

21 DAYS TO AWAKEN THE WRITER WITHIN

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Day 3

First Drafts

Ideas for stories and personal essays are everywhere: they're walking past you on the street, hidden in a five line article on page 9 of your local newspaper, in your dreams, in a memory of your grandmother sitting in her wheelchair after Sunday lunch, in the "Don't ... don't ...I'm telling you don't" that the woman in the coffee shop hisses into her cell phone. Maybe one's already nudging you? Is there a question or an idea that's been niggling at you, a memory or an image from your childhood that haunts you? Set down one word and then another and then a sentence; an elastic reach, a stretch using language to conjure that shimmering, at times illusive world in your mind;s eye. This is how the work begins. And then the writer is on the trail.

If a character shows up or if a line of dialogue lodges itself in your imagination, follow that character, that conversation. Say yes to the promptings, have patience and the all important willingness "not to know." What you bring to the table as a writer is the way you see the world. Stick with that. Not the way you think you should, not the way you think might make money. But you - your

slant on things, your perceptions - that's the best you can offer the page

It sounds simple and yet sometimes you will falter. Some trails will be cold, you'll pursue an idea for an article or a story for a while and then you might lose interest. There are times when fear kicks in, or lack of faith, or the perfectionist who derides the work arrives with her commentary shows up. (There will be more about that voice and how to skillfully work with it on day 8.) Be willing to leave imperfection in your wake. Write to the end, or what you believe is the end. Without that first draft you cannot delve into the important questions; what am I writing about, what's at stake, what are my themes? First drafts are like forays into a mine; you will unearth jewels and also a great deal of rough material. Don't fall into the trap of endlessly rewriting and refining your first paragraph. You might jettison it. Write ... write to the end ...

Here's the first of many contradictions and caveats in this book. This my process and I'm a writer who works in a mild state of disorder. This concerned me, just a tad, until a friend talked to me about Chaos Theory. I understood almost nothing of what he said, except that chaos seemed to produce results. But I did love those two words 'chaos theory'. All my efforts at organizing with note cards with neatly labeled files haven't contributed that much to my process, in fact they've been stalling techniques. With my scattered way of working I've written short stories, a novel, travel articles,

reviews essays. My 'chaos' seems to suit me just fine and I've made peace with it.

Does that sound like you? Some of you are probably nodding, others vigorously shaking your heads in dismay, "Absolutely not." If you're in the latter group then look after your need for order - up to a point. Maybe you will write a little slower, maybe you'll ponder a while before setting words down. Be as honest with yourself as you can and if your need to have it just so is indeed a stalling technique then dive in and get messy with your writing life.

Some writers will easily write a page or two and then they feel stumped. They have notebooks of beginnings for stories and essays, all rich with possibility. Baffled by what happens next, overwhelmed at the notion of working on the 'middle' they abandon work. If you're just starting out don't fret if this happens to you, as not every idea comes to full realization. If you've been writing for a while and are feeling frustrated because you tend to sputter out after a few pages use this course to challenge yourself and write into the unknown. Muddle through, stumble along into the middle and onto what you believe is the end. It's a first draft - it doesn't have to be perfect. You might even abandon pages and pages of the work but if you don't write them you probably won't write those pages deep in the work that delight you, that are close to perfection.

Creative Prompt.

This is one exercise to do for the duration of the course. Write down the opening lines for five different stories. You don't have to figure out what happens next. There's no obligation here. Let your imagination roam free. Think about starting in *media res* - that is in the middle of a scene or unfolding event .

When he says "Skins or blankets?" it will take you a moment to realize that he's asking which you want to sleep under.

- Pam Houston, "How to Talk to a Hunter"

Violet married the piano tuner when he was a young man. Bella married him when he was old.

- William Trevor, "The Piano Tuner's wives"

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brother's school set the boys free.

-James Joyce "Araby"

This is Chato talking, Chato de Shamrock, from the east side of old L.A., and I want you to know this a big day in my life because today I quit school and went to work as a writer. I write on fences or buildings or anything that comes along.

-Danny Santiago, "The Somebody"

Creative Prompt

You'll be going on a journey as you write your way through these twenty one days. The books, the essays, the stories we read also take us on journeys. I know that's one of the reasons why I love to read. Where is the author going to take me? What will I discover about myself or about the character?

Here is a three part exercise to help you discover journeys you might want to explore further. Reflecting on your life, jot down several sentences using the template below.

I used to ----- (fill in the blank) but now I'm -----(fill in the blank)

For example:

I used to act in other people's stories but now I write my own.

I used to wear flats, but now I put on heels every morning.

I used to play cards, but now I can't bear to look at them.

Then take a fictional leap and write down several sentences, using the same template for -

1. A ten year old girl who is an only child.
2. A retired surgeon.
3. A woman in her thirties who invested in a race horse.

Now make up three more characters of your own and do this exercise again.

Pick two that interest you: one from your own experience and one fictional one. How did you get from there to here? How did your character do it? Surely there were obstacles you had to overcome. How did you manage it? How did the character do it? Were there times when they faltered? There's a journey in each of there and this is fertile ground for an essay or a story.

I hope you enjoyed working with this sample chapter.

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All good thoughts for your adventures on the page!

Lisa xo