

THERE WERE NINE OF US, and we were working in a lovely room that overlooked the little lake. The windows were floor to ceiling and the view was wide. Early on, one of the retreaters wondered if the view would be distracting, but it wasn't. We were just soaking up the light. Usually the room is used for weddings, and a little bit of glamour was hanging on in the light fittings, which looked like a stiff tulle explosion.

We knew beforehand that we would be getting a bunch of published and emerging writers who needed a reset. And we were hopeful the mapping, writing, talking and journaling we had planned over three days—along with a massage, gorgeous rooms, food, and the beautiful gardens—would do just that. And it did. But it was so much more than that.

The women who came couldn't have been lovelier, more generous, more up for it, more excited, more wonderful. The conversations were so wide-ranging—from ghost stories to neuroplasticity to our pasts, to books, to walking, to family, to love stories, to death, to the size of the bedheads (huge), to whether or not we should steal the handcream out of our rooms. There was a lot of laughing and a few tears.

Some beautiful writing came out of the three days—but, probably more importantly, a lot of thinking about what a good creative life might look like. 'It is astonishing the number of small ways we discover to be mean and miserly with ourselves,' says Julia Cameron of creative people. 'Sometimes,' says Charlotte Wood, 'I think the high rates of depression and anxiety among writers – and they are, sadly, incredibly high – partly result from the pernicious myth that to be any good you must work always in desolate isolation.'

If we need to be creative, and we all do, are there ways to do it better—with less guilt, with more connection, with more happiness, with more productivity, with more, dare we say it, exercise?

There are. We were doing some of them before we went, we did a lot of the while we were there, and we are doing more of them now.

One of the women drove home, cleared the junk from her study *while cleverly refusing to actually sort it out* and headed to Ikea for new shelving. In twenty-four hours she had a daily writing routine happening. Another found short stories in the writing exercises. Another returned to her novel with well-founded confidence.

We are so pleased.

Now, the retreat feels like a fairytale in which tea and coffee were brought to us whenever we wished. And the food. The food...

One day, our 'working lunch' was Musque de Provence pumpkin soup with ginger and cardamom, sourdough, grilled chicken, chimichurri and cucumber pickle, a warm black barley and citrus salad, and éclairs with yuzu cream. I mean, really.

Afterwards one of the women texted us: 'If I close my eyes, I can see the clean bright creamy walls of my room framing the lake and almost hear the honk of a happy foie gras. My well is replenished and I can't remember the last time I felt so fully me.'