THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS WRITER'S BLOCK; (OR IF THERE IS, SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR DISSOLVING IT)

Only three days after the South Coast Writing Project's Summer Institute had ended, I was across the country, in Massachusetts, about to begin another month of writing as a member of another group of twenty-five at the Cummington Community of the Arts. The situation appeared idyllic: a cabin in which to work, a lively group of writers and artists to get to know, and a whole month ahead during which I could write whatever I chose, with no other obligations to distract me. My send-off from the Writing Project had been exuberant; the Fellows back home would be eager to read the poems I would write, and I was, although exhausted from the intensity of the summer program, filled with Writing Project enthusiasm. As added insurance I had with me a poem by Barry Spacks—part of our ongoing collaboration—and I intended to start by writing my first poem in response to his.

I was unpacked and nearly recovered from jet-lag. I sat at my desk looking out the window onto a green Berkshire meadow; the sunlight poured in, and I rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter. I looked at Barry's poem, then at my blank page. Then I got up and rearranged the bookshelf. I sat down, straightened the desk, thinking about the poem I had decided I should write first. Nothing. And worse than nothing, the fear of there being nothing. It seemed the idyllic conditions conspired to create a monumental writing block. I got up and left the cabin, walked along the road to the mailbox, knowing it was too early for the mail, and when I returned to my desk, I still could not begin.

But as it turned out, the writing block did not materialize. In fact, my experience at Cummington, which was a poetry-producing one after all, leads me to hypothesize that there are no such things as writing blocks, at least not as they are conventionally defined. My first reaction to finding myself at an artists' colony with a month free for writing was to tighten up, to allow the enormity of my expectations to keep me from working. The circumstances at Cummington magnified the pressure to write I have felt, not usually in poetry writing, but in beginning many prose assignments, and often during the progress of my writing in any form. I have often experienced an inability to write either what I've wanted, or as well as I've wanted. I have fought with writing tasks that were unpleasant; I've procrastinated and
complained, and I have found myself, as I was at Cummington, unable to work. However, even at these times, I am always able to write something.

There is a sense in which I was blocked about the poem I was attempting to begin, but I cannot be said to have had a writing block, for the evidence of the drafts written that day (I saved all my drafts for a study I'm conducting on the composing process of poets) is that I had another poem to write. There are twelve lines on the first page of drafts, aborted attempts to begin a poem in response to the one by Barry Spacks, and then the second page begins with a phrase that shows up in the poem I completed several days and twenty worksheets later. This poem appears to be entirely unrelated to the lines on page one, and I remember the sense of resignation with which I gave up that page. Rather than fight to start a poem I couldn't begin, rather than fight to start a poem at all, I began just to write, and this led me to discover what I did have available to be written.

It seems to me that a writing block develops not in a writer's ability to compose, but in one's psychological capacity to accept a product that does not match one's expectations. Mike Rose's investigation ("Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," College Composition and Communication, Dec. 1980) encourages this view. The tenacity with which the writers he studied hung onto in-serviceable plans and rules kept them from efficiently completing writing tasks, but these students, while avoiding majors where writing is a large requirement, did finish written assignments and were, at the time of the research, near graduation. How did these "blocked writers" manage to write at all?

Rose's students reported that they tackled assignments only at the last minute, and only with a sense of desperation. The ubiquitous practice of staying up all night to write papers seems to be the result not merely of poor planning or procrastination—procrastination could be called a symptom of the fear of writer's block—but is a viable antidote to the inability to meet one's own expectations for a piece of writing, or to write as easily, or as well, as a writer thinks he should. When the deadline is only hours away, expectations must fall aside; the student is willing to accept anything that comes out of the typewriter as a draft, often the final draft, of the paper. The rule-bound writer breaks his own rules in desperation for something, anything, to turn in the next morning. In doing so he is finally (ironically) free to write, to discover what he has to say. The skilled writer, I propose, is never blocked, but often finds herself unable to write as skillfully as she would wish, or has something that is more pressing to be written than the piece of writing she expected to produce. Letting go of these expectations frees the

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writer to begin, allows her to write something she did not, more accurately, could not, expect to write.

I find I need some assistance in doing this myself, though; it is easy to forget my own understanding of writer’s block when its symptoms threaten to erupt, so I’ve compiled the following list of suggestions and reminders to use on such occasions.

1. Assume that you are not blocked in your ability to write, but that the writing you are producing, or are capable at this moment of producing, does not match up to your expectations for yourself.

2. Instead of forcing yourself to write to these expectations, write what you have in you to write. You may need to write on another subject for a while, or you may need to write about the difficulty you are having with the topic. Any writing will do. Plan only to write, and leave aside any preconceptions about what you will write.

3. If you’ve thought about the subject for some time, you are probably somewhere in the middle, and not at the beginning, where you are trying, quite logically, to begin. You may even be at the conclusion. (My composing process study began on page 43. I could not write page one, but when I typed "43" at the top of the page, I found that I was able to write from the middle of the project.)

4. Make all initial writing freewriting. You may or may not want to try to write straight through a draft, but at least freewrite each time you are stuck. Let yourself write in any direction, and then you’ll have something to refine later.

5. Resist the temptation to continually reread what you have written. Sheridan Blau’s work with "invisible writing" ("Invisible Writing: Investigating Cognitive Processes in Composition," College Composition and Communication, forthcoming), suggests that composing without looking at the words as they appear on the page is a useful technique for writing a difficult passage. When he is not looking at his words, the writer’s attention is forced to be more fully on the content, and is not drawn so much to the form of what he is writing.

6. Try writing for a different audience, or in another genre. For example, write a letter instead of an essay, or write an essay for a specific individual.

7. Try changing the technical aspects of composing. If you are writing with a pen, switch to a typewriter; find another location in which to work; allow yourself to write for only fifteen minutes at a time.

8. Remember that all writing is work-in-progress and can be revised at any time.

This suggestion list has been of help to me already. I am still unable to write the first 42 pages of my study, but I’ve managed, in the meantime, to write this article.

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