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Come in...and be captivated...

Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:
Give writers suggested hints,
resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you
feel is most helpful and derive
inspiration from it- most importantly,
HAVE FUN!

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say
you're doing an art project and you want
to spice it up a bit. You reach into a
seemingly bottomless box full of
colorful art/craft supplies and
choose only the things that speak to
you. You take only what you need to feel
that you've fully expressed yourself.
Then, you go about doing your individual
project adding just the right amount of
everything you've chosen until you reach
a product that suits you completely. So,
this is on that concept. Reach in, find



"Arts and Crafts" N.M.B Copyright 2008

the things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

In Taos

By Christopher Woods

In Taos, late one summer afternoon, my wife Linda and I came upon a festival in the plaza. There were booths selling Indian crafts, candles, and food. We walked slowly around the plaza in a counter clockwise fashion, viewing the exhibits and the people. There was an almost hypnotic movement as the people walked en masse around the plaza, as though we were all part of a wheel that turned. I thought of a mandala with human

characters.

Then, I saw an exchange between two people in the plaza. A older woman shared a look with a young man. She was Anglo; he was Indian. The look was one of attraction. I could see that the woman was with another woman. They walked arm in arm. The young man was on his own. Looking at them, I knew they came from different worlds.

But there was something about the way they looked at each other that, to me, revealed a kind of longing, the kind we have all known. Because of the disparity in their ages, and their disparate situations, I knew that there was probably no relationship forthcoming between the woman and the young man. Instead, the look they gave each other was all they would share.

This encounter took only a few seconds, but it made a deep impression on me. I thought of the woman and the young man and knew that their brief exchange was also universal. We have all had such moments. Life is full of these moments. Then we go on, safe inside our own comfortable lives, never to venture beyond them to cross lines or to enter new territory.

As a writer, I long for these moments, but maybe in a different way. Creativity comes in so many ways. A poem about childhood might take decades to write. A story or play might come about instantly because of an image outside the car window. This encounter I observed in the plaza in Taos was something I needed to capture. I knew I would write about it at some point, but the details of the festival might blur in time and memory if I waited.

I knew what I would do. I told Linda that I wanted to write something. She would continue rounding the plaza in the human mandala. I stepped into a pharmacy to buy a pen and a writing tablet. I returned to the plaza and

found a bench. I sat down and began writing a story about the woman and the young man. I wrote about the mandala, about the colorful booths, the smells of food and flowers. I wrote about the sun going down, as day was ending. I sat on that bench in the Taos plaza for maybe an hour, until the story was finished. I made up details about their lives, and gave them interior thoughts about their encounter. I wrote about the way their lives connected, if only for a few seconds. All the while the mandala continued. The plaza had a magical feel as the sky darkened and the lights came on in the booths and surrounding buildings. In fact, I felt like my story was writing itself, that I was simply there to take dictation.

Looking back, I am always thankful for this story. It came as an unexpected gift. I titled it "Two Women At Nightfall." Later, it was published in THE SOUTHERN REVIEW.

As a writer and photographer, I am always aware that creativity can come at any time. It is important to pay attention, to be vigilant, to be aware of the world around us.

D. H. Lawrence said it was important to get out of the glass cages of our own egos. I couldn't agree more. We do have our personal stories and dramas to investigate, to capture in our chosen art. But the world is wide and I feel that the best stories and images are out there, waiting.



"Fun" N.M.B Copyright 2009

Noelle Sterne has published over 250 writers' craft articles, personal essays, spiritual pieces, and fiction in many print and online venues. For over a year her column for writers in the Absolute Write Newsletter, "The Starbucks Chronicles," shared creative struggles, motivational boosts, and the joys of latté-sipping. To date, appearing in 2011 and beyond are pieces in Writer's Digest, Writers' Journal, The Writer, 11.11, Soulful Living, and an anthology of women's writing. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle has conducted an academic coaching and editing practice for over 28 years. Based on this consulting practice, she is completing a psychological-spiritual handbook to help doctoral candidates finish their dissertations (finally). Her new book, a guide of practical spirituality for reaching lifelong yearnings, is Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams (Unity Books Spring 2011, www.trustyourlifenow.com forthcoming).

The Fallacy of Scheduled Work

By Noelle Sterne

As I packed my tote for my weekly two-hour writing session at the mall Starbucks, a glow of satisfaction inched through my chest. The files for the four

projects stood upright and alert. A larger color-coded file highlighted my neatly numbered agenda: (1) polish draft of hot query, (2) re-edit article on editing drafts, (3) tackle description of second-to-main character in current short story, (4) catch up on letter owed to writing colleague. I felt very organized, goal-oriented, and righteous.

At the mall, I settled in with my ambrosial latté, pulled out my files, fanned them on the table, and opened the little notebook I always carry for additional notes. Carefully choosing a pen from my arsenal, I reached for the query file. And stopped.

A rush of thoughts flooded my mind: how I'd set myself such tasks, of which these four were a microscopic percentage. I knew that in this session I'd never get to even two, much less all four. At home, a thousand more ideas in scribbled haste waited in piles on odd corners of my desk, and another thousand frowned with impatience from overstuffed drawers and overflowing cartons. What if, I teased myself, I didn't have to accomplish all this? How would I feel? What would I do?

Musing on these questions, verging on depression, I felt an unexpected excitement somewhere near my stomach. A poem was bubbling up—about the drive to accomplish, how life might be without the compulsion to write, how I could find peace nevertheless. I grabbed my little notebook and scrawled the first line, and then the next and the next.

One small page after another filled until the need to express, admittedly in rough language, was finally sated. I glanced at my watch. Damn, an hour gone already of the allotted two, and no files cracked.

With a sip of latté, I sighed. Why do the best organized plans of mice and writers go awry? Was my poetic veer-off mere stalling? Or was this a too facile and dismissive label? What is it, in the very midst of our most finely honed schedules, that rises up and knocks relentlessly until we must open to it?

To get myself to write almost daily and complete projects has been a long battle.

Other than the weekly mall confection, at last I'd arrived at a schedule that works practically and psychologically—writing in the mornings (no, not at that deified writer-dues-paying hour of 5:00 am) and then devote the rest of the day to client work.

With this plan, despite the usual bona fide stalling (roaming the Internet; keeping up with the latest media stars' pairings, unpairings, and repairings; checking email and responding instantly to get at least these off the list; scrupulously cleaning between every key on the keyboard), I've eventually written the drafts of what my insides dictate, polished them, and sent them out. Some of those pieces—published, to boot—have centered around advice to other writers on how to keep a writing schedule.

Yet . . . If I'd kept to my schedule not only of time but of project, I'd never have done some of the pieces most satisfying to me and helpful to other writers. Like this session at the mall. If I'd obeyed my strict taskmistress agenda, that poem never would have been scratched into the little notebook. When I attempted to revive the scheduled work and picked up the first file the second time, the demon struck again and commanded the title of this essay. In fact, in an early session in this mall Starbucks, having set myself the task of completing a current article, instead I looked around, became enamored of, and had to write about this faux café.

It's the writer's version of the old debate between discipline ossifying into rigidity and inspiration sloughing off into avoidance, the soldier or the bohemian. On one side, even though during a morning writing session I may stare out the window, switch among the 400 radio stations I've downloaded, and think about lunch, I sit there, remembering the wisdom of Flannery O'Connor. She counseled an aspiring author:

"You ought to set aside three hours every morning in which you write or do nothing else; no reading, no talking, no cooking, no nothing, but you sit there. . . . If you don't write, don't do anything else." [1]

Faulkner endorsed discipline with a sly declaration: "I write only when I'm

inspired. Fortunately I'm inspired at 9 o'clock every morning.”[2] To bolster my own discipline, and reflective of strong compulsiveness, I confess to keeping a log, daily and monthly, of my writing time. Seeing more hours fill the column, I delight; seeing less, I resolve to do better.

But now, as I sat in Starbucks with my carefully arranged materials before me worthy of any left-brain-driven pragmatist, what did I do? Careened like a drunk into something new. The waves of creativity assault without warning. Sometimes, when I've actually tackled the predetermined file, as I work in full blaze, three new ideas, uninvited callers peering through the window, pop up. Like today, I must turn away from the scheduled work, greet these interlopers, and welcome them in.

I often wish my constitution cared not about structure or schedules. In an article aptly called “Time Management for the Unmanageable,” Ruth Schiffman described in hilarious detail how she writes best by scheduling nothing. She recounted how she “once wrote an entire children’s book in a 3 x 5 notebook, seated on a park bench while my children were occupied with flying rings and monkey bars.”[3] Ruth came to terms with her non-organized mode. She recognized her taskmaster was her “heart, not the clock.” Incidentally, she continues to produce prolifically.

Many of us cannot so easily make peace. If, like me, you're highly structured, when the creativity angel-demon splats down in the midst of a session scheduled for other work, should you bind and gag it and shove it into a corner? Or should you allow it to overtake you?

One writer called its attack “a real annoyance” but quickly admitted he couldn't imagine life without it. Poet and novelist Gaie Sebold candidly described how, in the midst of slogging through yet another revision of a piece that bores worse than sitcoms, many of us yield shamefully to the “siren song of a shiny new novel.”[4] We can hardly stop ourselves from plunging in, abandoning the current “tarnished, dented, older work”[5] like used coffee grounds, no matter how much we earlier savored it.

I've found several ways to assuage the guilt of not sticking to the hallowed schedule. For one, I remind myself that succumbing to that irrepressible creative urge produces unexpected benefits. Even if I've plowed through reams of client work or landed a fat new contract, the day shines only if I've written at all. One writer (who asked for anonymity) blogged eloquently, "Today the car went dead, the water pipes burst, the bank froze my account, the cat exploded, and I wrote 1,500 words. It was a good day."

I remember that every time I accede to that untamable creativity, I reap another reward—a new poem, article, essay, story, novel in the making. Often, when I finally return to the scheduled piece, I see it fresher and sharper than before. Revisions, and even new writing, go easier.

I realize another reason to yield to those unexpected creative surges: we reassert our writerhood. We give ourselves yet another message (never too many) that indeed we're writers and deserve to honor the desires implanted in us.

The wonderful writing guru Julia Cameron put it in more universal terms. Acknowledging our creative thirst shows we're surrendering to what she called the "Great Creator," the ultimate source of our creativity.[6] We don't even have to believe in it as a Source or Force, she reassured us. Opening to it, though, reaffirms our innate will to write and makes way for ever more ideas. "Creativity is the natural order of life. . . . The refusal to be creative is self-will and is counter to our true nature." [7]

Allowing our creativity activates another, more profound principle. It's called, or miscalled, "chaos theory." When we yield to the apparent chaotic schedule-breaking of our creative desires, for a while everything seems completely disorganized, upset, agitated, disconnected. Then, paradoxically, as we keep hanging on in the chaotic path, a sense emerges, a structure, a new creation in the form of our new poem, story, essay, novel outline. We've plugged into our unconstrained nature and movement as a "self-organizing system," as organizational consultant and futurist Margaret Wheatley says.[8]

In such systems, which scientists have found operate in everything from

chemical reactions to human organizations to weather patterns to galaxies, “Changes do not occur randomly, in any direction. They always are consistent with what has gone on before, with the history and identity of the system.”[9] And more. Lest we writers condemn ourselves too harshly for breaking free of our planned schedules, we can console ourselves that as “systems,” we are, again paradoxically, doing what we should:

In response to environmental disturbances that signal the need for change [our bombarding new ideas], the system changes in a way that remains consistent with itself The system is autopoietic, focusing its activities on what is required to maintain its own integrity and self-renewal.[10]

So there. Whatever it looks like or we judge it as, we are remaining consistent with ourselves, true to our purpose.

If you, like Ruth, need no reassurance and suffer no conflicts with no structure but nevertheless produce, more power to you. If you’re more structured most of the time, or feel you need to be to be really productive, accept your disposition. But yield too to the natural order of your creativity when it appears and know that you are demonstrating the universal principle of self-organizing systems.

For every writer who puts in the daily three hours or makes sure inspiration visits at 9:00 am, others write like Ruth between the rest of life. Still others, like me, need Cameron’s and Wheatley’s perspectives to swerve with comfort from the schedule and yield to the heady chaos-becoming-order.

Some days, some weeks, some years, you may find high discipline almost effortless and keenly needed. Other times, sticking to scheduled work may prove a yoke and a fallacy, and you’ll giddily jump and splash into unstructured, explosive creativity. Either way or both can lead you to great work.

As your writing develops and your life unfolds, accept the method that you’re intuitively drawn to at a given time. Without guilt, futile self-bargaining, or shame, let each approach work for you. Trust your process, trust your inner promptings, and, whether scheduled, vaguely scheduled, or unscheduled, trust

your writing creative self.

ENDNOTES

[1] Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Cecil Dawkins, November 12, 1960, *The Habit of Being: Letters*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 49.

[2] Quotation in The Web's Most Humongous Collection of Writing Quotes, <http://home.earthlink.net/~wallinger/quotes.html#why>.

[3] Ruth Schiffmann, "Time Management for the Unmanageable", *Absolute Write Newsletter*, October 7, 2007, www.absolutewrite.com.

[4] Gaie Sebold, "Revision, Revision, Revision," *Absolute Write Newsletter*, January 30, 2008, www.absolutewrite.com/fun/Sebold/revision.html

[5] Sebold.

[6] Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), p. 2.

[7] Cameron, p. 3.

[8] Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler, 2006), p. 88.

[9] Wheatley, p. 94.

[10] Wheatley, p. 94.

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