

BLOCK AND PROCRASTINATION

Death and taxes. Writers and writing blocks. We aren't writing but we want to write. We hope to (or struggle to) move from one state to the other but we delay. We label those more disciplined than we are as plodders or hacks yet we chastise ourselves for our own procrastination. It's so easily characterized as either/or: we're blocked or we're in volcanic action, sitting down at a computer and rising hours later, dazed and (hopefully) delighted, product finally in hand. It's a manic-depressive sort of life, we think, though secretly we'd like to. . . if not plod . . . then progress, regularly, productively, daily closer to our writing goals. Because the stakes are high, the competition stiff, the activity relatively unnatural (sit in a room and write?), and the rewards distant (*possible* publication, *possible* readers, *possible* remuneration), to accomplish our demanding work—this activity we call writing—we despair and seek advice because no writing = no writer.

To commence, Anne Lamott (1995) suggests writing shitty first drafts. Richard Hugo (1979) urges us to write off the topic. To get and keep going long enough to have a draft worth working with, William Stafford (1987) predicts that we must first lower our standards. Natalie Goldberg (1986) advocates writing any place at all. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) advises us to focus on process, writing for writing's sake, because this is an important aspect of flow states. Georgia Heard (1995) finds it useful to face inner critics and listen to good angels. Peter Elbow (1973) prescribes freewriting, and Donald Murray (1985) reminds us that pausing and percolating are productive—that sometimes, often times, not writing is the path toward writing again, and writing better. Great, Murray constantly reminds us, is the enemy of good.

But what do writers mean when they talk about experiencing these states, and what do those who study writers suggest is going on: how might we all move from stuck to (re)started? Every writer has stories of times when writing worked and didn't work, just as most have advice and prescriptions for getting into gear again. But writing block and procrastination are states of mind as well as physical states, and what writers believe clearly affects their production potential and actual activities. For every example of a famous blocked writer we can find one of a writer who goes on ad nauseam. For

every truism we find a seemingly equally true opposite. It's worth seeing how beliefs circulate and gain currency and adherents.

BLOCKING IS NORMAL, ISN'T IT?

Studies of how writers learn suggest that William Stafford was correct in his estimation that many writers put an end to their own writing productivity by having overly high expectations. If you decide to compete with Shakespeare in the sonnet category, you may find it prudent to take endless walks around the block before undertaking your Herculean task. If, instead, you decide to investigate the sonnet form by reading and enjoying some sonnets, by writing strong imitations or approximations of your favorites (old and new), by getting as near as you can in a first try, you'll probably sooner rush to your nearest and dearest reader with your sonnet draft, your momentary success in the sonnet stakes. Of course, in order to do this, you must accept that a "good enough for now" sonnet may not be strictly metered. You do this because you realize you're not yet practiced enough and that it will take until your tenth or twentieth sonnet to achieve an enviable flow of iambs and rhyme. Without this sort of acceptance you're likely to walk away from the high wall surrounding your aspirations or to block. In that sense, blocking is a normal outcome of aspiration. Aspiration is necessary—not much ventured, not much gained—but overly high aspiration sets the creative stakes too high. Teacher Donald Graves explains it this way:

Blocking is too often viewed as a negative experience. But blocking is a necessary by-product of any creative endeavor. If the child had neither voice nor strong intention, no desire to be precise with information and language, then there would be no problems to solve and therefore no thwarting in the creation. When children solve their blocking problems or emerge from a three-day or week-long slump, they have new energy and tools to apply to their writing. Teachers who know how writers change can help them through the normal pangs of composing and rejoice with them when they reach the other side of the impasse. (1985, 18)

Graves's observations suggest that we need challenges, but challenges of the right dimensions. Therefore, the aspiring sonneteer should not necessarily settle inflexibly for only a Shakespearean sonnet on the first attempt. A strong approximation, a poem that makes a lot of the turns of the sonnet form but is admittedly a draft, can let the writer move forward. To inhabit that complicated boxy fourteen lines with some initial success is necessary in order to want to write another, and another.

Pausing, blocking, and problem solving are not bad if we accept the corollary that practice makes more perfect. In fact, accepting reasonable drafting conditions and setting sensible challenges often dissolves the block that we wrongly erected in the first place.

Inspiration is a culprit in the blocking and procrastination game (see also “Author”). Writers would prefer to appear expert from the first day they write to the last. Often they feel that to admit to anything less than mastery, to reveal and examine composing processes, to evince a learning curve is to appear—or to be—uninspired and inexpert, a real novice. Equally, to have to toil, to work long and hard at craft is to admit another sort of deficiency. Surely the creative simply create, galvanized by a muse, unlike a lesser workaday mortal. And while we all want to be successful, it’s sexier to appear effortlessly so. To work (the system) is tantamount to selling out. If it’s popular, it can’t be high art; if it was written without pain, it can’t be inspired; and if it’s done regularly, it can’t be original and of high quality. These are the unexamined truisms that push writers to hide their narratives of productivity. Psychotherapist Robert Boice, who works with productive and unproductive writers in clinical settings, finds:

Literary researchers tend to dismiss writers who produce a lot and who work hard. . . . Academics often suppose, erroneously, that those of us who write a lot necessarily suffer a loss in the quality and creativity of our work. . . . The facts say otherwise. . . . What these critics might better conclude is that being too obviously productive and nonprocrastinative can impair social approval of the less productive in academe. . . .

Tradition holds special commendation for writers who claim they write without discipline, without really trying. (1996, 16)

Conversely (or perversely), if we can’t claim to write without really trying, we can at least claim the pain of trying and not succeeding.

BLOCKING IS BAD, OR IS IT?

Afraid of success? Who wouldn’t be? We can all name a first novelist who never wrote another. We hold our breath—half hoping for and fearing the fall from grace of our favorites. We trade examples of one-story wonders and published-only-after-death poets. We’re reluctant to send out our story to the little journal we most admire because they might send it back. We’re afraid to write the family story because we’ll disappoint our parents. We assume we were made to write for the silver screen so we write poems and e-mails and somehow never buy that screenplay software

that would make our task—now so hard with its required formatting—easier, doable.

In one line of thinking, blocking is always bad, an avoidance (no talent) or a confirmation of our mediocrity. Nothing hazarded, nothing lost. Better to sit in the café reading and critiquing. Better to make fun of the last reader at the open mike. Better to get drunk with the visiting writers and hit on the agent at the conference than to . . . find out the truth about ourselves. Drinking, of course, has long been associated with easing writer's block: "Many writers use alcohol to help themselves write—to calm their anxieties, lift their inhibitions." Yet heavy drinking can quickly lead to a vicious circle. Writing ultimately suffers because of drink, "the unhappy writer then drinks more; the writing then suffers more, and so on" (Acocella 2004, 116).

So, in the least admirable view: "Blocked writers are, in many respects, like phobics whose real fear is of public embarrassment; like overeaters who simply haven't learned to arrange their environment to ensure that they consume less; and like socially unskilled clients who need to learn to calm down, observe, and model the habits of others in threatening situations. The difference is that with, say, an agoraphobic (the person who fears leaving home for public places like supermarkets), we rarely attribute the cause of fear to some mystical force like lack of inspiration" (Boice 1985, 212).

But that's not really the whole picture. Certainly, many writers are blocked through fear. But many more work through that fear and enroll in classes, practice their craft diligently, seek advice and follow advice or interventions with useful results. Robert Boice himself has found success treating blocks with contingency management techniques, asking writers to refrain from a reward until the day's task is done—rewards as simple as a daily shower or a cup of coffee. Who hasn't worked to self-set rewards? In the case of this keyword, a walk to the local bookstore has been delayed until enough words have been logged on the screen.

But it's not simply that we need therapies or meds for the writing aversive, we need to understand that blocking can also be productive and is inevitably part of the journey. Every problem implies its solution: lack of information (research some more), lack of response (find a good reader to share a text or talk with), lack of maturity (try another project and come back to this one later). Donald Graves's studies of young writers showed him: "Writers of all ages and abilities have a common problem: They assume information is in their texts that is simply not

there. Egocentricity is the lifelong problem of any writer. Writers need to be both the self and the other, both writer and reader, simultaneously. . . . A block can also arise because the child lacks adequate information. The child knows there is a discrepancy between his or her intention and the information on the page. . . . The writer has a gut feeling that the piece isn't right but lacks the objectivity or experience to summon the needed information (Graves 1985, 12–13).

We need to set up situations that help us make good matches between aspiration and ambition and ability. Writers need to pay attention to gut feelings and they also need training. Some get this training on their own, a lucky few find it in the company of others—in workshops, at conferences, under the guidance of dedicated editors. Most importantly, writers need to see that they have processes. When they do and learn to examine them, they learn how to optimize their opportunities. If writing at night isn't working, try writing in the morning. If the novel is going nowhere, outline again and break the chapters into scenes and finish just one scene and then another and then . . .

Equally, and perhaps more fundamentally, writers need success and positive reinforcement. All of them. However measured. This may be completing a certain number of pages, publication, or simply approbation from a supportive reader. Peter Elbow (1973) suggests that teachers can help students to like their writing by creating judgment-free zones and by encouraging them to write in low-risk environments, using journaling and freewriting. Writers have to get *somewhere* with language before they get somewhere better. After creating a form for assessing writing apprehension and researching that measure, John Daly observed: “A positive attitude about writing is associated with, and may even be a critical precursor of, the successful development and maintenance of writing skills” (1985, 44).

PROCRASTINATION (DOES) DOES NOT PAY

Readiness is not all, but it is something. You don't want to compete in a marathon with the flu or interview for a job without practice. Writers do need to prepare and sometimes pausing to do so pays off. “Each writer fears that writing will never come, yet the experienced writer knows it may take days, weeks, and months to produce a few hours of text production” (Murray 1985, 220). Murray argues that writers need information, insight, order, need, and voice as conditions for good forward progress. And Robert Boice sums up his extensive research by observing: “Said

more simply, PB [procrastination and blocking] is a problem of not knowing how to work patiently, mindfully, and optimistically” (1996, 141). Reed Larson claims that “optimal [writing] conditions occur when a person feels challenged at a level appropriately matched to his or her talents” (1985, 40).

Robert Boice’s work challenges the image of the writer waiting for a muse. The dailiness reported by William Stafford, who lowered his own standards every morning to rise in the dark and write a poem, or the doggedness that must propel Steven King to produce a novel year after year, or Elizabeth Bishop or Eudora Welty (and any number of other writers) who slowly craft work across a long life in letters, seem to support Boice’s findings that “as writing becomes habitual it is both easier and more enjoyable” (1985, 205). And experience matters. Mike Rose (1990) found that inexpert writers use ineffective strategies and had a smaller set of rules of thumb with which to encounter challenging writing tasks. Those writers needed to learn options and how to work around a problem as it arose.

Writers’ block and procrastination are psychosocial states as much as they are physical ones. The same is true of their obverse. Given the difficulties writers experience and the painful struggle that many report, why do writers write? For most of us, the state of being unblocked is a powerful one. When the writing is taking place, when we’re in the zone, the groove, the flow, there is nothing . . . nothing . . . a writer would rather do. For an expert practitioner, there are rewards on a large scale, for the opposite of pain is pleasure:

As our studies have suggested, the phenomenology of enjoyment has eight major components. When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention at least one, and often all, of the following. First, the experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing. Second, we must be able to concentrate on what we are doing. Third and fourth, the concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Fifth, one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life. Sixth, enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Seventh, concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over. Finally, the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours. The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people

feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it. (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 49)

The state of writing well, consistently, regularly, productively is the flow state most of us aspire to and one that can be achieved, one block, one delay overcome at a time—day by day, day after day.