

26. Writer's Block, Procrastination, and the Creative Process: It's All a Matter of Perspective

by ARDRA L. COLE

I don't often admit to having writer's block. Like other blocks, it's not easy to talk about. To do so could reflect badly on your reputation. Of what value is an academic (or writer of any kind) with a chronic case of writer's block? What kind of unpleasant effect might it have on your immediate environment? Is it safe to keep company with such a person? Besides, admitting to having writer's block could perpetuate the condition: it could become one of those self-fulfilling prophecies.

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Writer's block is no stranger to anyone who has ever put pencil to paper for purposes of creating a written text. We all have suffered from it at one time or another. And it seems once we admit to having it, the condition only worsens. Once we put the name 'block' on whatever is interfering with our flow of words, we might as well be standing outside in the midst of a Northern Canadian winter freeze waiting for a thaw. A block is an obstruction, a hindrance. Blocks prevent passage and can be difficult to remove. They make us stuck. To become unstuck requires considerable mental and physical energy, energy that is so focused on the removal of the block that nothing else of any consequence can be done in the process. And, if and when you successfully remove the block, what are you left with? No writing, only a cleared passageway. That is precisely why I prefer not to characterise any lapse in my ability to compose as writer's block. The term is counter-productive.

I prefer to think of this state as much more productive than what the word 'block' suggests. I prefer to name the condition that results in the unaltered pristine condition of my paper and needle-sharp point of my pencil as none other than my 'creative process.' Others may call it procrastination but to me it is a necessary condition for writing and it deserves to be honoured. I am a self-confessed procrastinator. I come by it honestly. My mother was my role model. Her first response to any task or demand, big or small, needing attention was, "I'll do it after." And she did, eventually. I marvel at how much she was able to accomplish but, then again, I figure that is precisely how she was able to accomplish so much. Everything was done 'after' something else which meant that she was always doing something. The thing to be done 'after' didn't get put on a list so that it was done in turn. It wasn't 'after' as in 'next'; it was more like 'after' as in 'when-I-can no-longer-live-with-myself-if-I-don't-attend-to-this-now.' But before she reached this desperate state she moved mountains.

Say, for example, she agreed to write a short article for the local events page of the newspaper about the Home and School Association Fund Raiser, and she had to meet a Friday evening deadline for Saturday's paper. Say, it was Friday morning and that you had agreed to deliver the

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item to the newspaper office in time to meet the deadline. Now, ordinarily, this would not appear to be much of an issue because it doesn't take very long to write a piece like that even when it is not part of one's routine or livelihood. But, if you were to look in on my mother this Friday morning, it would appear that such a task were the farthest thing from her mind.

In place of the anticipated pencil and paper and perhaps early drafts of the writing spread out on the kitchen table, there would be bowls and baking pans and every baking ingredient imaginable which had been pulled from the cupboards. There would be remnants of chocolate cake batter in one bowl and icing in another, a batch of cookie dough sitting in a lump ready to be pressed into shape, and a potful of dates stewing. My mother would be up to her wrists working and pressing into a large baking pan a crumbly mixture over which she would soon spread the stewed dates. If you were to inquire about the piece you were to pick up later in the day, she would reply with the anticipated "I'll do it after." You might decide to leave then and come back in a couple of hours to check on progress.

When you return you would immediately notice that the delicious aromas wafting from the kitchen earlier in the day would have dissipated. You might expect to find the kitchen cleaned up and my mother sitting at the table, perhaps with a cup of tea beside her, working away on her writing. But no. Instead, you would witness what might first appear to be the aftermath of the work of an experienced vandal. The entire kitchen would be in a state of disarray. The baking paraphernalia, not yet washed, would be stacked high in the sink, toppling into the adjacent dish drainer. The baking ingredients still on the table, as if they had started a trend, would have been joined by other items from the food cupboards. Cans, boxes, and packages of various shapes and sizes also would have overtaken the countertops along two walls of the kitchen.

It had all started with a search for a package of slivered almonds that my mother swore she had bought last grocery day. It went from there to a need to do a complete inventory of the pantry. It ended up with the kitchen in a state of chaos and the clock marking the minutes toward the

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deadline. Well, no, it didn't end that way; that was really more toward the beginning. The day was still young. "After, I'll do it after," she would insist in response to worried inquiries about the piece that had to make it to the paper in only a matter of hours. Recognising the futility of nagging or worrying, you might wander away promising to return later in the day when order was bound to have been restored and the writing inevitably in progress.

Later in the day you might decide to telephone before returning, to get a forewarning of what to expect. After numerous phone calls that result in nothing more than a busy signal, you decide that the receiver must have been left off the hook. Perhaps you had better go over despite your reluctance to disrupt any writing that might be underway. Who knows, it could be finished by now and ready to pick up. Your persistent knocking is finally answered by sounds of footsteps hurrying down the long hallway. The door is flung open and my mother hastily beckons you inside. Your worst fears are realised. "I'm on the phone," she calls over her shoulder as she retraces her steps to resume her conversation. "So, the Tea and Sale is on the 30th, can I put you down to pour between 2:00 and 3:00? That's lovely, Grace. Thanks. Yes, I think your beige felt hat would be perfect. Doris is wearing her new taupe one. Oh, I don't know yet. I saw one at Wood Brothers the other day I'm thinking would be ideal. Well, I must run. I've got a million things to do, my kitchen is a mess, I haven't given a thought to supper, and I have to get to something I've been putting off. Talk to you later. Bye for now."

"Oh my, is it that late?" she would ask in response to your upward glance at the clock on the kitchen wall. "I don't know where the time goes. There just aren't enough hours in the day. I guess it's time I did something about that piece for the paper. How about putting the kettle on for a cuppa?" With that she clears a small space at opposite sides of the kitchen table, sits down with pencil and paper, and starts to write. By the time the tea has steeped she has written a draft. As you help yourself to another date square and refill of tea she has refined the piece to her satisfaction. Between bites and sips you read what she has written and wonder aloud how she could have done it so quickly, why she just didn't

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do it earlier, why she always found it necessary to put things off. "I've been working on it all day," would be her reply.

Now, I'm not my mother; I don't bake. I lead a very different life. But, imagine for a minute, that you were able to look in on me as you did on my mother. Imagine that you could retrospectively witness my writing of this piece. The visit would span a longer period of time and you would do some travelling along the way but join me and, at the end, we can sit down to a cup of tea and a nice, fresh, store-bought date square.

Toronto, mid-November:

"Okay, so my chapter will be about something to do with teaching writing."

"Good, yeah, I think we should have several like that. You do one, I'll do one or maybe two, Carl's (*Leggo*) fits that category and so does Gary's (*Raspberry*), and there are sure to be others."

"Sounds good. I won't have a minute to even think about it until the end of term. When I get back from Christmas Downunder I can give it my full attention. And, in the meantime, I have two very long flights and lots of hours to fill so that I can at least get a start."

35,000 feet somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, early December:

"After," I say to myself, "after the movie, I'll think about my chapter." The movie is so bad I remove the headset after only a few minutes.

"Well, maybe I'll read a bit. Sometimes that sparks a few good ideas." I start and finish a 300 page novel. "Oh good, more food. Perhaps some sustenance will start the creative juices flowing." I devour another tasteless meal. "At least I can get out paper and pencil and sketch some ideas." I haul out my briefcase from under the seat ahead of me and begin to rummage through it for my 'ideas' notebook. I move my hand past files and envelopes of work that had been organised in 'to do' piles on my desk all month. Before my hand reaches my notebook it stops at a large envelope. "I really should finish reading this manuscript. The review is already a week late." I pull out the envelope, grab a pencil along

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the way, and settle back in my seat to read and make notes.

And so it goes for 20 hours each way. I arrive back in Toronto; at the end of December, with a briefcase full of 'to do' piles done but no visible progress on my chapter. "Now that I'm back I can really buckle down. I have a whole week to myself before last term's papers are due. Tomorrow, I'll get started on the chapter. Tomorrow, I'm going to sit with pencil poised over paper until letters form droplets on the sharpened tip, splash onto the blank page, and spread to form words, phrases, and sentences that combine as if somehow my pencil miraculously had read, unjumbled, and written my thoughts."

Toronto, three days later:

"There, my work space looks so much better this way. Those bookshelves really needed reorganising and the state of my desk drawers was really getting to me." I make a mental note, "Finding the right time, place, pencil, font, lucky socks, satisfactory arrangement of bookshelves, et cetera are an important part of the creative process." Now I feel like I can make a fresh start on my writing...if it just weren't so noisy. "Why do my neighbours pick now to start renovating? Maybe later when it is quieter...." As if anticipating my next move, my dog gets up from his mat beside my desk, stretches, and moves toward the door. "Come on, boy, let's go to the park."

Toronto, mid-January:

"So have you finished your piece for the book? ...No, neither have I but I'm working on it. It's about the importance of having or making creative space for writing--physical space, temporal space, and mental space."

"Fabulous. Oh, the things I could do and write if I could only find the time; not an hour here or there but good solid blocks of time. Sometimes you just have to be selfish and take it, 'a room of one's own' and all of that. I've been chipping away at something but I just need my family to pretend I don't exist for even a day. I could finish it then."

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"I have the time right now but it's the mental space that I can't seem to find. My head is so cluttered with other work demands, I can hardly find even a crack to let ideas take root. I'm almost a month into a sabbatical and still I can't seem to get out from under the weight of everyday work-related demands. I need to physically remove myself so that I can put other things out of sight, out of mind. Next week I take flight."

Big Tancook Island, Nova Scotia, end of January:

"Ahhhh, finally I can do some serious writing," I proclaim aloud as I settle into my old, wooden, desk chair. I am in my writing shed, a one-room building that, in an earlier life, had been the kitchen of our 175 year old home. It had been cut off and hauled away to make room for a larger, more modern addition and, when we bought the property, it sat abandoned, relegated to 'shed' status. I immediately claimed it as my own and eventually, through a family group effort, it was refurbished to its current state. It is *my* space, a place where I feel completely 'at home,' a place in which I can bask in the comfort and security of my self. The only distractions I allow are self-imposed; the only company by invitation.

I look around, taking in and being taken in by my surroundings, at the artifacts and symbols of special significance to me, things that make this place mine. I turn my gaze to the window straight ahead and through it to the Atlantic ocean a stone's throw away. The sea is big today; a north-west, winter wind blowing onshore whips the steel gray water into frothy peaks. The waves relentlessly pounding against the rocky shoreline in sub-zero temperatures have left a thick coating of ice on the face of the small cliff at the edge of our property and the upright posts along the wharf's edge standing as ice sentinels. Inside, the small heater works hard to keep the howling wind at bay. The interior temperature is comfortable; I am also warmed from within by my contentment with being here. As if in agreement, my dog lets out a long, audible sigh, curls himself into an even tighter ball on his rug at my feet, and closes his eyes. I notice that I, too, am starting to slip away; as my thoughts travel to

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another place and time, I allow myself to be carried along. I pick up my pencil and begin to write.

Only a few feet away the glass door suddenly imploded, glass projectiles shooting forward to unknown targets. Acting on reflex to protect herself, Frances buried her head in her arms still wrapped around the newel post. Without warning, her body was gripped and rendered immobile by pain. Her foot, a target of one of the glass missiles, was pinned to the floor.

"Charlotte!" came a blood-letting scream from the very depths of Frances' being. "My baby!" she yelled in panic-stricken terror. All Frances could think about was needing to get to Pearl, left lying in her bassinet in front of the kitchen window....

I am startled back to reality by a gentle nudging at my right elbow. Slightly disoriented, I look downward into a pair of large velvety brown eyes begging for some long overdue attention. The wind has subsided; hours have passed.

"But wait," you might interject, unable to mask your confusion. "What does this have to do with the chapter you're supposed to be writing?"

"After," I reply reassuringly, "but first a walk and then a cup of tea," I call over my shoulder as I set off in the direction of the woods, my dog already bounding ahead on the marked but overgrown trail. I follow the trail as best I can, my way periodically blocked by overhanging branches and small trees felled by the force of the autumn and winter winds. My thoughts take a half-turn to the chapter I am still writing in my head. "Honouring the creative process is an essential element of writing inquiry," I say aloud. I say it again hoping for something to follow. I leave the sentence out there to dangle like the tree lichen that surrounds me on this part of the trail. "I'll come back to it after," I promise myself, the other half of my thoughts winning my attention. "It wouldn't take much to clear this trail," I admit after brushing away yet another intruding branch. I whistle for my dog and head back down the path toward the tool shed.

As we emerge, hours later, from the first freshly cleared section of the

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trail, darkness is falling. Pleased with progress made on the trail and the promise of another productive day tomorrow, I return the tools to the shed and head to the house. The phone is ringing as I enter. I take time to plug in the kettle before answering..

"It's coming along well. Yeah, I feel good about it. No, I've switched direction a bit. The significance of creative space is part of it but the focus is on the creative process itself and the importance of writers knowing and honouring their own process. Well, yeah, I find that too. Students are so quick to 'doubt and disparage themselves, insisting that they can't write, really write, that 'So what if they won a prize for creative writing in grade three?' that was then...., wasting time trying to find the 'right' way, which means someone else's way, to write. 'It's not going to work,' I keep telling them. 'You have to find *your* way and, when you find it, you have to respect it, work *with* it not *against* it.' We—not us personally but the whole education system and especially higher education—really do a number on students' sense of themselves as creative individuals. The ideas that research can be creative and that writing and inquiry can be one and the same are far-fetched to most students, especially those who have excelled at conforming to academic social science convention. It's frightening to think of how many times the invitation to: 'challenge convention, write from your heart, say what you want how you want, be creative' is met with fear-glazed stares and suspicion. Sorry for the rant but.... Yeah, I hope it'll be of some use."

The threat of returning to the kitchen to find the wallpaper stripped by the steam of the furiously boiling kettle brings the phone call to an abrupt close. I hang up with a renewed commitment to the chapter I will write (Oops, am writing). As the tea steeps, I tear the cellophane off a package of date squares I purchased yesterday at the local bakery. I put two healthy-sized pieces on a plate, fill two mugs with steaming tea and clear a place at the kitchen table for us to sit.

"And your chapter?" you ask between sips that test the heat of the liquid on your lips and tongue.

"After," I promise. "I'll do it after."

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