

On My Mind: Writer's pause, a.k.a. writer's block

In “The Book of Two Ways,” Jodi Picault writes that people are artists because “there’s something inside you that you can’t keep from spilling out. Maybe it comes in the form of sentences, or a grand jeté, or a stroke of a paintbrush ... the seed, it’s always the same. It’s the emotion there isn’t a word for. The feeling that’s too big for your body ... people who are comfortable — people who are content don’t create art.” I dwelt on those lines for a while, and then found myself wanting to copy them down, and then to start writing my own reflections in this column again. I welcomed the impetus; it’s been some months since I’ve written anything, and I’ve been blaming “writer’s block.”

A lot has been written and said about writer’s block, including by numerous Island writers. I spoke with a handful of them for this column.

Carol and Jim Gilligan are both in their 80s, and both are still publishing new books. They asked me whether I’d thought about collecting the essays I write into a book. I told them about my recent, diminished desire to write; I posited that it might stem from the social retreat that came with the pandemic, and the way that period made many of us seek to live more in the here and now. A number of factors have led me, recently, to feel a profound appreciation for my life; I am largely content with life as it is, and hence less compelled to keep making forays into new territory. As Jodi Picault says, “People who are content don’t create art.”

I asked the Gilligans why they continue to write, and Carol said, “I write because it is how I know who I am.” I know what she means. As I write these words now, I feel, as Jodi Picault suggests, as though there is something that has to spill out, and I won’t fully know what it is, or even how I feel about it, until I write it. It is invigorating, exciting, and satisfying. And yet, there are frequent moments during which I have the urge to stop, to play a game of solitaire, to respond to an email, or to give up altogether — as I’ve done with about five other columns I’ve started writing over the past months.

Fred Waitskin, who wrote “Searching for Bobby Fischer” and many other great books, describes being inside or outside of a “writing bubble.” He says that when he is inside the bubble, “It’s as if you have always been there. It’s a feeling of being a little immortal, like falling in love. It is a place where you don’t care what other people think.” When he is in the bubble, he says, sometimes there is a television screen in his mind, and he is just writing down what he sees on the screen. I am reminded of the early 20th century painter Hilma Af Klint, who, in a trance state, allowed a spiritual entity to enter her body and do the painting. Another writer (who prefers to remain anonymous) told me that he is no longer writing; rather, he is just a scribe for his spirit guide. When I told Fred Waitskin about that, he said, “Exactly! That’s the writing bubble.” Fred, who has often experienced writer’s block and helps other writers work through it, cautions, “Once you are in the bubble, keep writing every day. If you leave the bubble for long, it becomes hard to get back inside.”

He talked about a technique that Hemingway used: “Before I finish a day’s work, I always leave the next paragraph that I intend to write unwritten, allowing my unconscious mind to toy with it for 20 hours. Then the next morning, when I turn my machine back on, I know what I want to write. This in itself is useful, but additionally, during this 20-hour pause, my unconscious mind has been working on the material, providing hints and directions I never imagined were inside me.”

I like the idea that creativity is driven by something “too big for your body” that needs to come out. Writing anything has always made me feel good, even just a chart note or a business email. But when writing stops flowing easily, I want to give up. So this time, rather than stopping right here, I did a search on “writer’s block.” What I came up with is that the most common cause for it is fear — fear of

being judged, fear of being rejected, or fear of being unable to adequately express the thing that is too big for your body. During the past several months, I have retreated to the satisfying, comforting realms of being a psychotherapist and doctor, and enjoying my family, home, and friends. But as I write this, I'm troubled by a nagging discomfort around wondering if I have it in me to deliver the baby that is gestating in my mind; the baby that I like to imagine is going to be beautiful and compelling. Maybe it won't be as perfect as I imagine. (That stops me, too.) I need to get into Fred's writer's bubble, where there is no self-consciousness, no worrying about whether it is going to be beautiful enough in other people's eyes.

I asked prolific writer and Harvard Business School Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter about her experience with writer's block. She said that she doesn't like the term; to her, it feels self-punishing, and like something that needs to be surgically removed, like a bowel obstruction. Writer's block "denies the rhythms of life," she says. "Sometimes we're just on a 'pause.' If there's no immediate impetus (like deadlines or particular audiences awaiting the words), then why not do other things for a while? After all, writing is intense; it means going into one's head, and it takes a lot of energy and will." I am reminded of the famous Dorothy Parker quote, "I hate writing; I love having written." When Rosabeth gets stuck, if taking a break isn't an option, she just puts random thoughts down on the page. Eventually, she finds that "gradually, a narrative takes shape. Anything to get it underway! ... Passivity is depressing, and then everything gets locked up (including the creativity, the writing), but activity is energizing — all gears in motion."

I asked my oldest child, Truda, if they ever get writer's block, and they said, "Absolutely ... every time I sit down to write a text or email. So I just avoid writing texts and emails until eventually I just start with the first word. If I do it piece by piece, it's easier. Besides, I'm not a writer; I'm a visual artist and filmmaker, and I don't procrastinate with those. It is piece by piece, and I know what I'm doing before I do it. Writer's block happens when you don't know what is coming next. Procrastination happens when you don't want to do what is coming next. The problem with writing is that I don't know what's coming next." Perhaps that is one of the obstacles for me as well. When I am not quite sure what I want to write next, I want to turn to another task.

Bestselling writer Richard North Patterson told me that he has never experienced writer's block, perhaps because he always knows what's coming next. Before he writes, he organizes his thoughts into an outline, and then, he says, "I just follow the outline." He makes discoveries in the course of writing, but he basically always knows where he is going. Sometimes he makes mistakes, but then he corrects them. "You can't fix a blank piece of paper," he said. "It's like studying for an exam: If you know your subject, the exam will be easy. I always know what I want to write about."

I am reminded of how different emotional states rest in different parts of the brain. For instance, there is an area of the brain called the default mode network (DMN). It is where humans go by default. When that part of the brain is active, we are thinking about the past and future, planning, worrying, or ruminating. It's likely that when avoiding a task, that part of the brain is active — planning what to make for dinner, musing on something curious a friend said recently, worrying about whether one's son has finally made a doctor's appointment to look into his bad knee. But there is another area of the brain, the task positive network (TPN), that works entirely differently. When the TPN is active, the DMN is turned off; they are never active at the same time. The TPN is active when we are engrossed in a task, when we are in what some creative people call "flow." As soon as Richard North Patterson starts to write his outline, or Truda starts to edit a film or put paintbrush to canvas, the DMN is turned off and the TPN is turned on. Writer's block or writer's pause is at least temporarily turned off. (See my article, mvtimes.com/2018/01/17/mind-power-mindfulness)

I like the idea of "writer's pause." Thinking of it that way helps the perfectionistic critic in me to relax, and thus makes getting back to writing easier. The danger with pausing, however, is that there's an endless list of things that need to be done — like making or changing airline reservations, or filling out

paperwork, or responding to emails — and then the writing just gets dropped. Then that inchoate thing that needs to get out of my body just festers inside me.

A few people have suggested that writing these columns must be like therapy for me. Absolutely right. And like good writing, good therapy entails work. Fred Waitskin says that in the writer's bubble, you discover things that you never had any idea existed — one more way that writing is like good psychotherapy. Now, having written this column, I do feel like something has spilled out that needed to be released. And perhaps I know who I am and what drives me in a way that I didn't before I started writing. As I leave the writer's bubble, I realize that maybe I wasn't as content as I thought I was before, because it feels really great to have written. Now it will be interesting to see if my writer's pause has been turned off, and if ideas and words will flow more easily in the future.

Tips for writer's block

- Think of it as writer's pause rather than writer's block. It probably *is* just a pause. "Block" sounds permanent and punitive.
- Read. Reading can inspire you to write, as it did for me.
- Just get started. Commit to a small goal, like writing the title or the date on top of the page. As soon as you do that, you are out of the anxious part of your brain, and have activated the action part of your brain.
- Find out "who" it is in you that thinks it is a bad idea for you to express yourself creatively. There is a part of you, that is well-intentioned, that is trying to protect you from something bad happening. As soon as you observe that part of you, you are no longer blended with it.
- Talk with a friend or therapist about it.
- If you are writing for a boss, ask for a deadline.
- As Rosabeth Moss Kanter suggests, type out or write random thoughts. She calls it a "mind dump." It can be cathartic and get you going. She finds it helpful to start in the middle, then write the conclusion, and then, finally, write the beginning.
- Once you start writing, consider scheduling a time to return to the "writer's bubble" every day.
- Ask yourself what you are afraid of. When you come up with an answer, ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that can happen?" When you come up with an answer, repeatedly ask yourself the question, "So what would be the worst thing that would happen if that occurred?" Then add the question, "If the worst possible outcome happened, could I handle it?" You probably could.

Born and bred Vineyarder and writer Nicole Galland began her first novel, "The Fool's Tale," and then put it down for more than five years. She just couldn't bring herself to write anything more. So she made a quilt. She sewed 25 quotes about writer's block into the quilt. When she finished the quilt, she went back to "The Fool's Tale," and finished it, too. It is one of my favorite books of all time.

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