

Where's Your "Pencil"?

In his lovely essay "Why Write?," the novelist Paul Auster tells a story about growing up as an eight-year-old in New York City and being obsessed with baseball, particularly the New York Giants. The only thing he remembers about attending his first major league baseball game at the Polo Grounds with his parents and friends is that he saw his idol, Willie Mays, outside the players' locker room after the game. The young Auster screwed up his courage and approached the great centerfielder. "Mr. Mays," he said, "could I please have your autograph?"

"Sure, kid, sure," the obliging Mays replied. "You got a pencil?"

Auster didn't have a pencil on him, neither did his father or his mother or anyone else in his group.

Mays waited patiently, but when it became obvious that no one present had anything to write with, he shrugged and said, "Sorry, kid. Ain't got no pencil, can't give no autograph."

From that day on, Auster made it a habit to never leave the house without a pencil in his pocket. "It's not that I had any particular plans for that pencil," Auster writes, "but I didn't want to be unprepared. I had been caught empty-handed once, and I

wasn't about to let it happen again. If nothing else, the years have taught me this: If there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer."

What is your pencil? What is the one tool that feeds your creativity and is so essential that without it you feel naked and unprepared?

A Manhattan writer I know never leaves his apartment without reminding himself to "come back with a face." Whether he's walking down the street or sitting on a park bench or riding the subway or standing on a checkout line, he looks for a compelling face and works up a rich description of it in his mind. When he has a moment, he writes it all down in his notebook. Not only does the exercise warm up his descriptive powers, but studying the crags, lines, and bumps of a stranger's face forces him to imagine that individual's life. Sometimes, if he's lucky, the writer attaches a complete biography to the face, and then a name, and then a narrative. Before he knows it, he has the ingredients for a full-fledged story.

I know cartoonists who always carry pen and pad to sketch what they see, photographers who always have a camera in their pockets, composers who carry Dictaphones to capture a snatch of vagabond melody that pops into their heads. They are always prepared.

Pick your "pencil" and don't leave home without it.

Build Up Your Tolerance for Solitude

Some people are autophobic. They're afraid to be alone. The thought of going into a room to work all by themselves pains them in a way that is, at first, paralyzing within the room, and then keeps them from entering the room altogether.

It's not the solitude that slays a creative person. It's all that solitude *without a purpose*. You're alone, you're suffering, and you don't have a good reason for putting yourself through that misery. To build up your tolerance for solitude, you need a goal.

Sit alone in a room and let your thoughts go wherever they will. Do this for one minute. (Anyone can handle one minute of daydreaming.) Work up to ten minutes a day of this mindless mental wandering. Then start paying attention to your thoughts to see if a word or goal materializes. If it doesn't, extend the exercise to eleven minutes,