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On Not Writing

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Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

I started writing this essay five years ago, and then I stopped. That I was not able to finish the piece did not strike me at the time as ironic but as further proof that whatever I once had in me — juice, talent, will — was gone. In any case, completing it would have made moot the very point I was attempting to make: Not writing can be good for one's writing; indeed, it can make one a better writer.

I hadn't given up writing deliberately, and I cannot pinpoint a particular day when my not-writing period started, any more than one can say the moment when one is overtaken by sleep: It's only after you wake that you realize how long you were out. Nor did I feel blocked at first. Lines would come to me then slip away, like a dog that loses interest in how you are petting it and seeks another hand. This goes both ways. When I lost interest in them, the lines gradually stopped coming. Before I knew it, two years had passed with scarcely a word.

I didn't miss it, yet at the same time I felt something missing: A phantom voice, one might say. I had been pursuing writing since I was a kid, had published pieces in many places, and written three books back to back. I was nearing 50. To have silence and neither deadlines nor expectations for the first time in decades was sort of nice — and sort of troubling. Can one call oneself a writer when not-writing is what one actually does, day after day after day?

I never lied. If someone asked, I'd say I was not working on anything, and no, had nothing on the back burner, in the oven, cooking, percolating or marinating. (What's with all the food metaphors anyway?) I wasn't hungry either.

At a party one night, a very artistic looking young man with an Errol Flynn mustache warned me that I must not take a break for too long. "It won't come back," he said gravely. "I stopped writing in 1999, and now I can barely write a press release."

I can't say this didn't scare me a bit. What if I really never wrote or published again?

I wouldn't be in bad company, I told myself. After "Joe Gould's Secret," Joseph Mitchell published nothing new in his remaining 31 years. E.M. Forster published no more novels between "A Passage to India" and his death 46 years later. And then there were those hall of fame figures: J.D. Salinger, who published nothing for the last half of his life, and Harper Lee, whose post-Mockingbird silence should be enough to canonize her, the patron saint of not-artists of any discipline.

But let's be real: I'm not them, and not-writing is not a way to support oneself. So I got a job (not writing-related), then moved to a new city, found another job, this time in fund-raising for a nonprofit organization, and eventually enrolled in a course to become a certified personal fitness trainer. Classes were held in the basement of a gym. I did it for fun, and more pragmatically, as a Plan B, a way to support myself if I got laid off (a real possibility). But it was there, unexpectedly, that I found my way back to writing full time, a framework for moving forward and validation for what I had done instinctively.

Fitness training today is generally built upon six major concepts (though they may go by different terms, depending upon the certifying agency), and each of these, I found, has a correlative in writing.

First, there is the Principle of Specificity. This states that what you train for is what you get: If it is strength you want, train for strength. In short, be specific. Writing 101, right? It's all in the details.

Next: The Overload Principle, training a part of the body above the level to which it is accustomed. You must provide constant stimuli so the body never gets used to a given task; otherwise, expect no change. So too with writing: Push yourself, try new things — creative cross-training, I call it.

This leads to the Principle of Progression. Once you master new tasks, move on. Don't get stuck — whether on a paragraph or an exercise regimen. If you do, this will lead to Accommodation. With no new demands placed upon it, the body reaches homeostasis — not a good place to find oneself. Here, everything flattens out. So, don't get too comfortable; it will show on the page as clearly as in the mirror.

When stimuli are removed, gains are reversed — use it or lose it, the Principle of Reversibility. Just as movement in any form is better than none at all — walk around the block if you can't make it to Spin class — one must do something, anything, to keep the creative motor running. After I stopped writing, for instance, I bought a camera and started taking photographs instead.

And finally, the Rest Principle, the tenet that gave me particular solace. To make fitness gains, whether in strength, speed, stamina or whatever your aim (see Principle of Specificity), you must take ample time to recover.

I had been working out as long as I had been writing, so this last principle was not new to me. Overtraining without taking days off can lead to injuries, chronic fatigue and, frankly, pain. But I had never observed this rule very strictly when it came to working on a piece of writing. Just as the body needs time to rest, so too does an essay, story, chapter, poem, book or a single page.

In some cases, it is not just the writing that needs a breather but the writer, too. On this matter, I quote from a National Council on Strength and Fitness training manual, one of the textbooks we used in our personal training course.

Here, fatigue is defined as "an inability to contract despite continued neural stimulation" (what a bodybuilder might call a failure to flex, you and I might call writer's block, in other words).

"As the rate of motor unit fatigue increases," the manual goes on, "the effect becomes more pronounced, causing performance to decline proportionately to the level of fatigue. Periods of recovery enable a working tissue to avoid fatigue for longer periods of time... During the recovery period, the muscle fibers can rebuild their energy reserves, fix any damage resulting from the production of force, and fully return to normal pre-exertion levels."

Translation: Don't work through the pain; it will only hurt. Give yourself sufficient time to refresh.

How long should this period be? What is true for muscle fibers is true for creative ones as well. My rule of thumb in fitness training is 2-to-1: For every two days of intense workouts, a day off. However, "in cases of sustained high-level output," according to my manual, full recovery may take longer. This is what had happened with me. I needed a really, really long rest.

Then I woke one day, and a line came to me. It didn't slip away this time but stayed put. I followed it, like a path. It led to another, then another. Soon, pieces started lining up in my head, like cabs idling curbside, ready to go where I wanted to take them. But it wasn't so much that pages started getting written that made me realize that my not-writing period had come to an end. Instead, my perspective had shifted.

Writing is not measured in page counts, I now believe, any more than a writer is defined by publication credits. To be a writer is to make a commitment to the long haul, as one does (especially as one gets older) to keeping fit and healthy for as long a run as possible. For me, this means staying active physically and creatively, switching it up, remaining curious and interested in learning new skills (upon finishing this piece, for instance, I'm going on my final open-water dive to become a certified scuba diver), and of course giving myself ample

periods of rest, days or even weeks off. I know that the writer in me, like the lifelong fitness devotee, will be better off.

Bill Hayes, the author of "The Anatomist: A True Story of Gray's Anatomy," is at work on a history of exercise.

Heeding Bill Hayes's advice, this series will be taking a breather from its weekly routine. It won't be away for long. Look for Draft essays in coming Sunday Review sections.

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