



When Do You Write?

A M Carley

Writing is an iterative process. So is editing.

I work with writers, and I also write creatively myself. So the questions come up frequently:

- When do you write?
- What circumstances need to be in place?
- Do you make yourself write even when you don't feel like it?
- How do you set aside time to write?

You know those questions.

Then the other day, one of the writers in my writer group, BACCA, asked us these questions:

- Do you have a regular writing schedule?

- A writing ritual or rituals?
- Conditions that you know help or hinder your writing?

The day before, I discovered that an author client had made an unannounced change in plan, leaving an entire team of people delayed by a week or more. On that very day, I had blown off a writing deadline of my own. And at that moment, I realized this was something to write about. I'll speak for myself, not my clients, friends, colleagues, or famous writers in history.

Iter-iter-iter-ations

Do you have a regular writing schedule?

I believe that I can write something more or less okay, most of the time. Even when the stars aren't aligned, I can probably crank out some sentences. I also believe that, for those sentences to have a chance at singing - and I love sentences that sing - they'll need more love, later. For me, writing is an iterative process. So is editing. People who can slam out an adroitly worded, deftly built essay in one burst - well, maybe I needn't complete that thought. Students of literary history can share stories about the derring-do of famous writers in years past who knocked out perfect work with one quill pen tied behind their back.

Motivation is for amateurs.

--Chuck Close, quoted in Seth Godin's
What to Do When It's Your Turn (2015).

Like the painter Chuck Close, quoted above, I don't wait for inspiration. That's a passive stance that doesn't serve me. Inspiration is wonderful, of course. I take advantage of it at

every opportunity. That's why we have things like notebooks, Evernote, and smartphones that record our voices. Dropping off to sleep recently, I received some amazing lines, and ideas, for my writing. Half-awake, I knew enough to scrawl them onto the paper I keep at the bedside, for later transcription. Those notes informed my latest draft of a fiction piece I'm nursing along.

Although I'm not one of the butt-in-chair-at-five-in-the-morning types, I believe in writing something, anything, in order to have a draft. The draft is my friend. Once I have a draft, I have possibilities.

I can mark it up, massage it, stare at it, laugh ruefully at it, stomp away from it, reconsider it, ridicule it, sigh at it, cross it out, write in "stet" next to the cross-out, walk away and prepare a beverage / snack / meal / dessert, return and reconsider it (again), remember an important errand that must be run at once, and eventually, I can make it better. It may take a few more iterations, more streamlined than the last one, and I'll probably wind up with a piece of work that's at least presentable.

I exaggerate for effect. Mostly.

Important, not Urgent

For me the biggest hurdle to clear involves setting aside time for writing, when other demands on my time feel compelling. Years ago, a friend told me he was striving to honor those to-do items that were important, not urgent. Ever since, that has been a goal of mine as well. I have yet to meet it on a regular basis. It's too easy to respond to the urgencies of everyday

work and life. Someone needs attention, a project has a deadline, a team effort may not happen if you don't step up, the phone keeps ringing.... I imagine being sufficiently evolved as a creative, centered person to honor, without a struggle, the important and not urgent items.

Until I achieve that degree of evolution, I'll muddle through. I'll make the time to write, especially those essential first drafts. I'll rely on those drafts, and the bits of time I carve out for the iterative process. I'll write when I write, and words will get written.

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