Last night at the end of class, Katie, a graduate student and a first grade teacher, proudly waved a 5 by 7 inch notebook in front of me. The notebook contained 180 pages — one for each day of the coming school year. Katie vowed to write faithfully in her teacher log and reflect on the ups, downs, highs, lows and in-betweens of teaching six-year-olds. I applauded Katie’s commitment and ingenuity in choosing a tiny notebook. “You can manage to write in that book everyday.”

Each September, at the beginning of a school year, teachers plunge into a frenzy of activity. Armed with new books, new lesson plans, and new students, we wipe the tabula rasa. We discard files, spruce up classrooms, and set goals. Some of us even write them down. I recycle old goals — like cultivating patience, talking less and listening more — because I never get them right. And like Katie, I plan to write regularly. In fact, writing for two hours every morning tops my “to do” list every year. Since I belong to the “I should be doing laundry or grading papers” school of writers, I need jump starters to rev me up and keep me going. I’ve used the following with varying degrees of success:

**Post Post-Its:** On the first day of the new semester, I copied *nulla dies sine linea* — never a day without a line — in bold letters and posted it near my computer screen. This Latin *linea* sits between two others: “One of the biggest killers of creativity is the knife of the perfectionist,” and “Today I will do one small task that will contribute toward my life goal.” I like affirmations, quotes, and feel-good messages. But I’m no Pollyanna. So I finally ripped up the “I will lose 10 pounds by ...” note which sat on my desk for a year. The truth? If I wanted to lose 10 pounds, I would have. “Learn when enough is enough, Frances,” my mother used to chide.

**Heed Advice:** I direct the West Virginia Writing Project and teach evening classes, so writing for two hours every morning should be easy. Not so says Donald Murray: “The academic schedule encourages the illusion that you can get your writing done on the day free from teaching ... between semesters, next summer, or on sabbatical. Nonsense. When those times come you can’t suddenly take up an alien craft.” Murray’s advice: pick a best time of day for writing and protect that time. “Be selfish,” he says. Selfish? Me? A mother? A good Catholic girl?
Seek Role Models: My obsessions include reading about writers who make enormous sacrifices for their art. Recently, I read a review of My Own Country: A Doctor’s Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS by Abraham Verghese. Dr. Verghese, a professor of medicine and chief of infectious diseases at Texas Tech Health Sciences Center, rose every morning at 4:30 a.m. to write before going off to his “real” job at the hospital. A picture of Dr. Verghese, gentle and smiling, hangs on my bulletin board. Sometimes I stick my tongue out at him. Poor Dr. Verghese.

In a Writer’s Digest tip sheet column, Mark Davis recalls writing his second novel while working full-time as an advertising writer. He set an achievable goal for the number of pages he wrote each day: one. Writing one page a day for ten months, he wrote a first draft of his novel. Six months later he completed his revision. "If you have the desire, drive, and discipline, you can do it too," he concludes. Desire, drive ... yes. Discipline? I hate that word.

Cultivate Mindfulness: A product of Catholic schools, I associate “discipline” with humorless nuns, floggings, self-mutilation, mortification, and penance. (“Forgive me, father, for I have not written for two hours every morning this week.”) Since discipline and guilt are synonyms in my vocabulary, I prefer the word “mindfulness.” Jon Zabat-Zinn defines this Buddhist concept as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.” Writer Donald Hall labels this paying attention “absorbedness.” Though I want to write “awk” in the margin, I envy Hall. “In the best part of the day, ‘absorbedness’ occupies me ...”

I cultivate mindfulness by swimming laps and walking in the woods. Do these practices spill into my writing? I’m not sure, but they relieve stress and assuage guilt.

Keep a Journal: Journals work for some writers and not others. During the past fifteen years, I’ve kept different types of journals and read many others. Just as stretching before swimming laps loosens my stiff joints, journal writing loosens my feeble brain. More importantly, I can spit and moan in my journal.

In The Artist’s Way, A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity, Julia Cameron presents basic tools for creative recovery. One, the morning pages “... are three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness. They are not meant to be art or even writing ....” Designed to override the inner critic, the censor, the morning pages are compost for creativity. Cameron believes, “All that angry, whiny, petty stuff that you write down in the morning, stands between you and your creativity.” In Writing and Being, Taking Back Our Lives Through the Power of Language, G. Lynn Nelson, director of the Greater Phoenix Area Writing Project, compares the journal to a garbage can. So dump words from head to page; whine, wail and worry in a journal.

Start a Writers’ Group: Mine has been meeting for over a year. It consists of four faculty women, the regulars, and a few floaters. One member is completing a dissertation on Chicana writers; another is editing a book on testing, creativity, and gifted students; and the third is conducting research on teachers’ decisions about whether or not to report suspected cases of child abuse. Heavy stuff. I’m stuck on writing about not writing. “Is my topic too frivolous?” (Frivolous is a mortal sin in academia.) The group responds, “Are you kidding? We can all identify.” I read my draft; we laugh.

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In addition to deadlines and feedback, a supportive writing group provides a safety net where members can free fall into the frivolous without the fear of ridicule or failure. Find a few kindred souls and form a writing group.

"What comes first — motivation or action?" asks Dr. David Burns. Most teachers would respond, "motivation." Burns says it's the other way around. "Action must come first, and motivation comes later on." Burns believes that action leads to motivation which leads to more action. The formula works like this: "Get yourself up on Monday morning and write from 8 to 10 a.m. ... OK, you completed a rough draft ... Now, let's see if you can revise this wooden diatribe about not writing."

If, like most writers, you procrastinate, take action: rev-up with some jump-starters outlined here. If all else fails, chain yourself to your computer and wrestle with this alien craft.

References

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