Dordrecht, 1987) pg. 29-42
- ii Jenny Odell. *How to Do Nothing*, (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2019) pg. 10-11
- iii Annie Dillard. "The Writing Life—A Writer in the World." In *The Abundance: Narrative Essays Old and New* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016) pg. 112-113
- iv Jenny Odell. *How to Do Nothing*. pg. 22-23
- v *Ibid.* pg. 25
- vi Annie Dillard. "For the Time Being." In *The Abundance: Narrative Essays Old and New*. pg. 209-211
- vii Jenny Odell. *How to Do Nothing*. pg. 30
- viii Annie Dillard. "The Writing Life—A Writer in the World." In *The Abundance: Narrative Essays Old and New*, pg. 106