



YOU CAN'T PRETEND YOU DON'T CARE: BUILDING A WRITING PRACTICE

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I create stories in my head as I sit in traffic. While out in public I am keen to eavesdrop, my ears taking in the conversations of others, and for long afterward I mull over how to use these words or characters in my writing. I sometimes scribble down fragments of language when they hit me, but this rarely leads to anything more than forgotten half-pieces drifting around a drawer. Instead, I beat myself up for not being a real writer.

Something in me insists that *real* writers are people who get up at five a.m., muster whatever it takes to shackle themselves to their desks for hours, and face their own creativity head-on. I have long admired this image of the hardworking writer, striving to add their light to the world. Their daily commitment to this sacred writing time is a strength, and their impressive discipline something to be proud of.

I've worked with an Evergreen professor who invariably winces at the word "discipline." For some it evokes memories of being punished. He coaches students to adopt the word "habit" instead. My habits, though, are often unintentional: I pick up so-called bad habits all the time, while many of my good habits have been imposed on me by others. Unlike *habit*, *discipline* implies a choice, a deliberate decision to commit to a goal over a long period of time. Discipline is what I can use to choose my habits.

And discipline is a constant struggle for me. All too often I lose the fight against fear, anxiety, sleepiness, or anything; maybe it's simply a better time to clean my entire kitchen than it is to write. After I whined to one of my writing mentors that I lacked the discipline to write, she encouraged me to write about just that. Every day for at least ten minutes, I would write only about why I don't write.

The first day on the task, I sat down with pen in hand and told myself to let anything come out, writing too quickly to censor my thoughts. In ten minutes I produced little more than a list of the excuses I use to keep myself from writing.

I don't write because I never feel like I have the time.

I don't write because it hurts my hands.

I don't write because I'd rather sleep.

I don't write because it feels hard. And I'm sure I have no good ideas anyway.

I don't write because it's work, and I don't feel like working.

I don't write because I'm tired.

I don't write because the table shakes as I do, and it's so annoying.

I don't write for any reason.

I don't write because my teeth hurt.

I don't write because it's a stupid waste of time and I have no talent.

I don't write for anyone.

I don't write for me.

I don't write because I can't discipline myself.

I have no discipline.

I don't write because it's hard.

What's so hard about it?

It makes me uncover.

I don't write because it means I can't hide anymore.

I don't write because people will say I can't do it well.

I don't write because I am afraid of being seen.

Why? Why do I want to hide?

I'm worried they won't like me.

Who?

Anyone.

I don't write because anyone may not like me.

I don't write because I don't know how.

I don't write because I'm no good at writing.

I don't write because it feels like I'm supposed to.

I don't write in inclement weather.

I don't write unless my life is on the line.

I don't write if I can avoid it, which is always.

I don't write because I don't care.

But I do care.

And this is why it hurts not to write.

Unsure of how this practice could be of any help to me, I continued only because I had made a commitment to my mentor. The following day I approached the same topic: why I don't write. My words soon fell into the form of a dialogue with myself, and I became less and less willing to accept my excuses. I learned to press myself for the truth.

Why don't you write?

I'm afraid.

No, stop. You're not using that excuse anymore. Why don't you write?

I don't want to.

Nope, can't pretend you don't care.

Each day, I wrote, the practice building on what I had discovered the day before. I drilled deeper and deeper through my defenses.

So why don't you write?

It's hard.

What's so hard about it?

Wanting greatness.

Must you be great, even now,
as a fledgling?

I want to be great.

Why?

I will feel good?

How do you know?

I don't.

How will you know when you are
great? When you are published?

Well, maybe, depending
on who publishes me.

What if you are published, but
no one reads your work—then
are you great?

No, I guess not.

So, you are great if someone
reads your work?

No, because anyone can.

You are great if thousands read
your work?

No. Thousands may read
but not like.

You are great if you get paid
for your work?

Well, yeah, probably.

But many people who are not
great can sell their work.

Yes, that's true.

So what makes you great? What makes a great writer to you?

If I read and I get lost. If I read and remember. The turns of language and the capturing of scents, sounds, all senses.

So who can determine if your writing does this?

No one. I can hardly tell, having written it, and I am unlikely to fully believe anyone who says so.

Why? Why not trust the feedback of your readers?

I don't know.
What do they know!

All they have to know is that your words touched them. Is that enough?

Yes.

Can you believe someone who says that your writing touched them, that they liked your writing, even if you do not trust the person's taste?

Yes, I can believe that.

But will it make you feel great?

No.

So how do you know if you are great?

Only I can be satisfied, I guess.

And what makes you feel satisfied, really?

Putting in work makes me feel
satisfied. Even if I am not finished,
I feel good after a writing session,
or after taking a draft to a new phase.

And so—does working make you great?

Working, producing something
I feel proud of. Always striving, even
in the face of fear or depression or
feeling tired. That is great. Working,
continuing to work at my craft,
my passion. That is great.

Even if you produce no great works?

That seems unlikely, if I truly
commit to working.

But even if you produce no great
work in your lifetime, and nobody
ever reads or hears or feels touched
by your work—even if you do not
become famous or revered or
respected or anything—can you still
be great for having worked hard at
what you want to do?

Yes, it's called integrity.

After seven days, I was so worn out from examining why I don't write that I just wanted to write. Moving my hand on paper or my fingers across a keyboard was enough to whet my appetite. I dug up a short story I had abandoned eight months before and got right to work.

Had I stopped this process after day one, I would not have discovered what was really holding me back. The value of my work came when I settled into that same creative space and addressed an idea for several days at a time. Only by returning did I make any progress. This, I learned, is how creative practice builds on itself, even in small pieces. I had created a new habit of writing daily, and a new desire to write.

It is not always easy, and I may have to revisit this practice in the future. But I know now that I can manage the discipline it takes to write for ten minutes a day. In ten minutes a day, every day for

a year, I can slowly chip away at a novel.¹ By the end of the year, I will have written for over sixty hours. My consistent, short periods of work amount to more than what I could write if I waited to be seized by inspiration or desire.

So I fall back on discipline as my greatest tool, a skill I can grow with each practice. On days when nothing seems to flow, I allow myself to stop after ten minutes. I showed up and did my part, and I can feel at peace for the day. But far more often, ten minutes turns into thirty, or over an hour. I fall into a reverie, writing down everything that comes to me, unearthing something new each time.

Tomorrow I will return, sit, write for ten minutes. I delight to see my work expand on itself in this way, in small chunks of time devoted to my tasks. Disciplined writing can feel monotonous at times, and it can even be painful, but it is never as painful as not showing up to write.

1. Very slowly.