

On developing a practice of noticing



Author Pam Houston discusses collecting glimmers, trusting metaphors, and giving in to being a daily writer.

November 1, 2023 -

As told to Hurley Winkler, 3053 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Mentorship](#).

I know a big part of your writing process is collecting what you refer to as “glimmers,” which I’ve heard you define as things that have attracted your attention for some reason or another, though its importance isn’t always immediately apparent.

Well, just a couple of things. It’s not that the importance of the glimmer is not apparent to me right away. It’s that the reason for the importance is not apparent to me right away. And that’s kind of an important distinction, because I trust so much the process of noticing the glimmer, even if I don’t know what it means or why I’m noticing it.

And so I do know that it’s important. I just don’t know why, and I don’t really care if I ever know why. I mean, usually in the course of using it in writing, the reason it was important to me will reveal itself, but not always. And that’s okay with me because I believe in its power to carry its meaning to the reader, even if I’m not in control of that transfer, if that makes sense.

It does. What’s the most recent glimmer you’ve come across?

My husband and I went on a walk with the dogs this morning, and he found a wild onion in the pasture and he broke it off and handed it to me to chew on. Is that vitally important to any story I will ever tell? I’m not sure. But that was what popped into my mind when you asked, and it happened just about an hour ago. They can happen constantly.

The last glimmer that I think I’ll probably use in my writing, though? Let me think about—oh, I know. That’s an easy one, too. On Sunday—no, Monday morning—I gave a reading. I went out to Yosemite for about 36 hours to give a reading at a historic lodge there in Tuolumne Meadows. And even though I knew it was going to be tight in my schedule, I wanted to go because I knew I could stay up there in the meadows with the ranger, which would mean that, in the morning after my reading, I would be the only person in Tuolumne Meadows basically. And it was every bit as perfect as I imagined it being, to be there, in a place that’s visited by so many people, all alone. But I wasn’t alone. I saw a whole lot of deer, including several does with fawns, including a doe with two tiny spotted fawns who were just having the zoomies all over the meadow. It was just so cool to see that place without people, even though I was sort of wrecking that. They weren’t really scared of me because I was only one of me, and there were so many of them, marmots and pine martens and all kinds of birds and all these deer. That would’ve been the last thing that I know I’ll write about.

How do you know when a glimmer is going to make its way onto the page? What’s the difference between the morning in the meadow and the onion in the pasture?

Well, I don't know. I don't know until it does. It's important to me to be in the practice of noticing constantly. That's really the important part of my practice. And if I were being Buddhist about it, the onion would be equally as vital as the morning in Tuolumne Meadows, but I'm not a Buddhist, nor do I exactly strive to be. But the most important part of the practice is to notice and, no matter how big or small or major or minor, to keep a running recording in my head or on the page.

Having said that, there are just things that feel more significant, either because they're a major life event, like falling from a horse and not dying at a full gallop, or if it's something that's more daily, like the onion in the pasture. Sometimes those daily things can be just the metaphor. The honest answer is I don't spend a lot of time evaluating them because I think that's counterproductive to the process. The process is really about collection and having them at my disposal if I need them later.

There are certain glimmers that seem like the reason to write an essay. They will propel me into an essay because I so believe in how big they are for me. But aside from that, I sort of feel like they're all kind of equal. And getting to be alone in Tuolumne Meadows after this very wet spring, the road just opened a week ago, and here we are in August. They had 15 feet of snow up there. Everything was all renewed and revitalized. That all feels big enough to propel me into an essay about the earth and its potential for rejuvenation if we would leave it alone. It's got a lot of big ideas in it, and I feel like I could write that essay today, but at least equally important to the process is just collecting little things that are going to be momentary drop-ins in other pieces of writing that might inform it or change it or reveal it.

Have there been seasons of your life where you've fallen off the practice of noticing?

Honestly, I'm pretty good at it. Certainly there have been times, but it's my driver. It's kind of the definition of me. Wherever I am, I want to go for a walk. I want to go out and look. I want to go see. It'll say on my tombstone—not that I will have a tombstone—but it would say, if I were going to have one, *she always wanted to go see*. So it is something I'm good at. I'm not that good at sitting down and writing, honestly, but I'm quite good at noticing. And I think the reason I've been a writer all these years is because I'm good at noticing, because I am not good at sitting in a chair.

I guess one time that was really scary in recent memory was when I had long Covid for about a year, and I had so little energy. The thing I've always had in abundance is energy, I can always go for a walk. I can go fly in somewhere to give a reading, and even though I'll only be on the ground for eight hours, I'll still find a way to go out and walk around and look at wherever I am. That's really important to me. Whether it's a city or a beautiful natural area, it doesn't matter. I want to know where I am. I want the details of it. I eat them. I am always hungry for more of that.

When I had long Covid, I didn't have energy for that, and it was scary. I couldn't get off the couch. I had such deep fatigue, which I had never had in my life. I didn't know anything about it, because I've never had an autoimmune disease or anything, and I have many friends who have. The idea that I couldn't take the dogs for a walk or cook dinner or anything—I was scared. And honestly, I was so scared that I wasn't even living that it honestly didn't freak me out that much that I wasn't writing, because the living part was so much more important to me. Even though the writing's very important to me. It was sort of the first time in my whole life I gave myself a break for not getting writing done because I couldn't even take a shower.

I think my brain is still a little weird after that, and I think my heart's still a little weird, but basically I'm like 80 percent better, which I'll take. 85 percent maybe. I'm not as good at multitasking as I used to be, which I think is probably the good news. Ultimately, I think multitasking is probably not that good for us, but I am easier on myself as a result of going through that, in two ways. I'm easier on myself if I don't do every single thing I think I'm supposed to do, which feels good at 61. And also, I'm kind of easier on the writing. Not that I don't want it to be excellent, but there's less negative self-talk than there was before Covid. There's less, "Oh, that's so stupid. Oh, that's so boring. Oh, you're boring everyone. Say something interesting or get up and leave the computer behind."

All that sort of self-hating talk, which I used to think was just what my friend Fenton Johnson calls "the price

of admission for being a writer." It's calmed down some. I mean, not entirely, but just being able to write again, having the energy to write again, not to mention having the energy to go out in the world and collect glimmers—I feel so grateful for that. I don't want to spend energy on the super self-criticism, which is not to say I won't revise and revise and revise. I'm a compulsive reviser, but just in terms of getting the first draft down, I'm easier on myself, which I think can only be good.

I'm so glad you're continuing to recover. Now, I know you're a writer who loves a good metaphor. When I write, I always feel like I'm wrestling metaphors onto the page. For you, is it a matter that the metaphor will come together on the page?

Glimmers are my source of metaphor. We've all had times where we've witnessed something or been involved in something and we go, "Oh my god, that's such a metaphor for life," or, "That's such a metaphor for what I'm going through right now." I was just teaching and writing near the Great Sand Dunes, which is a national park near me, and there's this one dune that's way up on the side of the hill, and it's called an escape dune. So there's the huge dune field, and then there's this escape dune that got away, and I swear to god, every single student put it in their piece the next day. It was such an appealing metaphor to everyone. There are going to be times like that, where a metaphor suggests itself to you, or you even have a scene that you feel wants to be a little more visual or lyric, and you go searching for a metaphor, which is when it can feel like you're forcing them.

That's why I start with the glimmers. We're back to that little onion now. I don't know what it is or what it means, but if it turns out that I put my husband breaking it off for me to taste it in a scene, I have to count on the fact that that meaning is going to get conveyed to the reader without me having to ram it down their throat. For me, the best metaphors are the ones that grow naturally out of the scene or out of the glimmer without me having to go, okay, what metaphor goes here? Because then it starts to feel a little mechanical or a little forced or a little overdetermined. I like the meaning to float a little. If the glimmer makes it all the way to the reader without me even really understanding its meaning, then I know I haven't manhandled it.

Are you a daily writer?

I'm a daily writer right now because I have a book deadline, this mini book I'm doing on *Roe v. Wade*. I don't do that very often. I usually just try to let it come when it comes, except when I'm on deadline and I've sat down and I've just made myself write 500 words a day no matter what. Again, this is so not my writing style. I'm just trying it, and it's going okay. And I think that's connected to what I said before about not being so hard on myself. When I get this book done, which I will in the next month or two, I might try to continue at this pace. It would be the first time in my life that I did daily pages. I've never done it. I've rolled my eyes at the idea, honestly.

What about it has made you roll your eyes?

A few reasons. One is because teaching is super, super important to me, and my identity is really bound up in teaching, and that's the thing I do every day. I mean, of course I don't do it every day, but my dedication to teaching never wavers, and there's always student pages to read. But I also think I rolled my eyes at it because I was so sure I would write badly if I forced myself to write every day.

I don't like writing badly. Some of my good friends who are writers will write 10,000 words to get to a thousand, and I'm not like that. I like to get it in the room the first time. I do revise incessantly, but it's kind of going from eight to 10 instead of from two to 10. And I think I always thought that going from two to 10 was just a waste of time. If I don't have anything to say, why would I even sit down?

I'm now rethinking that. Even in these 500 words a day, a lot of them suck. But there's good ones in there that have arisen because I made myself sit down and write 500 words, which I realize is what every book on writing has said since the beginning of time. I just didn't really believe it.

You mentioned your dedication to teaching. How do you keep writing in spite of the fact that teaching can feel so much more satisfying?

It is so much easier to put my students' writing first, especially now. I've had my moment. I've had my say, and they're all coming to try to save the fucking planet. Of course their work is more valuable than mine, particularly my students at the Institute of American Indian Arts, but not exclusively. The work I do with mentoring these books into the world—I just feel like they're so much more important just by virtue of being new. It's new ideas and it's new reactions to the world.

That said, that set of feelings can be convenient when I'm really afraid to write or when I'm not making the time to write or when I'm afraid of the thing I'm about to write. But I have all these things in the queue that I want to write, which feels like happy news. I have eight or nine essays, and some of them might turn into short stories, and I am excited to write for the first time in a while.

You said that some of the essays might turn into short stories: is that how your work typically starts? Does it begin in essay form, then turn into fiction if you decide you want to take more liberties with it?

How it usually works is that I just start writing something and I don't worry about it. I don't worry about whether it's an essay or a story. I'm usually just playing a shell game with glimmers, and then they sort of fall into connection to each other. Then, somewhere in there, I decide whether it's a story or an essay, depending on how it's going, depending on whether it wants made-up characters or not. I mean, I wrote the book *Contents May Have Shifted*, got all the way to turning it in and said, "I don't know what you want to call this." The character's name is Pam, but I made a lot of shit up. Sometimes the work really never identifies itself. Or sometimes, like with a short story I wrote recently, a dog starts talking, and then it's like, okay, this must be fiction. There's a few things in the queue, and I keep bouncing back and forth as I'm thinking about them while I'm driving or whatever. That's just a way to keep my mind active around them. I won't really know until I start writing.

Pam Houston Recommends:

Recommendations for finding glimmers.

If it's an option, always walk. In a city. In the mountains. In somebody's driveway. If you're at someone's house, walk around the yard.

Notice with as many senses as you have. I find that smell can bring me back to a place quicker than almost anything. I think that's true for a lot of us.

Don't be afraid of being alone. I think it's much, much easier to notice everything when you're alone. I love to travel alone. I like to travel with my friends and my husband, but I really like to travel alone because I feel like it puts me in a really "noticing place." Also, people speak to you more when you're alone, and I think that's really good for dialogue glimmers.

Pay attention to your body. For me, a glimmer is a physical experience as much as a mental one. There are things that I see or hear or taste, and it's not so logical that it would be a glimmer for me, but I can feel a sort of vibrational resonance in my chest or in my body. There are other bodily sensations, like a pain or a shortness of breath or something, that make me know I'm in the presence of a glimmer. But mostly it's this kind of humming in my chest.

Write it down, no matter how small. Don't talk yourself out of it, even though it feels dumb or clichéd or too much like the other glimmers you've been noticing lately. Jot it down or put it in your phone or take a picture of it, no matter what. If you never look at it again. And if it turns out to be a cliché, fine, no problem. Nothing lost.

Name

Pam Houston

Vocation

author and teacher

□

