

## **Inspiration for Early Career Geographers**

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### **Abstract**

Multiple paths have charted the future of geography. In the midst of disciplinary uncertainty, what can early career geographers do to stay imaginative? Authored by two early career geographers, this paper outlines some advice and inspiration for geographers to write prolifically, explore placefully, and diversify their reading palettes. It builds upon Peirce Lewis's (1985) challenge to never relinquish "that God-given ability to see and feel and seek to understand the wonders of the earth." Three missions are provided to cultivate imaginative geographers: start a writing group, schedule weekly field dates, and adopt a daily reading routine. These missions frame professional geography into a career path that cultivates joy, curiosity, poetry, and gratitude.

### **Introduction**

Young geographers, remember why you went into the field in the first place and commit yourself accordingly, with zeal. Of course you will make mistakes. Of course you will look foolish now and then; people are sure to giggle as you go about sniffing the world like an adolescent puppy. But those are small risks indeed if you are really serious about understanding the world. Don't let anybody diminish your capacity for *attention*—that God-given ability to see and feel and seek to understand the wonders of the earth (Lewis, 1985, p. 475).

If any lines are worth committing to the geographer's memory, they come from the above quote, which concludes Peirce Lewis's Presidential Address to the American Association of Geographers (AAG). Lewis's 1985 commentary, "Beyond description," continues to enthuse generations of young geographers.

For us, Thomas Larsen and Lisa Tabor, his words played a decisive role in staying or leaving the discipline altogether. He reminded us that it is necessary and proper for geographers to take risks, make mistakes, and pay attention.

Commentaries on the future of geography stress forging multiple futures. Discussion mostly highlights views of tenured and emeritus faculty on institutional restructuring and how to devote intellectual energies of geographers (Bednarz, 2019; Grosvenor Center, 2020; Mitchell, 2020). Lost in the cacophony are the voices of early career geographers, the small-but-significant disciples of geographic research and education. Geography's disciples include traveling teachers pinballing from job to job, struggling to market their geography degrees, and trying to make a meaningful contribution to advance the discipline (Kaplan, 2019; Malloy & Berdahl, 2019). They feel the effects of geography's uncertain future personally.

The present essay avoids enumerating what should be done. That path is already crowded and overtrodden. Rather, this paper offers strategies for early career geographers to recall and cultivate what inspires them about the discipline. Yi Fu Tuan wrote, "If the good inherit Earth, it is because they have the right state of mind—they look and see, hear and understand" (2012, p. 151). Right mindsets can be transformative, but they are not without limits. Tuan followed his statement by saying "most of us are too blinded by ambition, envy, greed and vanity to have what we own" (p. 151). Amid this scrambling, where is the imagination? If "a geographical awareness helps reveal how the segments of our lives fit together" (Sack, 1997, p. 257), then how often do geographers reflect on the joy of seeing, feeling, and seeking to understand Earth's wonders?

Acquiring a graduate degree in geography can open doors, but it also puts graduates at risk of being entrapped by the knowledge they have accumulated (Frige, 2020; Wood, 2019). Intelligent people can acquire a wide vocabulary and library of books but become entrenched in an inflexible mindset that responds inadequately to emerging trends in the job market and scholarly thinking (Epstein, 2019; Robson, 2019). Geographers can learn much from artists like Rainer Maria Rilke (2000), who remarked in *Letters to a young poet* that:

only someone who is ready for everything, who doesn't exclude any experience, even the most incomprehensible, [...] will himself sound the depths of his own being. For if we imagine this being of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it is obvious that most people come to know only one corner of their room, one spot near the window, one narrow strip on which they keep walking back and forth. (p. 90)

Despite the structural problems facing geography, early career scholars have a palatial imagination from which to draw (Lowenthal, 1961). Drawing from our own experience, we devised a series of missions to help early career geographers

unlock the gates to their personal *châteaux*. Specifically, we discuss creative ways to write, explore, and read.

### **We Do Not Have to Open a Vein to Write Well**

What does one get when combining enthusiasm for geography and a gravitation toward sounding smart or provocative? Usually a hodgepodge of technical sentences following lines pulled from our individual manifestos. As scholars who have published multiple manuscripts, we will be the first to say that we are not good writers. We have written more bad sentences than good ones. Part of the academic journey is learning that writing should not be rendered incomprehensible for the sake of sounding intelligent. Taking Steven Pinker's (2014) advice, geographers must be kind to their readers and to themselves.

In personal correspondences with other early career geographers, we notice that writing is a dreaded part of communicating geographic research. We regularly encounter early career geographers who feel fatigued from farming out their dissertations to journal outlets. Writing does not have to be masochistic. The process works best when one is authentic, consistent, and playful. Surly, plainspoken Ernest Hemingway offered sound advice, "I love to write. But it has never gotten any easier to do and you can't expect it to if you keep trying for something better than you can do" (1981, p. 893). When geographers do not enjoy writing, they are less likely to write well and more likely to write less. Integrating play with work and loving to write can catalyze imaginative thinking and overcoming mental barriers to writing (Gilbert, 2015).

Also consider the amount of time involved. There never seems to be enough seconds in the day to check off everything geographers are "supposed" to do. Perhaps they do not wish to put up their ideas to scrutiny by anonymous reviewers or critics. For the most part, peer review and scholarly dialogues can be valuable opportunities for constructive feedback on how to improve one's research or how to better align manuscripts with a journal's expectations. As Rilke (2000, p. 24) penned, writing means "not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come."

Sometimes, critics' comments feel malicious, biased, and unfairly negative. Some colleagues will bypass the original intent of the research to describe that they *think* it should have been or to make *ad hominem* statements toward a scholar's intellectual competence. This behavior proliferates throughout academia and should be met with grace and generosity—not anger and retaliation. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2018) wrote that:

people in academic life who love to diss scholars who have criticized them, and who believe this does them some good, have to be focusing only on reputation and status, since it's obvious that injuring someone else's reputation does not make

your own work better than it was before or correct whatever flaws the other person has found in it. (p. 26)

Negative reviews can come off as radioactive, make authors sick to their stomach, and make them want to quit academia and become yoga instructors (or is that just us?). Lashing out or shying away may seem like the optimal route, especially when one's ego feels like it got smashed between the hot irons of a Foreman grill, with one's self-worth dripping into the plastic receptacle at the bottom. As Nussbaum suggested, criticisms can be pathways to improvement when the yearning to preserve status and reputation is replaced with an unyielding curiosity and desire to learn. Nonetheless, the process can be draining when striving to maintain adequate boundaries between work and personal life.

Good ideas disappear with fear and exhaustion. To remain resilient, Thomas Larsen followed horror writer Stephen King's (2000) advice by pinning every rejection letter to the wall (and yes there have been plenty), viewing the collection as a challenge rather than a hindrance. Ideas squeal to a halt when geographers do not take the risk of writing and publishing. Writing may feel like an unnatural act but giving up sends the discipline to its depths (see Bradbury, 1990; Pinker, 2014). Geographers slide open the screen door for students and the public to step out into diverse worlds. Writing likewise assists by directing "the reader's gaze to something in the world" (Pinker, 2014, p. 56).

Pre-writing warms up the imagination, sparks inventive ideas, and arranges thoughts in pursuit of a fully formed work (Mogahed, 2013). Numerous writers overcome creativity blockades by dedicating each morning to journaling at least three pages. According to Julia Cameron (2020):

Morning Pages are three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing, done first thing in the morning. There is no wrong way to do Morning Pages—they are not high art. They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind—and they are for your eyes only. (p. 1)

Morning Pages supply writers with the license to jot down whatever comes to mind, even if it is complete nonsense. The practice can also serve as an expression of gratitude (Armenta *et al.*, 2017). Poet Ross Gay (2019, p. xi) once felt "delighted and compelled to both wonder about and share that delight" and decided "that it might feel nice, even useful, to write a daily essay about something delightful." That collection of essayettes became *The Book of Delights*, which was well-received among literary circles. An attitude of gratitude helps set aside toxic feelings to consider which perspectives can motivate and support writing (Armenta *et al.*, 2017).

Writing should interest early career geographers because it represents a form of place-making. That is why naturalist and poet Gary Snyder (2016) takes good care of his Macintosh:

Because whole worlds of writing can be boldly laid out and then  
 highlighted and vanish in a flash at “delete,”  
 so it teaches of impermanence and pain;  
 And because my computer and me are both brief in this world,  
 both foolish, and we have earthy fates,  
 Because I have let it move in with my right in the tent,  
 And it goes with me out every morning;  
 We fill up our baskets, get back home,  
 Feel rich, relax,  
 I throw it a scrap and it hums. (p. 9)

Writing tools—pencils, notebooks, laptops, the notes app on one’s smartphone, the backs of receipts—are field instruments for the geographic imagination. As a testimony, one of this paper’s authors conceived the idea behind their master’s thesis on a bar napkin! Early career geographers already engage in place-based education, gaining inspiration from the ordinary landscapes they inhabit. Writing accompanies them throughout the day so that they can report back and shed a light on myriad lifeworlds.

### ***Mission: Start a Writing Group***

Reject the myth that writing is an insular, personal endeavor. Writing is a social process, one that is interpersonal, place-based, collaborative, and mutually transforming. Based on research on writing in social spaces (Murray, 2015), the first mission is to seek at least one of the following opportunities:

- Join or start a communal writing group at one’s institution.
- Talk to a friend or colleague about writing-in-progress.
- Converse about writing objectives.
- Organize an off campus writing retreat.

Experiment with different writing groups and approaches, with the goal of finding a supportive outlet or method. These networks take many forms, including virtual outlets (*e.g.*, Zoom, Skype, FaceTime). A newly formed writing group may gather and chat to settle in, bounce around ideas, and establish a comfortable, trusting environment. Maintaining these social relationships and space energizes scholars (Murray, 2015). In our experience, we found ourselves writing more frequently, both together and alone.

### **Take a Regular Dose of Vitamin N**

To sharpen the senses while sniffing about the world “like an adolescent puppy” (Lewis, 1985, p. 475), geographers must be curious enough to travel throughout the rooms of their home as well as they do when on a ramble through the American West or Central Europe (de Botton, 2002). The subspecialty of the

geographer makes no difference. Everyone benefits from spending alone time in nature or within a tranquil state of mind through contemplation (Wicks, 2019).

Every early career geographer needs their Vitamin N (Nature). Geographers are just as susceptible to nature deficit disorder as the rest of the post-industrial world (Louv, 2011). Teaching loads, research projects, and busy homelives hinder the capacity to comprehend places. Humanistic geographers like Edward Relph (1981) emphasize seeing landscapes clearly without imposing any preconceptions, having curiosity to search throughout the world, and developing compassionate intelligence toward places. Break out of the business of teaching and researching from time to time. Find ways to renew the personal, ecological education that life provides (Orr, 2004). Explore, unlearn, and rediscover meaning in being a geographer.

Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham Heschel said that “as civilization advances, the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines” (qtd. in Orr, 2004, p. 139). Humans relate to nature in various ways, bound themselves to distinctive places, and differ in their levels of connection. What humans have in common is that they all come to love the familiar (Orr, 2004). A daily dose of Vitamin N helps geographers reconnect with their selves in relation to place. Forest bathing, going off-grid, or having a cocktail on a bar patio has transformative implications for early career geographers (see Wicks, 2019). As Orr (2004) writes:

Finally, we can attempt to teach the things that one might imagine the earth would teach us: silence, humility, holiness, connectedness, courtesy, beauty, celebration, giving, restoration, obligation, and wildness. (p. 52)

Meditating on each of these words opens a portal to rewilding the early career geographer. Exploration of the self in relation to geography generates personal mandalas of beauty, celebration, silence, restoration, and obligation.

### ***Mission: Schedule Weekly Field Dates***

Salter (2001, p. 108) wrote that “the reason that there is no bad landscape is that lessons weave through every scene.” Inspired by nature essayists, poets, and humanistic geographers, we suggest devoting time to view, document, and experience ordinary landscapes. We like to call this practice a field date. This practice relates to Julia Cameron’s (2020, p. 1) notion of an artist’s date, “a once-weekly, festive, solo expedition to explore something that interests you. The Artist Date need not be overtly ‘artistic’ – think mischief more than mastery.”

Formal field work, in the traditional sense, requires long, structured stretches of time collecting and analyzing data (Hart, 2001). In the personal search for meaning, life 24/7 can be viewed as a field trip, an opportunity to untether from the desk and experience in a deeper sense the ongoing conversation with places (Tuan, 2001). Most geographers cannot wander aimlessly every day

like Thoreau, nor can they always engage in meticulously planned, research-driven field work. Instead, engage with ordinary situations in a placeful manner, such as drinking coffee on a rainy morning with no digital devices in sight. Other examples include:

- Take an afternoon walk across campus and listening to the wind rustle through the trees (or through the tunnels underneath frostbitten campuses in the Great White North) over the familiar hustle and bustle of academic life (see Gumprecht, 2007).
- Follow local field guides, natural history essays, and travel and adventure accounts to encounter the ghostly footprints of historical landscapes, “all there to show the way if we just see it” (Harlan, 2010, p. 3). Consider:
  - Thomas Lyon’s (1989) *This Incomperable Land: A book of American Nature Writing*;
  - William Wyckoff’s (2014) *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide*;
  - Hal Jackson’s (2012) *Boone’s Lick Road: A Brief History and Guide to a Missouri Treasure*;
  - James Shortridge’s *Kaw Valley Landscapes: A Traveler’s Guide to Northeastern Kansas* (1988), *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), and *Cities on the Plains: The Evolution of Urban Kansas* (2004).
- Going on an unplanned drift (*dérive*) through a nearby area and identifying at least ten new things gone unnoticed (see Bassett, 2004; Souzis, 2015).

Creativity depends upon integrating various modes of exploration. Going on a field date differs from precise and planned field work with an end goal in mind. Such exploration may even be bedridden, simply breathing deeply and watching rain outside a bedroom window—a delightful diversion from feeling dogged tired or anxious about accumulating email notifications. Every ordinary moment is an invitation to become more intimately connected with the environment (Orr, 2004).

### **Turn Literature into Leisure**

Research and teaching in geography represent exercises in *constructivism*, the idea that knowledge is accumulated and nested hierarchically through time. Rarely do fresh ideas materialize out of nowhere like deciphering coffee grounds at the bottom of a mug. Inspiration comes from constantly consuming new information. Geographers are the product of the five closest people around them (Antonopoulos, 2016; Rohn, 1991), and the same goes with what and whom they read.

Reading poetry, especially lean, simple poems, prompts geographers to be receptive to different ways of thinking about their subject. According to Ray Bradbury (1990, p. 39), creative people should read poetry every day “because it flexes muscles you don’t use often enough. Poetry expands the senses and keeps them in prime condition.” Poems also offer bite-sized breaks from the rigid scholarly writing that geographers produce and consume. Some may not enjoy poetry or were scarred from high school course in language arts. Poetry diversifies one’s reading intake and adds more creative channels.

High impact research and teaching depend on high impact literature. Success also depends upon consuming an array of literature to conjure new ideas and links among ideas. Keeping up with the scholarly and informal literature involves the imperfect process of perfecting the daily routine. Here is the daily reading ritual for Thomas Larsen:

- *Morning* – Walk the dog while listening to *The Writer’s Almanac* and *The Economist Intelligence* podcasts before sitting down to write and research scholarship for the latest paper. Take a break and listen to an audiobook, such as comedian Tom Papa’s (2020) *You’re Doing Great! And other reasons to stay alive*.
- *Afternoon* – Scan the American Geographical Society (AGS) *DailyGeo*, the American Association of Geographers (AAG) *SmartBrief*, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) *Daily News* and *First Release Notifications*.
- *Evening* – Read at least five pages from five non-geography books. The latest selection of prose, poetry, and non-fiction includes: Ted Kooser’s (2004) Pulitzer Prize-winning poems in *Delights and Shadows*; Mary Oliver’s (2014) collection of nature essays in *Upstream*; Andrea Wulf’s (2015) biography of Alexander von Humboldt; Robert J. Wicks’s (2019) *The Tao of Ordinairiness: Humility and simplicity in a narcissistic age*; and poems from the great Sufi master Hafiz (Ladinsky, 1999).

The weekly reading ritual for Lisa Tabor, who demands flexibility in her life, is to:

- *Most mornings* – Read approximately one chapter of a book that benefits her current classes. At the moment, these books include *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World* by Andrea Wulf (2015), which will be integrated into the graduate level course *Nature of Geographic Thought*, and *The World: A brief introduction* (Haass, 2020), which is being deployed to enhance her large lecture course in *World Geography*. Before engaging in daily work, she completes *The Sunrise Manifesto: Guided morning journal* (almost never at sunrise) as means for practicing gratitude, setting daily goals, and decluttering the mind (SaltWrap, 2016).



- *Most afternoons* – Review email blasts from various listservs, which include *Science*, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, AAG's *SmartBrief*, the *Esri Globe*, the news outlets of *Medium* and *CNN*, and whatever new reads arising from the state Department of Education and university. This time is also ideal to read an article that a colleague, co-author, or old advisor forwarded.
- *Most evenings* – Take a walk and alternate between being one with nature and listening to fun podcasts or audio books. She tends toward podcasts and audiobooks that are not work-related AT ALL, like *The Office Ladies*, *Straight Up with Stassi*, or *Freakonomics*. She always reads before bed -- whatever she feels like reading in that moment!

To be creative, we must read creative work. Several the listed books have less to do with scholarship and more to do with being human (see Ladinsky, 1999; Papa, 2020; Wicks, 2019). Responding to a geography vocation does not end at 5:00 PM. It is part of an individual's search for meaning (Tuan, 2012). Geography promotes the everlasting self, which, according to poet laureate Tracy K. Smith (2018),

Comes in from a downpour  
Shaking water in every direction—  
A collaborative condition:  
Gathered, shed, spread, then  
Forgotten, reabsorbed. Like love  
From a lifetime ago, and mud  
A dog has tracked on the floor. (p. 71)

Reading good literature is essential to the education of the geographer (Sauer, 1956). Tuan embodies the type of geographer who spent a lifetime reading and making sense of his own place within the cosmos, using geography as a medium for expression, clarity, and conundrum (Tuan, 2001, 2012). Books and poems nurture the geographic imagination (Lowenthal, 1961).

### ***Mission: Adopt a Daily Reading Routine***

Frequently (and readers may already be thinking this), the day appears too cluttered for reading time. That is why a routine or ritual is so important. Experiment with which reading routine works best:

- Draft of list of required readings and desired readings.
- Integrate a piece or type of reading outside of our normal genres, or perhaps a guilty pleasure that we would scold ourselves for checking out from the library.
- Ask others what they are reading.
- Reflect on how days go when reading is prioritized versus when it is not.

It can be shocking how much reading can fit into daily schedules. The goodness it feels to include these various readings compels us to make the time. Indulging ourselves with full acceptance while mixing in relevant work-related pieces helps us live a more authentic life. David Kelly called it “creative confidence” in his 2012 TED talk, saying that “overcoming fear in one domain subsequently gave people new confidence in other areas of their lives, too” (Walters, 2012, p. 1). And this more authentic life will increase our positivity, our enjoyment of our work, and ultimately our creativity in all that we do.

### Supporting Early Career Geographers

Writing almost four decades ago, Peirce Lewis noted, “All sorts of things are in flux—that only a while ago were thought to be fixed in place: economic conditions, political attitudes, social institutions” (Lewis [1983] 2004, p. 30). Fast-forward to present, early career geographers face new kinds of flux, especially with the renaming and consolidation of geography departments, accelerating global changes, and the recent COVID-19 global pandemic (Dorling, 2020; Frazier and Wikle, 2017; Winkler, 2016). Amid such change and uncertainty, hope exists when geographers embrace emerging situations (see Winkler, 2016). Lewis later stated ([1983] 2004,

Times like these are always unsettling and sometimes downright disagreeable. But—and it’s an important but—such times of change are times of opportunity. If a tougher and leaner geographic profession is alert to those opportunities, the next few years can see unprecedented gains for the profession that we all love so deeply. (p. 30)

We should work to inspire, support, and protect future generations of professional geographers. Sebastian Junger (2016), in his book *Tribe: On homecoming and belonging*, summarizes this sentiment with three conditions for human wellbeing: (1) competence in what they do, (2) authenticity in how they live their lives, and (3) a connection to others. Young geographers have the capability to build creative, authentic careers in communion with other geographers through starting writing groups, scheduling personal field trips that rewild their understandings of ordinary places and the human spirit, and reading high impact scholarship, poetry, and prose to expand their mindsets.

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