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writing & research center

Hope St. John: [00:00:00]

Hi all, I'm Hope and this Write for You, a podcast from the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing and Research Center where we talk about writing and how it happens in a collaborative space and open dialogue. Together with a host of fellow graduate students, we'll explore the writing process that was an ideal, but as it is actually practiced by our fellow intrepid writers – with pen scratching, keys, clacking and whatever else gets the words on the page. Consider me your disembodied writing buddy.

Today I'm thrilled to be bringing you a conversation with doctoral candidate Sam Sumpter and Michelle Pham. As with the previous episode, we recorded this over Zoom from our respective homes in the midst of Washington statewide stay-at-home order, so you may hear the sounds of everyday life and technology filtering through in the background. Here's Sam and Michelle to introduce themselves.

Sam Sumpter: [00:01:03]

My name is Sam Sumpter and I am a PhD candidate in the Philosophy Department and I'm in my sixth year, now working on finishing up my dissertation. Uh, and I work in primarily issues of like apply to ethics and gender, social philosophy. My dissertation is specifically on issues of trans identity and microaggressions.

Michelle Pham: [00:01:26]

I'm Michelle Pham. I'm also a graduate student in the Philosophy Department. I've been in the program for seven and a half years. My research is in philosophy of science, or more specifically an area called social epistemology. So, it's just about group knowledge, basically, and one of the questions that I explore in the dissertation is what we mean when we say that a group of experts agree on some particular statement, and what that means for policy in decision making contexts.

HS: [00:01:56]

Sam and Michelle both participated in the OWRC's Open Writing Circles in past quarters, so this was an exciting opportunity for me to reconnect with them, as well as to learn more about their approaches to writing. On that note, let's hear from Sam and Michelle about their processes.

MP: [00:02:13]

What is your writing process like?

SS: [00:02:17]

Yeah, that is a question. Um, it's sometimes kind of chaotic, I think. I… I tend to really, uh, focus my writing time into big chunks that come with a lot of time between them. So I typically – I… I've tried doing the thing where you write a little bit every day, and it just doesn't work for me. Um, so I typically try to set aside one day a week where I'm planning to right for, like. four hours. Um, and as long as I am in the right sort of part of the writing cycle, that tends to work pretty well. And what usually it takes to get to that part of the cycle is, I have to have already done all the reading that I'm thinking about and want to have that sort of, like, percolating, and I already need to have some kind of idea of like what my outline is going to be and where I'm trying to go. So, I try to like break all that down way before I even start actually doing the writing. Um, so the time I spend actually doing the writing, I think it ends up being far less than the sort of prep time and sort of the, like, miserable struggling time where I'm just like, hating it and mad about everything and, like, just thinking, like, "Why am I even doing this?" That's like one part of the cycle. And then I, like, free myself from that. Like Plato's cave dwellers, come out of that. Uh, and in, in, like, a moment of euphoria, I'm able to, like, write a lot in, like, four hours and just sort of, like, obsess over it and just dive into a hole. Um… So it really does sort of, like, fall on this like weird little cycle for me. Yeah, I think that's, I can't think of a better way of describing it, I guess. Is your writing process anything at all like that or is it different from that?

MP: [00:04:18]

So, I think I'm the opposite.

I think we discovered this before, but I – so, we're similar in that I think it helps a lot to do prep work beforehand. So, having some kind of general outline. Um, so, it's general in that you have the basic sections, but having an idea of what you want to go into those sections and how those sections fit together, overall, I find helps ease the anxiety of the…the writing process, but it's very rare for me to write for four hours. I'm more of a write-every-day kind of person. So I think, during the good times, it's usually five or six days a week for… anywhere between an hour and a half, to two hours, or two and a half hours. And I think it, it really just depends on what section I'm writing. Some sections take longer to write, others were descriptive. You can sort of ease through them. But, of course, like there are those moments where you realize in the descriptive section that you have it completely wrong and then you have… and that's never any fun. But I find that I'm most happy and at ease when I can keep a pretty strict schedule and I know I'm doing it.

SS: [00:05:35]

        Yeah.

MP: [00:05:36}

        Anytime I take more than a few days off, I get a lot of anxiety, because I feel like I'm not doing it. And I think, um, what I realized being close to the end now, is that a lot of my thinking actually happens during the writing. So, while the prep work is like preliminary planning – so having the idea – the actual writing… it almost never turns out exactly the way I had planned. It's pretty rare for that to happen. I think for some of the earlier chapters that's true, but for the later chapters, they ended up being very, very different. And I don't think that's a bad thing. But recognizing that that sometimes can happen and sometimes it doesn't, um, is a good thing.

        So yeah, I generally write anywhere from an hour and a half to two and a half hours, five to six days a week. I usually do it first thing in the morning. I just get it out of the way, and then I'm okay with doing all the other mundane stuff related to graduate life later in the day. And I just in general feel way better. Um, I find that if I leave it until the afternoon, I'm usually pretty sluggish, and we've all seen our emails at that point and we started thinking about other things and I'm generally just distracted, so I just do it first before I check email or read the news.

SS: [00:06:51]

Yeah.

Yeah. I think that's, uh, I think we are pretty opposite because I think the way that I do my thinking is when I'm just like staying away from it. I think, like, when I get miserable, it's when I'm thinking about it constantly and like I'm just like sort of obsessing over all the ways that it's wrong, and I'm just like constantly thinking about that. I think that's when I start to hate it and not be able to actually, like, get anything done. So, being able to take time away from it, where it's like sort of in the back of my mind, but not something that I'm just, like, trying to figure everything out about – that sort of, like, background percolating is what helps me actually do productive work when I am – when I am writing. Yeah. It's, uh, I think it's taken me a really long time to figure out that that's what works for me.

MP: [00:07:40]

Yeah. And I think, you know, when we're in the thick of things, especially the first year or two depending on how far along you are and of course depending on what you're like as a person too, we all have really weird quirks. But for some reason, I think in graduate school we also have this idealized picture of what a dissertators should be like. And I, we try really hard to mold ourselves to fit that model, but we also need to recognize that we're all different. And we do things very differently. We're more awake at certain times than others. And I think not being too rigid and being willing to let yourself work the way that you normally work... is really important and I think can be very freeing for you during this, like, very hard period.

SS: [00:08:27]

Totally. Yeah. And I think that point about like figuring out what time of day works was really important for me, too. And like what time of the week. Um, 'cause, like, once I decided just trying to set aside a day a week for it would be helpful for me. Um, I felt really good about that. But then it took a really long time to figure out which day that was. 'Cause originally I tried, like, doing Fridays and then I realized that by the time it's Friday, if I know I have a whole day set aside to do philosophy, I'm probably not going to do anything that day because I'm, like, thinking about the weekend. I'm ready to relax. Um, and sort of the same, the opposite problem with Mondays cause I tried Mondays and I would just like log on to my computer and I would

have like a million emails that I wanted to deal with and knew I had to deal with right away. And if I didn't, it would just feel like I was spending way too much time avoiding them. So finally I've settled on, like, either Tuesdays or Wednesdays, and that seems to work the best for managing all of the other stuff I have swirling around that I have to get done, while also making sure that I'm in the right kind of mindset to be able to make myself focus and get myself to focus.

MP: [00:09:35]

Nice. I mean, I feel like we can both go on and on and on about this.

Alright. So how would you describe yourself as a writer?

SS: [00:09:43]

Um, okay. How would I describe myself as a writer?

I think the, uh, the less charitable way I describe myself when I'm not feeling particularly nice to myself is, like, bingey. Um, 'cause it, sometimes it feels sort of unhealthy the way that I like go through these cycles where I'm, like, hating stuff and then, like, obsessing over it and then going back to hating it. And then like really just digging into it. Uh, I think in my more charitable moments I would describe it more as just sort of cyclic and just recognizing that this is, uh… these sort of like cycles of struggling with it and it not being fun and it being difficult to even figure out where I'm going are just part of the process of figuring out where I'm going. And then, the parts that feel more euphoric and more like easy and, and things are feeling more productive. That's also part of it. Um, so I think, yeah, probably cyclic is, is the nicest way I've thought of to describe myself.

Yeah. How would you describe yourself?

MP: [00:10:52]

I think, uh… I liked that you started with the noncharitable version and then the charitable version, so, I'll do something similar. I think the noncharitable version is just extremely rigid. So, if the schedule is five to six days a week and X hours a day, whenever I don't do that because life happens – and inevitably life happens sometimes – I freak out and I'm super hard on myself when I don't do it, even if it's just for a day. And I think, yeah, that's not a great attitude to have because I feel like it has to be this box that I need to check off every day in order

to feel better. Um, so that's the, the uncharitable version. The more charitable version is, I guess maybe I'm like a, a tortoise in the race, you know, slow and steady wins the race. You just go a little by little and you take your time, but you're taking a step each day, and eventually it gets done. Um, and usually in a very reasonable timeframe for each chapter. But yeah, in my bad moments, it's so rigid to the point where I'm unwilling to make compromises and then when things happen and I'm not able to make those compromises, I'm super hard on myself. On the other hand, I think being really strict with yourself and making yourself accountable to your schedule can also be a very good thing. So, trying to find some healthy balance between those two things.

SS: [00:12:13]

Yeah, I totally agree. And I think also in my sort of less charitable moments, I sort of can make myself feel bad about the, like, long periods of time where I feel like I'm not being productive or because I'm not putting like solid sentences on the page and I'm not creating like a visible product by the end of it. I think I'm a lot better now at recognizing that those times when it feels like I'm not doing anything are actually really, really important because I do need to stop thinking about it sometimes. But yeah, I also agree that having some, like, ways to be accountable to yourself are really important for just like making steady progress. And I've had some difficulties figuring out how to, like, do that in a way that actually works for myself. 'Cause like I've tried – I've had this experience where like I'll block off time that I'm going to dedicate to writing, and then a bunch of other stuff comes up, and I like deprioritize it ,and I move it, and I keep moving it until like it's just gone from the week. So, I think that like having times with other people where we're, I know we're going to be working together, like, having other people as part of the accountability just makes it a lot more, uh… makes it a lot more difficult to get rid of it, or to move it, or to deprioritize it. Um…

MP: [00:13:29]

Yeah. And I think actually there's… it's interesting because we have such different approaches, but I think we go through the same anxieties. So for me, because I work so consistently, sometimes because I am working so consistently, the expectation is that things should be forming pretty regularly and all the time. And I think, you know, if you go through a three-week period where you're working on the same two sections and they're only about eight pages, but you feel

like you're not making much progress in reality, you are, if you're thinking about it and you're reworking it and you're trying to communicate your idea, usually it is happening. But not being able to realize that you're actually working, but being hard on yourself because you don't have a finished product by the end of those three weeks, it's something very similar. Just the pressure...

SS: [00:14:22]

Yeah.

MP: [00:14:24]

And, yeah – and I think I completely agree with you about working with other people. That's definitely something that I didn't realize was so important to me until I joined the writing circle. That it makes such a difference in my mentality and my ability to focus on the work. I think... we're people at the end of the day and writing is so lonely, so having people to share that experience with can be really uplifting and, um, can make the process more joyous than it actually is...

Okay. So what is one thing you struggle with or wished you did better?

SS: [00:14:59]

Yeah, that's a good question. I think one thing I've found, especially working on the past two chapters that I've worked on, is knowing when to stop reading. 'Cause I.. I knew sort of – like, for one of these chapters in particular, I knew like what I wanted it to do, but I didn't know how I wanted it to get there. Like, which pieces of the literature were going to be the most useful or the most effective. Um, and so what I ended up doing is just, I like spent, like, two months reading, like, eight different literatures, um, and taking notes on them and being like, "Oh, it could go in this direction, it could go in this direction." And then it ended up being just, like, way more information than I would ever, ever need to be able to accomplish this chapter. So, I think that part of that came from feeling a little aimless about exactly what I wanted it to do and... and what I wanted to focus on. But I think part of it also just came from the anxiety of starting and actually getting it going. And then when I ultimately started outlining it, I had these, like, enormous exegesis sections that I didn't need because this is, like, an argument chapter, not a lit review. And so, uh, I think getting a better sense at when to stop reading would be something that I do want to continue to work on. I think I'm, uh, hopefully, fingers

crossed, okay for the rest of this dissertation, but who knows, I could, like, find one cool quote that leads me to another citation that leads me down like a rabbit hole of like turning into a hole, like, long exploration of, like, one tiny thing that I would probably be better served to just, like, say and move on.

[Dog barking]

MP: [00:16:36]

I think Ginger agrees with you.

SS: [00:16:39]

Yeah. My dog agrees. Um… but yeah, so I think just sort of getting better at, sort of, really deeply internalizing the mantra that the best dissertation is a complete dissertation and not necessarily getting sucked into rabbit holes about tiny points that are really interesting and cool to me, but that maybe don't serve my actually finishing the project in an efficient, effective way.

MP: [00:17:02]

Yeah. I think I… I have a similar problem, but it's not with research. It's with writing. Knowing when to stop. I think I didn't really learn that until my, my fourth chapter and my dissertation has five original chapters, so… It was painful, but I think those first few, I really could have submitted each of them after about three months. But I think that's actually a downside to writing… so frequently is that you read it so much to the point where it doesn't seem like it's great anymore. And so I think… taking breaks and also knowing when to stop, to send it out for feedback. I think when you feel like you're… you don't know if it's good or not, you're not even sure or it's all negative, but you have something that is generally complete, that's usually a time that you need to stop and basically just send it out.

But I think I waited so long to do it because I was so anxious. Um, in part because I had heard stories about… people's committee members ripping up their chapters in shreds during meetings, calling it crap. Uh…

SS: [00:18:11]

God!

MP: [00:18:12]

Yeah! And it just kind of just terrified me. I just thought, "Oh my goodness, it would just be so embarrassing to my advisor if I sent this to my entire committee and they all thought it was a load of garbage." And you know, I should say, it has never happened. Never. But every time I get to that point where I'm supposed to submit it, I keep it for an extra couple of weeks because I'm so freaked out about it. When I got to chapter four, I realized, I was like, "Okay, I think I'm at that point where it probably doesn't matter anymore. I worked on it enough." And I sent it out and lo and behold, the committee thought it was great. So… I mean, I think there's always things to work on in every chapter and they're always going to give you critical feedback, that's part of it. But knowing when to stop is really important.

SS: [00:19:00]

Yeah, I think… I think I'm slightly different about it because I still have the same sort of like, "Uh, this is not very good." But my way of emotionally handling that is to be like, "I don't want to look at it anymore." And just like, "Just take it from me please." And I just, like, send it to them because I know it's not going to be very good, but I just don't want to think about it anymore and I don't want to look at it. Um, and I think that that it helps me feel like it's getting out of my brain and, like, out of my hands and that helps alleviate some of my anxiety about it, even when I'm like, "Oh, that was bad. That was… it's just going to be really bad." And it never really is that bad.

MP: [00:19:39]

Yeah. It's really never that bad. And I think the other thing is, even if it is bad, to be quite honest, that's the whole point of having a committee. If you need help, simply drowning in your terrible chapter… I don't know if that would actually help you. Maybe that means it's time to call a meeting with your advisor and say, "Hey, can we just meet to talk about the chapter? I don't want to send you what I have, but here's an outline and here's what I'm struggling with." And sometimes just having a conversation with somebody about it can help clear up the air on why you're struggling so much.

SS: [00:20:12]

Yeah, I totally agree.

MP: [00:20:14]

Ready to go to the next question?

SS: [00:20:15]

Yep.

MP: [00:20:16]

So, what is one experience that has influenced how you approach writing?

SS: [00:20:22]

Yeah, that's a good question. One of the first things that comes to mind is just thinking about my, like, first quarter in grad school, the seminars I took. So, I was taking two seminars and had to write term papers for both of them. And I spent a lot of time on both of them and I read, like, all of this extra literature I, like, wanted to make them really good, really important, really great papers that could eventually turn into like my master's paper and a bunch of other stuff. And so I just spent like a lot of extra time reading a lot of extra stuff and spending a ton of time on these two term papers, which in retrospect, like, as I was ending coursework in my second year, my approach to turn papers was totally different. It was, like, just do it, and just get this dumb thing done. And I think what that has helped me get a lot better at, is appreciating the stakes almost of, of writing and appreciating that, like, yeah, I could spend a million years getting this one paper really perfect and really just, like, gorgeous and changing the world with it. But is that amount of time really worth it? Probably not, in those cases. It's probably better to just get things done in a way that I'm happy with and I'm feel good about and feel confident about. So, I think I've gotten from that experience, from that, like, sort of flip between my first term papers and my last term papers, recognizing like I can have pretty realistic expectations for what kind of amount of work I put into something in order to consider it something that I'm like happy with and feel is something I can confidently put my name on.

MP: [00:22:10]

No, that's like really interesting. I think just contrasting your, your first-
and your second-year term paper writing. I remember those. Those
were painful.

One thing that's in my life outside of academia that's taught me so
much about writing is actually practicing karate. And I think this is
where the rigidity in my schedule comes from. So in karate, I think,
sometimes people like to overintellectualize the things we do, the
techniques we practice. But a lot of our seniors basically say you can
ask them questions, but if you over intellectualize any of this, basically
you're thinking about it more than you're actually doing it. So, if you
really want to improve your set of skills, you just have to do them a
lot. And it's usually thousands of times before you actually see any
real payoff. And I think that's actually [00:23:00] how I think about
writing. When we have a dissertation, I think so little emphasis is put
on the actual craft of writing itself and how we end up improving our
writing skills. Because by the end of it I think you want to have a
finished product and you want to have something to say, but you want
to be able to say it well. And some people don't care about this as
much, but I actually really care about that in part because it's mine
and I think the way that you communicate whatever it is that you're
trying to say, you want to say it in the best way possible. And so to
me, I think if you want to improve your writing and you want to finish
your dissertation, all of that stuff, it's not going to get anywhere unless
you actually do it a lot. If you don't do it a lot, whatever that may
mean for you, it won't get anywhere. And I've definitely had moments
very early on where, just for weeks at a time, you know, I just be
completely anxious about what I was going to say in the dissertation
and not feel ready. And part of it was just, I wasn't forcing myself to sit
down to do it. And I think realizing for myself that the act of just doing
it is probably the biggest hurdle you have to get through when you're
writing your dissertation can be a really, really helpful way to orient
yourself or your project. So yeah, I think just at the end of the day
when it comes to writing and finishing your dissertation, you just have
to do it. It's complicated and yet simple at the same time.

SS: [00:25:29]

Yeah, I totally agree. It is sort of like an interesting… balance to try to
find between doing the kind of work and the kind of research that is
helping you produce something that has been sort of, like, responsibly
thought about. Because I could also see going too far on the other

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direction where it's like, "Okay, wel, we don't want to obsess over like picking into every single detail of everything and reading everything ever." But it's also a big problem when people are like, "Okay, I read two things and now I know everything about this and I'm going to write a million articles about it." And then you're, like, missing a lot of really potentially helpful critical information that it's kind of irresponsible to be ignoring. So there is… there's like that that balance to find and I think just figuring out for myself where to situate my own personal like mental health and anxieties within that balance has also been a big project because I think there's also, like, the very real kind of imposter syndrome that so many of us deal with where it's hard to trust myself to be reliable about what counts as thorough research and what is, like, overkill, that is just me compensating for feeling like inexperienced or whatever.

MP: [00:25:42]

Yeah, I totally hear you on that. I think the one big difference between karate practice and writing is that – at least in the organization that I practiced with – we have amazing seniors who help us. So when you grade for black belt, you have to have practiced this one *kata*. So it's like forms that get passed down from generations that you just do over and over. You have to do it 5,000 times. On your own. And usually about every thousand or so, you perform it to your senior and they give you some feedback. So they have a… a structure in place. And when you're ready to grade, it's not you who decides you're ready to grade, your senior says, "Okay, you've done the 5,000, I'm recommending you for grading." Whereas I think in graduate school, the relationship between student and advisor can vary so much depending on who your advisor is and what sort of approach your advisor takes, that it can be wholly unhelpful, because I think the graduate student is put in this really position where sometimes they have to take leadership. And some people obviously have really good advisors, so that's great. But not all advisors are equal. And I think part of it is just that in academia people are overworked and they have too many things going on. And I think it's easy to just put aside some obligations when other things come up. Yeah. So there's some discrepancy there. And I think when we talk about writing, it is this very isolating and lonely experience, but so much of it also depends on the feedback that you get from your advisor, your committee, whether it's your peers. And I think at the end of the day, like that's the other really important component that's going to hold you up to be successful. Because if no one tells you, you're not going to know. Why would, you know, why are you in graduate school if you, you

knew what a really good chapter look like, you know? Anyway, I just think there's a lot of other social factors involved in the writing process that sometimes I think graduate students don't take into account. And I think it can be actually quite detrimental when you hold yourself too accountable for it and you, you end up isolating yourself and not talking to other people.

SS: [00:27:53]

Yeah, totally. And I think we're really incentivized to sort of, like, overaccountablize ourselves. Uh… because we are, I mean, we are in such a weird and often toxic power dynamic. Just within the way we're situated in academia. And I think there's so many messages just, like, in the air that are telling us if we're not suffering then we're not doing it right. Or just, like, being miserable is what it takes. So, it can be really hard to even just, like, get past all of these, like, ambient messages we're getting about what grad school should look like. And it can be really difficult to figure out how to get out of that headspace and really be able to recognize where problematic power dynamics are getting in the way and where problematic narratives about grad school are getting in the way and how we can find support and find advocacy for ourselves and with ourselves when we need to.

MP: [00:28:48]

Yeah, I think that's really important. And we…we talk about it – I remember, I think when I started graduate school that was a big part of the conversation, you know, not being too rigid about what counts as good or bad philosophy, because of these really strange power dynamics in the discipline. I don't know about other disciplines, but philosophy is a really uh, strange place to be, and there's a lot of work to be done. And I, I remember like it was really great because it was such an open conversation and when I started graduate school, but once you get to writing and you're not having those conversations anymore, it's really easy to forget and then to pour all of the responsibility on yourself and not ask for help, which can be really bad.

SS: [00:29:32]

Yeah.

MP: [00:29:34]

Okay. So, what is something you've learned about writing that you wish more people knew?

SS: [0029:40]

I think just sort of, like, the basic idea that it's okay to feel sort of aimless for a while and that it's not going to last forever as long as... as long as you are trying. As long as you're, like, putting in the work, the aimlessness doesn't have to last forever and, like, I've, I've been able to finally figure out some strategies for, like, helping myself still continue to think about the topic I want to be thinking about even when I have no idea what I'm trying to do with it. Like mind maps, I've started doing that a lot and find it really, really helpful. I've also learned, like, in general that being pretty tactical with the work I'm doing can be really helpful. Like, just printing out whatever chapter or whatever, like, brainstorming notes I've been working on and just, like, cutting them up and rearranging them and being able to visualize that way. So I think learning what sort of weird practices help you not feel too miserable even when writing is a little bit difficult – or really difficult – figuring out what those kinds of strategies are for myself has been very, very helpful so that I can keep working on it and keep thinking about it without it being terrible. Without it, like, being, uh, just something that makes me feel horrible about myself. Um, and... and just also, like, recognizing that just because writing is an individual activity doesn't mean it has to be like isolating and it doesn't have to really – it shouldn't be truly individual, it should be something that's really collaborative, and just finding support networks and finding people I trust to run stuff by and to just vent about stuff has been really, really helpful for me.

MP: [00:31:18]

Yeah. I think the – I really second your thoughts about writing being a collaborative activity. I think if I organized a group very early on, when I just started writing the dissertation and being able to talk with other people more regularly about my project, it would've made things a lot easier for me. Because it was very easy to become extremely self-isolated because I got this grant and so I didn't have to teach. And so I was just spending all of this time alone and... and I hadn't really figured out my writing flow at that point yet, but I just thought I had to write like five hours a day and it turns out it's just impossible for a creature like me. Like I just can't do it. It's not my cup of tea. Um,

yeah... I think being around other people and being able to talk about your struggles and whatever it is that you're working on is really helpful.

And I guess maybe the other thing, um, I think it's sort of related to what you said earlier, is just that usually I find when I'm in the thick of things, I always think it's way worse than it actually is. And so, one thing I wish more people knew is just whatever it is that you've produced, it's probably a little bit better than you think it actually is. Or maybe to put it differently, it's not as bad as you think. It's always like that because I think while you're writing, there's just much anxiety involved that everything gets negative very easily, but you don't recognize that you've actually made progress. And so, if you've put in the appropriate amount of time for the sort of writer that you are, just recognizing that it is work that you've done. And because you've looked at it so many times, you're probably not a fair evaluator of the quality of the work.

SS: [00:33:04]

Yeah, and I think one of the things I've learned too has been just, like, setting really specific goals for myself each week. Even when they might seem kind of silly like, "Read this article and take some notes on it." If I can, like. set some goal, even if it's small, even if it seems like really inconsequential or like, not that productive or whatever, being able to like check off that I've been doing stuff and, like, just see like, "Okay, yep, I have been doing things." Maybe they're not getting me there super quickly or maybe it doesn't feel perfect, but I am doing stuff and I am making progress in the way that works for me. I think that can also sort of help lessen some of the anxiety and help lessen some of the, like, self-doubt and self-hate kind of things that can come up.

MP: [00:33:47]

Yeah, that's definitely something I've always admired about you. So, in sitting next to each other, I remember you have this awesome planner and under each day you'd have like a set of boxes that you'd start ticking off and by the end of the day most of them are usually gone and if you didn't finish it – I remember talking to you about it. You weren't particularly hard on yourself. You just circled it and you said, well, "I'll just do that tomorrow." And I started doing it too, and I think the... your point about setting realistic goals is so important. I remember early on – just when I think about it, holy hell, I don't even

know how I've survived. I would go to the library and my goal was just "write." It's just not a very helpful goal to have, you know? And saying you're going to finish a dissertation chapter in two weeks – unless you've thought about it so extensively and mulled it over your head – there's no way you're going to complete a chapter in two weeks. I've heard stories that some people have, but I don't – I'm just not that kind of person. I can't produce something good in two weeks.

SS: [00:34:47]

Yeah, I don't – I don't know who those people are.

MP: [00:34:51]

But I think… yeah, like, if you go to the library and you have two hours and you plan on writing, it should be something like, "Work on this section of the chapter, specifically these three paragraphs and fix this." Something like that. I think that having a tangible goal that you can realistically do in the amount of time that you have, rather than, "Finish the rest of Chapter Five," even though you've only written three pages. That's – don't do that, because I did it and it didn't work, I promise.

SS: [00:35:24]

Yeah. And I like to put everything as a to do list items, 'cause I really get a lot of satisfaction out of like checking stuff off. It just really makes me feel a lot better even when it's like, "Draft email. Send email." 'Cause I also feel like more anxious when I've got a lot of little stuff in my head and it's just sort of like floating around, like, "Oh when are you going to do that? When are you gonna do that?" So writing it all down and just being able to, like, get it out of my head and into a different place is the only way that I've been able to figure out how to manage feeling like I've got too many things going on to be able to focus on any one thing.

MP: [00:35:58]

The other thing is, the anxiety that you have with writing… you have to somehow find your own way of managing your emotions. The emotions are not wrong because it is a very anxious experience to undergo. But I think finding a healthy way for you to manage your expectations and to take care of yourself is really important. And different people are going to do different things. For me, punching

and kicking stuff always feels better. Or, you know, on some days it's just I'm going to binge watch Netflix and that's all. That's fine too. I think just finding a way to make sure you take care of yourself is really important.

SS: [00:36:40]

Yeah. And I think one of the most important things I learned fairly early on in grad school was that... when I was doing philosophy all the time, when, like, that was the only thing I was doing – I was teaching, I was doing coursework, I was working on my own research... I started to hate philosophy. Like, I thought about dropping out all the time 'cause I was like, "This is not giving me joy. Like this is not sparking joy for me." And I finally learned that when I was spending most of my time doing other stuff, and then philosophy almost as like a side thing, that's when I started to really love it again, and really get excited about doing the work is when I could think of it as almost like a treat now, because it's like, "Okay this is the time I have set aside for philosophy. It's not a whole lot of time, but it's the time I'm going to do it." And I could just focus on the things that are fun and that feel good and I don't have to like just sit in it all the time. And I think that's true for me. I don't think it's true for everybody. I think there are plenty of people who would be like, "Yeah I'll just do this thing all the time, 'cause I really do like it that much." But I think not being too hard on yourself about what engaging in your research and your work looks like for you is really important because again, there were so many messages we get about, like, what a good academic looks like. And like especially in philosophy, there are these... people who, um, are really insistent on making everyone think that it's still the case that in order to be a real philosopher, you have to spend 80 hours a week thinking about formal metaphysics, which is not true. I would like to formally go on the record saying that it was not true.

MP: [00:38:013]

Yeah. I think, um, as much as I love philosophy – and there's definitely very special moments when you figure something out for yourself that's so intellectually rewarding – I still recognize the value of doing it and I love it – but I have zero interest in doing it for more than 40 hours a week. I don't even do it for that long –

SS: [00:38:34]

Oh God, that sounds like a lot...

MP: [00:38:37]

Email writing and all that other stuff, that's maybe more like 20 or 25 hours a week, including reading.

But I think you have to manage it and keep it realistic. And I think even if you like the craft, there's a lot of other stuff that comes with the craft and that's part of it. There's a lot of pressure to want to fit in and feel like you want to do it all the time because if you do it all the time, you're serious. If you have a life, you must not love it enough.

SS: [00:39:02]

Yeah, totally.

MP: [00:39:03]

All that garbage.

SS: [00:39:04]

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

MP: [00:39:06]

Okay, so let's move on to the last question, which is, "What is one tip or encouragement you'd like to offer?"

SS: [00:39:15]

I don't know if I have a whole lot more other than what some of the stuff I've already said. Um, but I think recognizing that you don't have to, like, feel productive all the time in order to be doing a good job and to be, like, probably making more progress than you think you are. I remember like a couple of weeks ago, I had been, like, dreading opening up this chapter again cause I was like, "Oh there's so much left to do. I'm so behind. I'm not being as productive as I ought to be." Um… and then I opened it up and I was looking through it and I was like, "Oh, I'm practically done with this. Like, this is fine. This is not nearly as bad as I'd been like telling myself it was." Um, so I think that's something I would – I definitely wish was more a part of the ways that we collectively talk about writing and doing sort of, like, intellectual work is it doesn't all have to be this, like, sort of idealized picture that we mythologize of the great academic writer just sort of farting out a whole dissertation in one go. So, I think that's important

for me. I think also finding your people and finding your support and finding the things that you care about that help you manage your emotions – not, and not manage your emotions in a way that's, "How am I going to like get myself to perform in this like perfect way?" but like legitimately, like meaningfully, doing what makes you feel good and what makes you excited about the thing you're doing. 'Cause if you're not excited about it at least sometimes, at least in the good times, then, like… you shouldn't be doing it. If it's not making you feel more interested in the world and, like, more excited about what you are doing to participate in society or whatever, then like there's also no shame in going and doing something else in general. It's just sort of about, like, not being too hard on yourself and finding your people and finding your support.

MP: [00:41:10]

Yeah, I completely agree. I think it's… if you don't have friends, it's a sad place to be. You need friends and you need people who can support you, uh, especially when you, you really need it. And I think maybe one other thing is just that when we go to graduate school, I think completing a dissertation and getting a PhD becomes a really big deal in your life. And it is like a, a momentous life choice that you make because a very large chunk of time is going to be devoted to this thing. But I think actually it has helped me to think about it as just one small chunk in my life and this whole dissertation graduate school thing, it becomes like X amount of hours that I spend on it and then there's other things in my life that I'm going to worry about. For whatever reason, I think that just thinking about it as, like, this thing I really love to do, and I have this really important thing to say, for some people it can be really empowering. But I think for some people it can actually be debilitating and I think I fall in the latter camp. So, I think just romanticizing about the importance of your work and how significant it is to get a PhD, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, all that garbage. For some people I think it doesn't help, it actually makes them more anxious and it makes them feel more pressure. So to me, I think just focusing on day-to-day tasks and do it one thing at a time. And of course, when you finish a chapter, you have to celebrate. You need to celebrate those small victories. Because I think… I remember when I first started graduate school, a lot of people said this thing's like a marathon and they're totally right.

I've never ran a marathon, but I would imagine if you're running a marathon and all you think about is, "When is this over? When is this over? Oh my God, I'm running a marathon." That's not a very fun

thought to have for such a long period of time. Instead, you should be focused on just the next step, the next stride you're going to take. And I think, um, when you're writing and when you're working on your dissertation, it should be that the next word you're going to write, the next page, the next chapter, and you celebrate those small victories rather than thinking about the big picture all the time and overwhelming yourself.

HS: [00:43:30]

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