

# Pedro de Alcantara

## The Joy of Flow

from *The Integrated Writer*

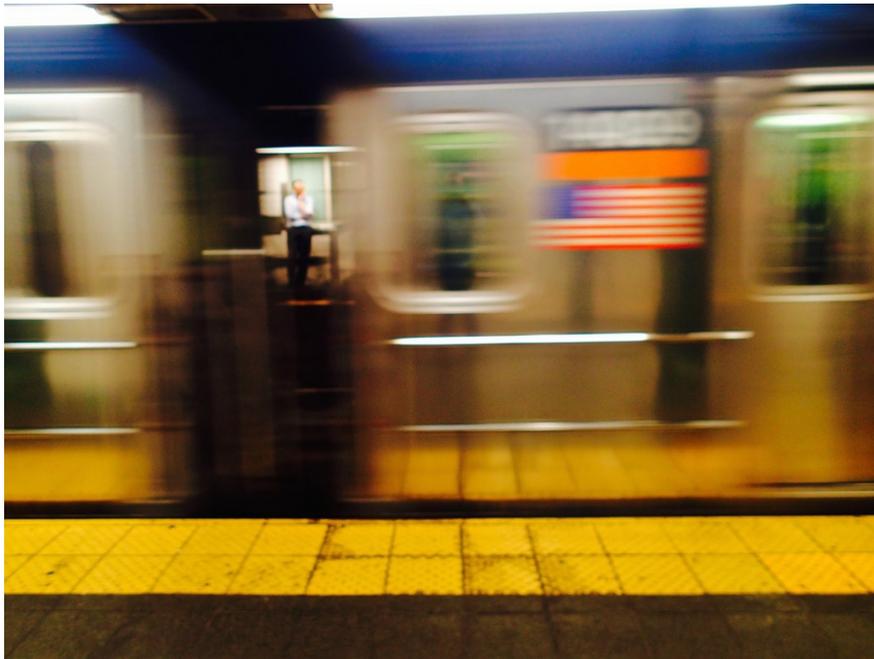
Creativity and productivity take place in time and space. When the conditions are right, they “flow.” Creativity flows, and you practice the violin for an unbroken hour, uplifted by the vibrant sounds that you and Bach make together. Productivity flows, and you write and send fifteen emails without making mistakes or getting annoyed.

The pleasure of flow is the pleasure of life itself. We love flow, and we hate its absence.

Love and hate make us a little insecure. We want the flow of creativity and productivity never to stop. We become afraid of losing the flow, and we start begging. “Please, God, let nothing or nobody interrupt me right now. I need to *concentrate*. Please, please, God.”

Begging tends to disrupt the flow. Trust, on the other hand, tends to help it. What can you do to stop begging and start trusting?

I propose that you re-think flow itself, and that you re-think the meaning of concentration.



Flow appears continuous but is intermittent by nature. It grows and diminishes in intensity over short and long periods. The flow of creativity, for instance, is subject to pushes and pulls coming from outside your creative mind: the weather, food and drink and sleep, other people. It's also subject to incomprehensible laws that we can't fully apprehend intellectually. Flow has its own need to expand and to contract, to breathe and to move, to surge and to retreat, and sometimes to slow down so much that it seems to disappear. But the flow of creativity never ceases altogether; it only feels that way. Flow is self-renewing.

Flow “happens.” You can't control it. It's better to accept the changeable nature of flow, and the changeable nature of your *perception* of flow. Embrace elasticity, and even seek it. Trust your capacity to resume your train of thought, and you'll stop being afraid of interruptions.

You follow any number of TV series without losing sight of who does what to whom, when, why, how, and what for. “The Sopranos,” for instance—you retain information not only from episode to episode, but also from season to season, even when the break between seasons is several months long. Indeed, you connect fragments, episodes, and whole seasons as a matter of course, and you do so for several shows at the same time.

You read the paper most days, over weeks and months and years, and somehow you develop a mental mosaic of world facts and figures and faces, ever-expanding, ever-changing, continuous in thought even if discontinuous in time.

During a big family dinner you keep track of a dozen personalities having multiple, intermittent, interwoven conversations, and you absorb hundreds of remarks and jokes and bodily gestures without ever confusing your Uncle John with your Uncle Jack.

You read a book over a period of days, sometimes weeks or even months, and when you start page 52 or 137 or 251 after a break of any length you immediately enter the world of the author and her characters.

Your child goes to grade school, and day after day, week after week you keep track of what she said, what she learned, how she felt, what friendships she made or broke.

In matters of observation, perception, memory, and analysis, you’re a past master of *delayed continuity*, by which I mean a continuity of content over a discontinuity of time. Delayed continuity is the nature of life itself. In principle, then, you ought to be able to apply your current mastery of delayed continuity to your creative routines, and become able to write, paint, make music, or solve business problems in irregular, intermittent bouts of time, some of them very short, some of them spaced wide apart.

I know what you’re thinking: “You don’t understand, I must concentrate on my writing. If I don’t, I’ll just lose my flow.” Sure, you really must concentrate on your writing—and I’m not kidding, you must. I actually agree with you. The problem is that you probably misunderstand the meaning of *concentration*.



Most likely you believe that to concentrate means to eliminate every distraction, and focus your attention on a single object—the chapter, the scene, the paragraph you’re desperately trying to write, or the tricky passage on Bach’s Chaconne that you so need to practice. You want to forget the children, the household tasks, the obligations, the endless stream of stimulation; you just want to concentrate on one thing, and one thing only: the task. That’s how you concentrate: by a process of elimination.

But true concentration means something else altogether. Think *con-centric* circles: many circles of different sizes, all sharing the same center. To concentrate doesn’t mean to eliminate elements; rather, it means to organize, around a central point, as many elements as there are in your life at every moment. The central point isn’t even the work you’re doing—the scene or paragraph you’re trying to write—but your own self, your presence, your manifold personality. You’re the center of the universe. Make it be so, and working on any task becomes easier regardless of how busy and demanding life is all around you.

It goes like this:

You.

You and the scene.

You and the scene and your daughter and the dog.

You and the scene and your daughter and the dog and the laundry.

You and the scene and your daughter and the dog and the laundry and the in-laws.

You and the scene and your daughter and the dog and the laundry and the in-laws and the lecture on global warming your husband insists you attend.

It takes a lot of discipline to become good at this. Accepting the idea itself is hard. A strong voice inside your head might say that it's selfish and ugly to make yourself the center of the universe. And yet, this is the most altruistic thing you can do. If you really know how to take care of yourself first and foremost, you become better able to take care of everything and everyone else, since you become stronger, more resourceful, more stable, better able to face stress without losing your cool. Your constructive attention to yourself gives you the first thing you need to be attentive to something else—the scene, the poem—and something or someone else at the same time—the daughter, the dog.

In time you become able to write in dribs and drabs: two pages today, none for a week; ten pages over the weekend, none over the 4th of July celebrations; three pages a day for three days, none for a month. If you keep your own vital center permanently connected, you can *always* resume a project after a break of any length, because you retain the continuity of a steady inner corner over a discontinuity of time and space. It doesn't matter if you're working on a novel, a screenplay, a 600-page tome on the medicinal traditions of the ethnic Albanians living in southern Italy, or all three in alternation: you're good at this and have been forever. It's just another of your innate human capabilities, which—like all other talents—you can maintain and develop if you give it thought and training.

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