

On Not Writing

AND WHAT, EXACTLY, IT MEANS

IT'S ten minutes to three on a Sunday afternoon, and I've been sitting at home all day not writing. Time passes slowly; I'd be hard put to describe how I make the hours go by without sounding like a slug. I eat a bowl of cereal, then sometime later a bowl of soup, trying to keep warm on this cold winter day. I wash some dishes and check my e-mail. I stare dully out the window, barely noticing the pigeons balanced like plump stones on the telephone wires.

I wear sweatpants, a sweatshirt, a pair of holey socks good only for keeping my feet warm on a writing day. There's no need to dress up. No one will see me in my apartment, unless a neighbor happens to glance across the way to notice a solitary figure wandering around in here, wiping the stove top with a sponge, bending down to pick up a dust ball under my desk.

While my neighbors read the Sunday *New York Times* or venture off to see a movie, what am I doing? Not writing.

The phone doesn't ring. I lift the receiver to make sure it's working. If some friend calls to suggest going for a walk, it might offer a lifeline out of the frustrating work of not writing. After all, it's important not to become a hermit, right? You can't write about life if you don't get out and live it—right?

One great novelist scoffed at that excuse. "Everything I need to know about human nature," he said, "I learned by the time I was five years old." It took me a while to puzzle out the meaning of that bold statement. He didn't mean that he was incredibly precocious, or that human nature is essentially childish. He was making the point that every human knows the basic deep emotions—love, anger, jealousy, envy, admiration—that can drive a story.

Of course, in order to get that story on paper you still have to apply the proverbial seat of the pants to the seat of the chair. And I'm not ready. There's something disreputable about all this puttering around. It drives some writers to drink. I think of the Replacements' haunting song "Here Comes a Regular," in which Paul Westerberg sings, "A person can work up a mean, mean thirst / After a hard day of nothin' much at all."

I sit in front of my computer, scuff the floor with my



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foot, and stare off into the ether like the village idiot. "I looked for the dust in the air," wrote Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jimmy Breslin, beautifully, "for that is where words live, tumbling lazily, remaining just out of reach, and staying there, staying, staying, staying, until something, an unseen waft of air, causes them to drift right up to your reach, gather into sentences, one sentence, two sentences, that's all you need to get started."

Ah, yes, the *getting started*...

Once I went out on a blind date. Over a glass of wine, we exchanged the usual personal histories.

"You're a writer?" she said. "I had a roommate who was a writer. He was *weird*."

She had my full attention. "Weird, how?"

"Well, for example, one time I came home from a busy day at the office and asked him what he'd done all day. He said he'd gone up and paced around on the roof for a couple of hours, and then went into the city to look at people's faces to get ideas for characters."

I quickly picked up the menu. "How about a salad to start?"

THE general public seems to think of writers as people for whom the words come magically easily, but I'm intrigued by this contrary dictum: Writers are people for whom writing is *harder*. Plumbing the meaning requires some strange contortions, but I find a kernel of sense. A huge part of writing is rewriting, and you can't push yourself to keep doing that unless you're the kind of person who is truly bothered by ungainly combinations of words. Other people might not care, but a wrong adjective or a weak turn of phrase chafes writers, and we're never satisfied until we manage to change the words and get them right.

Even so, I don't believe that the pain of writing comes in the writing itself. Everybody quotes screenwriter Gene Fowler, who sarcastically quipped,

"Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank piece of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead." It's not the writing that draws the blood, though—it's all that staring.

Which brings up the sad matter of writer's block. A friend of mine just lived through a writer's dream and nightmare. He had written several well-received but slow-selling novels, and then finally got his big break: A new publisher decided to take his next book on and put a big push behind it. He got a great advance, the promise of a major publicity campaign—and a deadline. And that date moved closer and closer, but somehow the words wouldn't come. The deadline passed, and he writhed in torment, but still... the words wouldn't come.

A year went by, and he watched his career go down the tubes, and finally he decided he just couldn't take the strain anymore. He told me that he was giving up and moving on to another line of work. I felt good for him, actually. I think we tend to get in a frame of mind where we believe that we *have to* be writers—or else we've failed somehow as human beings. But to the great wide Universe, the question of whether one of us can write has about as much significance as the flight path of a gnat. The world doesn't need us to be writers, and it doesn't fall apart if we stop. If this career choice calls up misery and pain, why not just quit? If you can be happy and fulfilled as a bus driver or a banker, why not do that? Why beat yourself up?

Of course, before throwing in the typewriter, it might be a good idea to explore the source of all this not-writing agony. One obvious reason: a fear of failure. If you don't write, you don't have to risk rejection or public humiliation. And that's not all. There's also the fact that writing can feel like a letdown: The words on the page rarely match the potential glory in our heads. We all see ourselves as successors to Hemingway or Virginia Woolf. When we make the actual attempt, though, we can feel sadly diminished.

I've been avoiding a writer I know because she talks about nothing but her book, the fantastic debut memoir she's been working on for the past ten years. I'm afraid I might have to listen to another ten years of talk about this eternally potential tome. It can be disastrous for unpublished writers to put so much weight and hope into a single project. It starts to feel like a one-shot race toward an intimidating Olympic finish line, with the whole world looking on from up in the stands—and that's a hell of a lot of pressure.

The story about my blocked friend has an upbeat ending, by the way. I recently received this e-mail from him: "I am *insanely* happy to let you know that my year-and-a-half writing block finally broke! A classic case of having to give up in order to get back." He needed time to let go of the pressure and his fears, and to rediscover the fun of the actual writing.

The antidote to the fear of failure can simply be to write. Write a simple exercise, or a short poem, or a short short story. As for the scary transition between potential words in the brain and actual words on paper, I often find that, though the written words might initially feel smaller, they eventually start to take me places I never imagined and can build into something new and exciting and full.

In considering finishing a larger project—a debut book, for example—just think of it as one of many you'll eventually write. Every book is not going to be *my masterpiece*, but at least I keep finishing them. It's a craft, a job, a daily small achievement. Writing a book, someone said, is like throwing bricks over a wall. You don't have to lift the entire pallet of bricks at once, just one brick at a time, just *thunk, thunk, thunk*. And it's better to actually build one modest, serviceable little cabin than to never complete the glorious mansion in your head.

I'M sitting near my desk now. The room is so quiet that I become aware of the most minute noises: the tick of the

clock, the soft hum of the electric heater, the faint insectlike whine of my computer.

Writers in movies resolve their not writing with a bang. They pace around, stare distracted into the distance for a few seconds, then sit down, take a few deep drags from a cigarette, and start clattering furiously away, the work emerging whole, like a baby born in a taxi. This is *WRITING*, as if the work is like pounding out Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, rather than a slow accretion of sentences.

In real life, getting to the computer is a matter of delayed momentum: I finally hit the keyboard not because I've been struck with a cinematic bolt of inspiration, but because the self-disgust of *not writing* finally gains enough mass to roll over my anxiety about what to write.

I've never—knock on wood—suffered from writer's block. I *have* suffered through weeks of anxiously dithering around, chasing dust balls, but I've finally come to realize that this period of not writing is not a problem, not some obstacle that prevents me from working. It's a necessary part of the writing process. Stress the conscious mind and the subconscious will eventually release words, phrases, bubbles of insight, sometimes even whole scenes. I keep stacks of index cards around my apartment, ready to gather up those mysterious solutions to the problem of not writing, which often arrive in the twilight time between waking and sleep.

And they *do* finally come.

Here's a good joke for writers:

A guy named Shapiro wanders around all day, moaning, "Oh, Lord, why don't you let me win the lottery? Why don't you ever let me win the lottery?!" This goes on and on until finally the clouds open up and a voice thunders down. "Shapiro! For *years* I've had to listen to this from you. Enough already! Do me a favor—at least meet me halfway: Buy a ticket!"

I sit down in front of the keyboard and begin to type. ∞