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"Alone with the Work": A conversation with Amy E. Weldon

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CS: I first discovered Amy Weldon's work last year at the AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) conference in San Antonio. The book was *The Hands-On Life* and I began reading it at a time when I was looking to distance myself from the ubiquitous screens that had dominated my private and professional life for the last decade or so. I had recently deleted all social media accounts and downgraded my phone in the hopes of making a bit more space for contemplative practices, but what I could not know then was that a looming pandemic would make sure that I was never far from a semblance of a digital life. Over the next year I read *The Hands-On Life* and thought a lot about appropriate technology with Amy's help. Recently I had a chance to talk with her about what it has been like writing and teaching during this time.

CS: In your book, *The Hands-On Life*, you say that gardening is an excellent example of what the hands-on life is all about—being connected with the work necessary for what you need to live and thrive. This got me thinking about your life as a writer and the ideas that run through much of Wendell Berry's work in this regard. Specifically, his writing process. In various essays he mentions that handwriting is integral to his thinking. Similarly, the late Australian poet Les Murray describes the "spoor of botch" approach to writing without using a word processor. I am curious about your writing process and how you approach that practice in a hands-on way.

AW: Right now, I'm writing a textbook for advanced fiction writers for Bloomsbury as part of their Writers' and Artists' Guide Series, and I'm really excited to be doing it. The chapter I'm working on right now is about the processes by which you actually get the work onto the page. At first, I thought, "well, this is going to be relatively short," because I thought it would mostly be about notebooks and journals, how I carry mine around deliberately and teach students to do the same. But then I realized that because of the Internet's constant invitation to self-exposure,

I'd need to talk also in this chapter about how privacy—being alone with the work—is a part of the composition process too; handwriting on the physical page can foster that.

First, the practical tip: Buy a notebook of some sort. I don't care what it is, but it needs to be something that you like to write in that you carry with you, and that you bring to class to write in there as everywhere. Notebooks are important, not only because they help you capture the things you would otherwise forget (because you *will* forget them), but they also give you a space of privacy to be alone with the work, and to let the work, tell you what it needs to be. As I reflected on the practical process of notebook-writing, I realized that process was about a way to be alone with your work while you, and it, figure out what it's trying to be. Then, the chapter also immediately became about what social media, and its constant self-monetization model, is doing to our ideas of art, and to the self, and to the artists' self in particular.

Interestingly, this first emerged into the creative writing classroom around the time Instagram started to become a thing, which was, if I'm remembering rightly, 2015. One class of beginning fiction and poetry writers—they were so smart!—asked: if the notebook is about capturing images, drawing, and sketching, then could Instagram be used as a notebook? I was fascinated to listen as students discussed this, because they went right to the heart of the issue and got immediately to the same place I go in this chapter: no, you really can't—because Instagram and the internet is always for *public view in advance*. We live in an era in which the constant siren song of the internet invites you to put yourself on it and let it monetize you in ways that look superficially like empowerment but are actually impoverishment (see the [emerging app NewNew](#), a brilliant piece in the *New York Times* called [“The Empty Religions of Instagram,”](#) another brilliant piece in *The Baffler* called [“In The Era of Teen\\$ploitation.”](#)) Sure, an app may occasionally return some money to you. But [as Jaron Lanier](#), among others, have shown, you are being impoverished by the sale of your data, now and into the indefinite future, in more ways than you can possibly see, and the entire business model of the internet is designed to hide that from you. Social, moral, and spiritual impoverishment go right along with internet-centeredness, for individuals and communities.

So, part of helping young artists, and myself as an artist, continue to think about the notebook is: how can it help you and your work be alone together and help your work grow in the space of privacy that it needs? Because once you look into the literature, you see every artist from Federico Fellini to Virginia Woolf saying versions of this: I don't want to talk out my work until it gets to a certain point, I don't want other people to know about it, I don't want to “seek feedback on it.” Sure, eventually you do need feedback. Writers also need community, and there are situations in which the Internet can provide that. But first, your work needs some time to grow in privacy and do its own thing and tell you what it means to be, and talking it out too early or exposing it to public view too early can kill it—in William Blake's phrase, “kill the infant in its cradle,” right? Talking it out can stop the whole process before it ever gets truly underway.

CS: One thing I want to get back to, is how you said a notebook allows you to be alone with the work. I've felt in my own life, specifically when thinking about how much graduate school, due to so much research-based writing, influenced my writing process. Specifically with regards to the Internet—I became dependent on an Internet connection to write anything at all. Since graduate school, I try to write without an Internet connection as

much as possible; whenever I sit down to write an essay, or a book review, I will write a first draft in longhand because I want to get my own thoughts out without the constant double-checking of other sources—at least initially.

AW: I find myself saying quite a lot, in my teaching of writing, something that I do wish graduate school professors and others would say to us: what is it that you're really trying to say here? What's your purpose? What's your point? Why are you writing this thing? What is it really about for you? We are not always encouraged to think of our work in terms of its purpose or goals, what it is really trying to add to the world, why you think it matters, yet it's good to keep in mind. Even though I don't think "first thought" is always necessarily the "best thought," if you don't have that ability to calibrate, to put your little surveyor stake down, and then go back and maybe do some additional research, maybe do some reading, get feedback, you may never be able to answer that question: What am I really hoping to add to the conversation with my work? You may move your little surveyor stake throughout the process, and that's fine, but I think you have to develop that ability to articulate a purpose in the first place. To declare it to yourself, to be able to make the initial gesture.

CS: For me, I would go to plant my flag on a statement, but then I would second-guess myself and qualify it and then, before you know, it's completely changed from my original intention.

AW: I often find that there's so much I write that needs to be changed, but at some point—and I do think this is true of the humanities, it's true of writers, it's true of people—part of being a human in the world, is figuring out, as Hannah Arendt, my favorite philosopher, would say: how do you make the judgment? Make the judgment fairly and well, that you can stand by it, and live by it. As Martin Luther, our college's namesake, says, "Here I stand." Even if you simultaneously admit that you may be wrong, that you may need to change as new facts come in.

CS: That's right, which is so hard to do given the endless possibility of everything now, you know? To come to that endpoint of critical thinking.

AW: It's hard to because, if we circle back to Yeats we see "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," and this is the challenge.

CS: You need humility, but humility that is tempered with the critical somehow.

AW: And with some knowledge of historical texture, cultural texture, and human texture—the kinds of texture that are just not going to be available to you on the internet as it is currently constituted. History, art, philosophy, religion, those things are going to give you that. But what does humanity look like circa-Instagram, on a spring day in 2021? That's not the best of humanity.

CS: You touch on this in *The Hands-on Life*, but that was written before the pandemic, so I am interested in how you have found ways to navigate digital technology's encroachment

into every arena of education in the age of Zoom classrooms and Covid-era virtual education?

AW: I've found in my life that important words circle back to you when you need them. I recently read, in the *London Review of Books*, Marco Polo's words to Kubla Khan in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:

"The hell of the living is not something that will be. If there is one, it is what is already here, the hell we live in every day, that we make by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the hell, and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of hell, are not hell, then make them endure, give them space."

CS: How apt is that? Perfect for what's going on.

AW: Yes! I read that and hollered, "thank you!" I think the purpose of education in general is to identify, first of all for ourselves, that which is not hell. Things that we think are important for our students to know and to carry forward, like Cormac McCarthy writes in *The Road*, to "carry the fire." How will *we* carry it? How will *they* carry it? And then we must think really hard and really deliberately about how to not only *preserve* those things but *teach* those things, to *offer* these things for students to understand and adapt, which are not only aspects of intellectual "content" or "skills" but philosophical orientations to the world and ways to understand oneself in it so that one can flourish alongside all the other human and nonhuman creatures in it. We teach these things in part by creating an *experience*—creating human- and idea-centered spaces in which students can experience these things, even as 21st-century life in general crowds them out. For instance, I ask students to silence and stow their phones out of sight as soon as they come into my classroom, even before I arrive, and to write by hand unless there's a reason they can't; we also read portions of texts aloud together in class, which inevitably prompts students to tell me, "I just noticed something I didn't when I was reading silently." It is becoming increasingly obvious to me, the difference between people who essentially came to adult consciousness before the internet, and those who now not only have never not known the Internet, but who have never not known social media.

CS: Right, that's true. We have to take that into account, since we are both of really the last generation that became young adults before the wide-spread use of the Internet. Does this separate you from your students in some fundamental way?

AW: It does separate me. Which just means I have to keep living actively in the challenge of showing them what I *do* think is there in that gap to be seen and valued. Not just to say, as some colleagues do, "well, it's progress, what can you do?" That drives me up the wall. I keep pinned by my desk a [graph showing projected global water shortages](#) with a scribble saying "This is the world they're heading into!" to keep reminding me of what's at stake—we have to keep building students' capacities, and our own, for *that!* In the introduction to my nonfiction book-in-progress, [A Thing of Beauty: Reading the Romantics in a World on Fire](#), and in my classes, I tell students that if I am not building your capacities for this world, which is only getting *more*

complex and will only *keep* asking you to look beyond yourself at more and more ramifications and interconnections and challenges, I am not doing my job.

Building your capacities starts with making choices, and being aware that the choices are there to be made—although in some cases you are also being systematically *deprived* of them by people who find your credulity profitable. I’m sympathetic to the charge that “choice,” “mindfulness,” etc. is sort of privileged white-people nonsense, but I have to keep insisting that it matters, because the evidence piles higher every day: an Internet-based, social-media-based world is impoverishing, in every way, every single human and nonhuman on our finite planet except, in Martin Ford’s words, the people who own the robots. Look around you. Sicker, jumpier, poorer, sadder, lonelier, and just closer to the edge in every way. The pandemic has made everything worse, and highlighted the stresses already there. I can’t think of a single segment of society exempt from, or unhurt by, this shift to a robot- and algorithm-driven economy, as all of us are offered bread-and-circus and sloganeering and next-day delivery instead of real answers to real and crying needs of spirit and brain. Even the literary industry, last bastion of Thoughtfulness and Words, is more and more shaped by whatever is or might be on Netflix or Twitter. Everybody’s chasing a vanishing readership. And it has, in my view, all coincided with the rise of screens and the way screens have replaced things we used to rely on maps, printed words, the natural world, and human relationships to do.

CS: I couldn’t help but notice that while you do have a website, you won’t find any links to your Twitter, Instagram, etc. Can you tell me about your relationship with social media?

AW: At this point it’s nonexistent, and I don’t see that changing. I had a social media account on Friendster—ha!—in grad school, around 1999, when we could all still believe with some justice that this thing called the World Wide Web was going to be good for the world—and then on MySpace. I remember distinctly when friends started to sign up for this new thing called Facebook, you had to have an .edu address, that’s how old I am. I stayed with Facebook, increasingly uneasy about complicity in what got worse and worse, until I quit for good on Jan 1, 2020, because I just didn’t like the preening, anxious, always-one-eye-on-the-“others” version of myself and my thinking it created. (I also didn’t like the fact that once I posted something, it technically then belonged to Mark Zuckerberg.) The space in my brain that has opened up is amazing. I actually reach out to people by email or phone now, have a conversation some other way. Of course, since I’ve been writing about the internet for coming up on a decade now, I still know way too much about it and keep track of its sinister side in particular. This is a terrible analogy, but sometimes I feel like some weird echo of those zealous Protestant Jesuit-hunters who knew all the ins-and-outs of Catholic doctrine to be able to track down and eliminate the “scourge of papistry” from 16th-17th c. England. (Although I don’t want tech-lords captured and tortured, to be clear!) I have no plans to ever go back to social media. It’s a massive energy-suck and a massive scam. These people are scamming all of us and getting away with it. Why should I help them?

CS: Have your decisions concerning social media affected your public life as a writer? I know so many writers who argue how social media is essential to having an audience for your work.

AW: Yeah, I can't pretend that hasn't cost me, although I say that somewhat theoretically, since I am not on social media and can't fully evaluate it (a Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle kind of trap, maybe?) But that's why I have my website. People can a) read the books ("it's all right there in the books," as Eudora Welty used to say, faintly baffled, and rightly so, at why people thought they needed so much access to her *personally*) and b) go to the website. I want readers, of course—who doesn't? And I appreciate them, so much—the gift of their time and attention. But I bring more than a bit of Emily Dickinson's anxiety about how "publication is the auction of the mind of man" to the assumption that social media is necessary for a writing career. Social-media buzzing about writing and writers so often *substitutes for* book sales—it doesn't *translate into* them as neatly as everybody says, or else the publishing industry and the average 19-year-old's reading level would be better off than they are.

Hard truth: the more time you spend on Twitter the less time you spend writing or letting the writing grow in your head. I just can't bring myself to join Twitter (for instance), because then I'm right back in that anxious space I left for good when I quit Facebook, of constantly grooming and preening and building up my little bowerbird nest for whoever happens to be looking (and, let's be honest, who is *ever* really looking at us as much as we think? Aren't we *always* more interested in ourselves than other people are?) To be sure, there are writers who carry forth valuable conversations and do real public-intellectual work on Twitter. But I have no gift or desire for that. Mostly, all that energy gets poured down a long funnel that ends in Jack Dorsey's pocket. Worse, it's a vote, little by little, for a world in which nobody gives a damn about actual books or the actual textures of humanity at our best that produce them.

There's also the reality of time and energy: I'm 46, writing books, teaching six courses a year, advising many students, and serving on committees to help build my college's curriculum and future. Life is short. I have to put my energy where it matters. If I have a "brand," my "brand" is that I don't do social media: I write books that I humbly hope people will still want to read in 50 years, or more. A guiding question for me is, "One year from now, what will you wish you had done now?" The answer is never—no matter how often I ask it— "started a Twitter account."

CS: This is a great transition to the last question, which is sort of a broader question: do you see the "hands-on life" going forward in a post COVID world? Do you see room for optimism there?

AW: I asked myself this question a lot and the answer varies by the day. Sometimes I feel optimistic, sometimes I feel pessimistic, and mostly I fall, along with Bill McKibben, somewhere in the middle, in a place of guardedly positive urgency: "Y'all, let's get moving, we really don't have that kind of time." And so I keep thinking in my own life, however often I'm trying and failing to live by this: a year from now, what will I wish I had done right now? The answer is always tried better to connect with the person in front of me, tried better to turn to that which is not hell and make space for it. It's hard because, in a way, I don't see anything in internet-driven society offering us the solutions that we need or a way out of this. I'm sorry: I really don't believe that we are going to internet our way out of this. We're going to human our way out of it, by stopping, looking around, hearing the voices of the humans and nonhumans around us, and acting meaningfully and positively on what we hear.

[Purchase The Hands-on Life here.](#)

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An Alabama native, Amy Weldon is professor of English at Luther College and the author of *The Hands-On Life: How to Wake Yourself Up and Save the World* (Cascade Books, 2018), *The Writer's Eye: Observation and Inspiration for Creative Writers* (Bloomsbury, 2018), and *Eldorado, Iowa* (Bowen Press Books, 2019.) More about her work is at amyeweldon.com.

1 Response



James Verdin Weldon

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Outstanding interview!

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