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In Praise of Makeshift Finishing

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The waxed linoleum of my office floor in an old wooden framed building at the University of New Brunswick was sticky. On a hot and humid summer day in July 2017, I sat, cross-legged, in shorts, for a week, sorting and re-sorting scraps of paper, fighting a growing wave of anxiety. I had organized the scraps into thirteen manila envelopes in rows on the floor. They were too many for my cheap, particle board desk. Each envelope was tanned, half the size of a sheet of paper, dated in permanent marker, and stuffed with photocopies of notes and observations, questions and analyses, ideas and theories, scenes and characters, interviews and descriptions, facts and references, and the other myriad of forms that ethnographic field notes take. I had no idea why or how to begin writing what I hoped would become a book. My second. The challenge, I thought, at the time, how to bring everything together into one thing. That was my first mistake.

John McPhee (2017), the venerable father of creative non-fiction, puts it well, reflecting on his own crisis of structure on a picnic table under an ash tree in 1966. From his crisis, he turns to a discussion of structure and method as a solution to the problem that “[y]our last piece is never going to write your next one for you.” What order should the papers or the manilla envelopes go? Which should come first? What was the point? What was my argument? What literature did I want to contribute to? I had ideas. But soon learned that new books are no easier than books written. In fact, they are worse; they are unwritten. Rather than McPhee’s craft, structure, and tools, both analogue and digital, here I want to dwell on the importance of finishing, however imperfectly.

I had written the notes in May 2017 during a visit to friends in the Chocó, a region of rainforest and rivers in northwestern Colombia. I had gone to the Chocó as an anthropologist between 2010 and 2012 to spend time in a village on a stretch of river populated by Afro-Colombian communities in northwest Colombia to learn how to mine gold. I took the photographs, conducted the interviews,

collected the documents, filed the folders, and wrote in the notebooks and in the files on the computer. At a red plastic desk, on a sweat-soaked mattress, unable to sleep, during meetings, during interviews, during breaks while learning how to mine gold, and at other times when I could grab a moment, I wrote. In 2017, I had gone to share a manuscript of my first book, which was about a gold rush on the river. I had sat, gossiped, looked at photographs, and I had read the book aloud to friends. Later that summer, I came back to Fredericton with so many ideas. As with earlier and subsequent visits, I had much I could write about. So, for a week, the envelopes and papers and I were spread out on the floor, sticky. Stuck. Too much to write about. All unfinished.

Worse, there was much more: to my left, a bookcase with a shelf of notebooks in the lower right-hand corner: journals with creamy paper and plain brown covers from a stationery shop in Ottawa, and notebooks with thin paper and brightly coloured covers from corner stores in Colombia. Each was filled with my impenetrable hand. On the top shelf, two boxes of index cards about Medellín were in a box gathering dust. My computer had files and folders of clippings and articles, maps and photographs, and enough audio and video to make a documentary. Notes for projects I have worked on, or am working on, or might still work on. Most unfinished. In the years since, I have added to the notes.

Over the years, I have written book reviews, lectures, notes and queries and description and analysis from the field, a book, an edited volume, and not as many articles as I would have liked, and a few short pieces. Those notes on the floor, on the bookshelf, in the shoebox, and on the computer, were my first clumsy, too serious, too self-conscious attempts at saying something on the page worth saying. Some notes might be worth working up into something worth publishing: a short piece, a longer article, or a chapter of a book. Thoughtful, provocative, urgent, perhaps? Timely, even.

The challenge? Not just that finishing is hard, but that in my inexperience and my desire, then as a new professor, many times since, and even now, I have wanted a simple plan on how to proceed, which has gotten in the way of proceeding. I wanted the certainty of a step-by-step set of instructions for writing—a recipe, a formula, a method to fall back on—misunderstanding that writing is more like cooking, a practice learned not from a recipe book but in the doing, as Michel de Certeau (1988) memorably describes learning how to cook. My mistake? Not that urge for a formula, but in not seeing the importance of *finishing* as part of the process. To finish not just to think on the page, but also to make it real.

In the eighth month of a sabbatical in a café in a working-class neighbourhood of Colombia's immense, chaotic capital of Bogotá, in March 2024, as I revise this, a third draft, I reflect about finishing before being ready, I think back to what I have learned about stringing words together in the almost seven years since the time on the floor. A lot of what I have learned is the craft and the carpentry that comes with embracing an iterative, repetitive manual practice of writing. Whatever skills I have gained with words have been hard won. But I made a crucial mistake in not finishing, and in always over thinking everything.

Students and journalists, with their deadlines, have a different rhythm to an anthropologist. Am I jealous? Deadlines far in the future are apt to make me not write, but a deadline, this afternoon, at five o'clock? I hit it, every time—a grant, a proposal. For such a hard, external deadline, I finish. Why not write this way? What can I learn from this as a writer? John McPhee, whose style weaves together story with characters and analysis in a way I have long admired, reminisces in *Draft No. 4*, his collection of essays on his writing career, about an assignment as a student at school. His teacher, a Mrs. Olive McKee, asked her students to submit three assignments a week, most weeks, about anything they wanted. My best friend, who has long since given up philosophy for a career in computers, fondly remembers being asked to write for class, every week, as an undergraduate. While I am scared to try this with my students, a fear they might revolt and drop the course *en masse*, I think it would be good, pedagogically. Precisely because they would learn to finish, even imperfectly. Yet, the longer I have been in the academy, the longer its deadlines become—at least for me. A book can take years, an article many months, both interrupted by many obligations. But, why? Why not finish quickly? Finishing is to have something good enough. Can a book be approached the same way?

In her biography, Rosamund Bartlett describes Leo Tolstoy's, the Russian Count, novelist and philosopher of non-violence, way of writing in some detail. A difference, his practice of serialization—the nineteenth-century method famously employed by Charles Dickens. Publish chapters of an unfinished book on a regular basis. At the end of it, Tolstoy would spend months revising and revising again galley proofs for subsequent editions. Looking at his publications, it is clear he also spent many years writing lots of shorter pieces, letters, and other correspondence. In my corner of the academy, have we given up on such iterative, serial approaches to working out ideas on the page, in diaries, and in letter form. In favour of publishing what is perfect? Which, often, means never finishing, let alone publishing.

The sabbatical gave me a lot of time for reading, walking, and writing. I have worked on *the* book a lot. It still needs more time. “Books take a long time, and you need pieces along the way,” texted Noah, my whip-smart Australian colleague who has given me his ear too often as I complain about writing. But might pieces along the way serve not merely as line items for a CV, which I find profoundly unmotivating, but instead to think out loud and in public to move longer projects forward. Was my mistake over the last seven years thinking in terms of long projects rather than in an idea that can be finished, polished, and sent out in small steps? Not quite a serialized monograph, but much more iterative. Is the mistake committing to certain inappropriate and paralyzing perfectionism? My mistake doubly so then as writing long in book form, in combination with perfectionism, makes starting, let alone finishing, so much harder.

The time sitting cross-legged on the sticky linoleum came towards the end of my first year as tenure-track faculty, still green, new, fully feeling the imposter, and overwhelmed by the combination of teaching, research, and service. I was tired. In the previous year and a half, I had revised a dissertation spanning 12 chapters and 450 pages into a draft of 200 words that would become my first book (Tubb 2020). On the floor, I hoped to do it again, for a quick book. My *naïveté*? Thinking the skills and certainty I had gained in a first endeavour would translate to the second. The double mistake, on the floor, trying to work out the whole, before even starting on a part.

When my son was two months old, he, my wife and I moved to New Haven for a year and half. It was there I planned, wrote, and drafted that first book for six months. I revised the dissertation before I even wrote a word. Along the way, I wrote two articles, only one of which came out, because the book came out first. I walked for hours a day to and from the Agrarian Studies Building in New Haven to Prospect Street to West Haven. At Yale, I met other students and researchers more committed, and more *adroitly* practiced at the publish or perish paradigm than I. We would workshop papers, and they would submit pieces, which to my mind, seemed unfinished and unready for peer-review. They would talk strategy and tactics, while I strove to perfect something. They used rejections to improve their work and gave their Curriculum Vitae a boost with each article submitted. We were all desperate to find faculty jobs, and thinking back, my dismissal of this approach was facile and wrong-headed. What I missed in my perfectionism was that submitting something you think is ready is not an abuse of the peer-review process, so much as a way to finish

something good enough. Send it off, gain some distance, get some revisions, and come back to revise. Or not. Maybe it was already good enough.

The problem with perfectionism is that more often than not, it leads to intensive revision, without finishing. It leads not to an imperfect article submitted too soon, nor an imperfect article never published, but rather an article living mostly in notes in piles of papers unfinished. A solution to the paralysis is to embrace a messier, shorter, more imperfect, contingent, and temporary way of writing. It is to embrace a kind of makeshift finishing, and a rejection of formulae to writing, or, for that matter, building a curriculum vitae.

For eight years, I have taught anthropology at University of New Brunswick, a small university in the Canadian Maritimes. It has many charms, I find. One of which is helping students learn to express themselves and think on the page. But in this role as a professor, I also serve on grant committees and graduate committees. It has struck me how often students (and faculty!) seem so often fixated on a certain formula. Essays have a certain formula—the five-paragraph essay. The thesis proposal has its own. The peer review article has one, which varies with discipline. University becomes almost an exercise in mastering the formula. But David Labaree describes it as a fetish for formulae learned from high school to the doctorate: “It’s dysfunctional—to say nothing of off-putting, infantilizing and intellectually arid. But, then again, it makes life easier for concerned. So, it’s not going away soon” (Labaree 2018). The critique is that the formula of an essay, a proposal, a thesis, and the outline get in the way of thinking and creativity. Breaking things down into tiny steps works to write a paper, but less so to actually think critically. But, for many, the resulting methodologist’s adherence to an opaque formula can not only be infantilizing and arid, as Labaree, warns, but something that does a disservice to original thinkers, drumming them out of academia.

I am left with a burning question, as a writer and a teacher: what is to be done? At issue, a formula can help in finishing. But finishing is not actually the goal. The point is not to publish (and perish), but to work out on the page and to work out and communicate an insight, a finding, a result, a concern, an idea. It is to participate in a conversation. As scholars, after all, it is by making words external to ourselves that we can work with our thoughts and make them better, clearer, shorter. The problem with formulae is not that they help in finishing, but that finishing can be an important step to having something to think with further. After all, as any writer knows, the words could always be different. Everything can always be revised and tinkered with.

Tinkering has a bad reputation, however. It is too often seen as a waste of time. It is one of a handful of English words that come to us from working-class trades of the nineteenth century—tinkering, being the pot fixer who would travel from town to town mending and selling pots and pans, cobbling being the cobbler who repaired shoes with available materials, and, worst of all, the reputation of the makeshifter. Makeshift, in English, connotes something unfinished, temporary. The makeshift shed an eyesore in the garden. But this reputation is unearned. Temporary, good enough, unfinished is exactly what writers *should* strive for. It is what I was doing wrong on the floor with my notes. I was trying to find *the structure*, whereas what I needed was *a structure*. A place to start, then revise from. As a new faculty, I strove for *the* publication, rather than *a* good enough publication to help me think about the next one.

The issue is that formulas can help in finishing, but finishing is not the goal. The goal? Not to publish, but to work out on the page and to communicate with others an insight, a finding, or a result. As scholars, after all, it is by making words external to ourselves that we can work with our thoughts and make them better, clearer, shorter, etcetera. The problem with formulas is that they hinder finishing, and that finishing can be an important step to having something to think with further. It seems obvious to me, the rational, bureaucratic, worlds governed by procedures, planning, and formulae are not the way most people live, most of the time. Instead, most of us live lives that are less planned. We improvise. This tension is the methodologism and rationality of the planner, and the actual getting things done through iterative good enough makeshift—the makeshifter *par excellence* works in a cobbled-together, temporary, contingent, improvised, and imperfect mode. While the planner and makeshifter are in tension, might there be a need to rebalance in favour of making it up as you go along. The alternative to premature perfectionism is exhausting, paralyzing, and counterproductive.

What does it mean to approach not just writing as makeshift, but also finishing? That is to say publishing? Might attempts at formulaic perfectionism be paralyzing and stilting? As a writer, my actual process has always been a cobbling together of materials—as a student, grant writer, faculty member, book writer. Everything I have ever written has been approached through doing research, reading, getting ideas, working it out, revising, expanding, and always in the end through iterative good enough writing decisions, so the words come together. It is a process that George Saunders (2021) captures almost exactly in his book on Russian short stories. We both write by revising. By making a series

of iterative and intuitive changes on the page over dozens of drafts, without much forethought. Haruki Marukami (2009) makes a similar point—it is by “rewriting and revising takes my thinking down even deeper paths. No matter how I write, though, I never reach a conclusion. And no matter how I rewrite, I never reach the destination.”

What is publication then? It is not the submission of a perfect piece of writing, but rather it is a finishing of a good enough pause in the revision. Destination unreached. To write and revise does require tools in editing, revising, cutting, citing, and researching. It requires a taste in coming back to the words, and being able to make iterative, intuitive makeshift edits. But what I want to suggest here, thinking what I have done wrong since that day on the floor and in grad school before that, was how this is an impediment of perfectionism. A certain approach towards perfection as the destination is a goal, but reaching it is impossible. So, why not, embrace this? Why not get something good enough to send off, and then send it off? Imperfect, but done, for now. Come back.

Since those days on the linoleum, I have written a lot. Most of it remains unpublished: early drafts that might never appear in that book. Yet, there are ideas and things that could be worked up and finished to serve for a longer piece. There are important ideas. Urgent ones. Ones I should already have shared. Finishing shorter pieces, then, can be a place to experiment, test out ideas, trying something new and work out ideas. These pieces have merit not merely on their own terms, but to finish something more substantive. Books are not the first step, they are a different step. A later step. Why not work up a lecture into a book review? Why not turn a reaction to a reading into a post on social media? Why not write up that idea into a short article? I have too often finished longer pieces when I am so tired, exhausted, and finished with it that I never want to see it again. I suspect if I became committed to makeshift finishing, I would not exhaust myself with attempts at perfection, and could instead have much more fun along the way.

Students, too, need far more opportunities to makeshift finishing. Might we grade the process, not the final product. To accept proposals, knowing they will change. To see writing as a living document. It is to know the truth, at least in my experience, that any piece of writing could always be improved. A sentence could always be better, tighter, funnier. But rather than getting stuck here, might embracing a makeshift approach to finishing be a way forward? Words are not finished, writers are.

In the end, as a writer-scholar looking back over the last decade, it is clear I have spent too much time striving for an impossible perfection in a book, when I could have written shorter pieces that feed into longer works: a Twitter/X post might be 128 characters—a sentence or two; a blog post could be 400 to 600 hundred words, a page or two; a newspaper article or op-ed is just 800, give or take, three or four pages; a book review is four or five pages; notes for a peer-reviewed journal ten pages (3,000 to 4,000 words); an article is 20 to 25 pages or 7,000 to 8,000 words; a manuscript 200 pages, 90,000 words. Why limit us to the last two genres, which require the combination of perfection and length that is paralyzing?

My mistake on the linoleum floor in my office was trying to find an order for *everything*, rather than an order for just *one thing*. There is a need to rethink publishing in anthropology, to place for different genres, lengths, and levels of analysis, but also as a step towards working out ideas that require more space. Find an order for a thing and finish it. Then send it out to give it wings. Do it again. More time might not lead to a better piece. It might lead to other things. The envelopes on the linoleum on the floor, the notebooks in the corner, my database on the computer, all have hundreds of pieces waiting to be finished. Finishing some need not be a way to pad a CV and feed the broken game that is publish and perish. It could instead be a way of thinking on the page, and in public.

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