

The Cure: Overcoming Writer's Block from Within

By Mike Vidafar

A gift is not weighed and measured, nor can it be bought. It can't be expected or demanded; rather it is granted, or it is not. In theological terms it's a grace, proceeding from the fullness of being. One can pray for it, but one's prayer will not therefore be answered. If this were not so, there would never be any writer's block. – Margaret Atwood, Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing

Folklore would have us believe that when the clock strikes midnight – the witching hour – that anything is possible. But for a writer, the realization of midnight is not always enchanting. Instead, especially when “keeper” sentences are at a premium, midnight can insight panic. For the men and women who make their living with words, no hindrance is as debilitating as an empty word processor, blinking menacingly atop an empty page. That space, the area where our panic, our disconnect from our words, and our frustration at not being able to perform a “simple” task, is where writer’s block lives.

While we can all (more or less) define writer’s block, and what it means to us personally, (and it is certainly a term we’ve all heard before,) for me, the task of writing about writer’s block carries with it the promise of the aforementioned. Yet, it is reasonable to consider that at least some part of writing about writer’s block should involve difficulty writing. If it didn’t, then as a writer, I would not be doing my enemy justice.

As is often the case, my writer’s block was helped by a change of perspective. I thought not of the in-action, but rather, of writers, and how they are constantly parrying the symptoms of this affliction. Ultimately, it is writers (the transcribers of the written word) who must discover their own definition (and solution for) writer’s block by first discovering themselves.

The first thing every writer should always do – regardless of writer’s block – is to become familiar with the concept of “writerly” identity. When we do that, we force ourselves to come to terms with what our job implies. In that way, we are reminded not to overlook our identities as writers. We aren’t story tellers who are forced to get it right the first time. We are intellectual hoarders and hermits, with thousands of pages that were never good enough, and thousands more that join and separate during revisions.

Yet the first pitfall into the blank page of writer’s block lies in the despair of not knowing who we are, and the uncertainty of step that looms overhead as we struggle to shine in the shadows of our predecessors (or even our previous work) that immediately puts a “period” to what a writer might (wrongly) feel is ‘the most poorly considered words ever to be put down on paper.’ It’s a difficult realization to come to, but once we understand our “job titles,” we can comfortably get past the initial onset of writer’s block. Despite the protests of our inner critic: we are good enough to do this.

The mantra may seem cliché, and certainly among writers, there are some whose work really won’t ever be any good. But even they should be able to overcome a truant pen, if they can get in touch with their better half.

The idea that there are two halves to the writer is nothing new- there are a plethora of artists throughout history that have postulated the two halves of an artist: authors whose work is the personification of the struggle a writer faces internally, centered around the question of “who does the writing.”

From Ancient Greece through the Renaissance, writing was done not by authors, but by the Muses. Even the word “inspiration” literally means “breathed upon”- again implying that the source of writing comes from someone other than the writer. And for those who find themselves cut off from the Muses, or who try to force words when they have none would certainly agree that there is something almost alien about the creative process.

The trick, however, is to accept the alien, and to be nice to it during the writing process. As for the moment of writing itself – the crucial question of “when writing takes place”, Margaret

Atwood has described her “best guess” using a metaphor of Lewis Carroll’s Alice and her infamous mirror:

The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, though at the same time she is all of these at once.

That description, that there is a foreign element to our creative conscience, does illuminate the writer’s inability to always create compelling work. The trick then, to overcoming lackluster work, is to find a way to sacrifice the right sorts of ourselves to our work. That way, our creative doppelgängers will never lack inspiration, and we (the halves of ourselves who do not do the writing) will never have to venture into the realm of artistic dishonesty (where we have all surely wasted time and effort).

The last hindrance to a writer occurs when they confuse or neglect their only two obligations: to him or herself, and to the reader. Too often are we concerned with ‘what audiences/professors/readers want to hear’ and still, equally often, are we not concerned with anyone but ourselves. Leaning too heavily towards one side or the other will surely mean your work is doomed to lack balance, and worse, may remain unwritten in the first place (because you’ve spent so much time agonizing over the prospect of imperfection that you’ve lost the will to write at all).

Ultimately, all there can be, in my estimation, is a story that you think is worth telling. Whether it’s worth is measured to you by money or appreciation, however, is a different story. The simple fact, however, is that as writers, we need to write in order to avoid writer’s block. We need to constantly work and re-work and treat our task as a job, or we will simply fall in and out of favor with ourselves too often to sustain the discipline needed to improve.

My earliest brushes with the phrase “Writer’s Block” had it referred to as an affliction- as a disease. But when we do that – when we take the blame away ourselves, and place it over there – with the “virus,” we fail to examine the reds, blacks, blues, and yellows that we are made of- the essence of who the writer is.

Yet, if we can better understand who we are, then it serves to reason that we can likewise avoid the debilitation that comes with our trade. It is a constant struggle to cultivate the will and effort to expel our thoughts onto pages. And when we manage to do it, it’s rarely done perfect the first time. But that’s why we get to revise. In the end, if you believe you can do this, if you even so much as think you have what it takes, then stop reading and start throwing words down. We’re all waiting to see what you’re made of.

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ORIGINALLY APPEARING IN [*THE WASHINGTON PASTIME*](#), 09 03 2012: Web. 19 Mar. 2013.