

The Blog: A Writing Practice

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Sample of Content:

How writing a blog can help a writer find his own, unique voice (plus get a lot of practice!)

Content:

I write a blog. It's called The Bush Diaries and I write in it virtually every day. The Bush Diaries started on November 8, 2004. I had been stewing for a couple of days about the re-election of George W. Bush (if you happen to be of any other than liberal persuasion, don't stop here! The publisher of the book version of my blog, The Real Bush Diaries, tells me that he's at the opposite end of the political spectrum. He said he wanted to publish the manuscript because it made him think. Hurrah! Just what I had intended.) Anyway, I happened to be more than a little puzzled--and, frankly, considerably dismayed--by the collective decision of the American electorate, and I felt I had to DO something. There's only one thing I really know, and that's how to write. On that particular day, I was stumbling around on the Internet in my usual clumsy way, without any particular purpose in mind, and fortuitously tumbled down into the blogosphere like Alice into that famous rabbit hole. Oh joy! For a writer, the prospect of actually publishing some piece of my work every day was irresistible. And getting readers!

What a medium! It was love at first sight. The title came to me as sheer inspiration, and within minutes, despite my primitive technical skills, I had the thing going. I was a blogger. I have been one ever since. People sometimes ask me where I get the discipline to sit down at the computer and punch out something every single day. Well, almost. They imagine it takes some special quality to stick to it in this way, and they want to know the secret of my unquestionably admirable dedication. Okay, I do have a secret. Quite apart from the ample resource of material with which our president thoughtfully provides me out the undoubted goodness of his heart, and quite apart from the genuine passion for change his presence in office seems to inspire in me, I do have a secret. And I'll share it with you, absolutely free, without charge or obligation whatsoever, as an act of pure, altruistic generosity. It's a simple one, really, a piece of linguistic legerdemain (if that's not too much of an alliterative mix of metaphors), a shift of verbal gears from the negative to the positive. It's just that I don't call it discipline. I call it practice. Which means I don't think of it as discipline, either. I don't know about you, but the very word inspires me with nothing but stomach-crunching dread. It reminds me of my days in boarding school and the painful rap on the knuckles with a hard wooden ruler when I failed to learn my French irregular verbs--which was fairly often, I ruefully admit. It sounds like punishment, or military boot camp. It sounds like a straight back and a stiff upper lip. It conjures up coercion of the worst kind. It's encrusted with a repulsive freight of dutiful shoulds and oughts and or elses. In a word, it's paralyzing. Ah, but practice! What a delightful word! Both a noun and a verb, it has two different spellings in my native English--the Queen's English, that is: stand up, everyone, and salute--to honor its dual nature: practice, the noun, and practise, the verb. No matter, we'll speak American here. A single spelling will suffice. So there's practice, the verb, as in that old chestnut about the visitor to New York City asking for directions on the street: How do I get to Carnegie Hall? Answer: Practice, practice, practice. It's what you have to do enough of to get good at what you do. If you play a tuba, you blast away for eight hours a day (and damn the upstairs neighbors). Same with the piccolo, but nicer. Practice is the only way. From the outside looking in it might seem like a big bore, but to those of us who really want to hone our craft, it's actually quite fun. It satisfies our jones, our obsessive urges. And after all, it's only practice. It doesn't need to be perfect. Yet. Which brings us to the noun. I myself learned about practice as a noun in a surprising way. It surprised me, anyway, because it was something I never imagined I could do: I learned about it through meditation. I was one of those people who think that meditation is not for them because they can't sit still for more than two minutes at a stretch, and their minds are in a constant whirl. It surprised me, when I first started the practice (there, see?) to discover that such a thing was possible. I learned to sit and pay attention to the breath. Just watch it coming in and going out. When the thoughts arrived--and they did, in droves. They still do, ten years later, though perhaps not quite so many, nor quite so frenetic!--I learned not to struggle with them in the vain attempt to send them packing. Not possible. Never happen. But rather to patiently watch them come and go, as they do, and keep bringing the attention back to this breath, now. This one, single, present breath. And, now, this one other breath. And so on. Each one in and for itself, watching the full length in, the full length out. Well, I don't need to convert you to a meditation practice right now, or offer you basic training in the how-to's. I'll do that another time maybe, for anyone who's interested. For now, enough to say that this particular skill proved an invaluable start-up tool for me in developing the understanding that, for a writer, that over-rated notion of inspiration (thanks, Romantics!) was only a small part of the process, and that practice, practice, practice was by far the more important ingredient. Practice is not hard. It means quite simply showing up every day and sitting down. It means getting in touch with that part of myself that wants--and needs--to write, and listening quietly for what it has to say. It means a bit of work to develop concentration and focus, bringing the mind back patiently to where I want it each time the mind itself decides to wander off in its own directions, to what it deems to be more diverting enterprises. It means simply deciding each and every day that here is a one-hour or a two-hour stretch--or even just a thirty-minute stretch--when I give myself permission to have nothing else to do but write. And then I start to scribble. (More about scribbling, too, another time.) Well, that little verbal switch works for me: it's not what I call (shudder!) discipline, it's oh, joy!) practice. It works well enough to suggest you might want to try it for yourself. Just show up, sit down, and get in touch

with that part of you that needs to write. Don't forget to breathe. And write. That's practice. Try it out. And good luck with it.

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About the Author:

Peter Clothier is the author of [The Real Bush Diaries](http://www.peterclothier.com). Visit his Web site to learn more about his imaginary conversations with President Bush, <http://www.peterclothier.com>