

The Writer's Dilemma(s)

FARAH GHUZNAVI

This is the fourth in a series of articles written by Farah Ghuznavi as Writer in Residence at the Commonwealth Writers website, based in the UK. Commonwealth Writers is the cultural initiative from the Commonwealth Foundation, and Farah is their first Bangladeshi Writer in Residence.

"Writing is like bricklaying, you put down one word after another. Sometimes the wall goes up straight and true and sometimes it doesn't and you have to push it down and start again, but you don't stop, it's your trade." That quote from Geraldine Brooks holds an important message for most of us who write (and on bad days, at least try to write). It captures the sheer laboriousness that is sometimes involved in putting down one word after another, one sentence after the next. And the utter frustration of realising that you have to take down the wall and start all over again, because something isn't working.

I have come across less generous versions of this message from other writers, who say that we should stop complaining about what hard work writing is. Their argument is that plumbers, bricklayers and accountants never say that they "don't feel like it", they just show up day in and day out and get the job done. There is undoubtedly some merit to that argument, but the great thing about plumbing, bricklaying or doing accounts is that in those trades, you can actually be confident that you know how to do what you have to do.

In most creative occupations, including writing, it's less straightforward. No matter how impressive their qualifications or their body of work, I suspect that few writers live completely without fear. Whether that is the fear of inadequacy, of outright failure, of losing the slender thread of inspiration or – for those lucky enough to have been deemed successful – the fear of not being able to do it again.

When you are stuck with a piece of work that doesn't seem to move, except sluggishly, when it feels as if nothing that you can come up with is working, there is often the temptation to just give up. If nothing else, there is the desire to procrastinate (I'm on first-name terms with this particular demon, by the way), and thereby avoid the inevitable unpleasantness for as long as possible.

And if you have a day job, family and friends, not to mention the audacity to pursue other interests, it may already be a challenge finding the time to write. After all, you could have any number of perfectly legitimate excuses to avoid getting down to it, beginning with the size of the laundry pile, the need to colour coordinate your files or the urgency of attending to the dust bunnies crying out for attention in the dark corners underneath your bed.

At times like that, the trick is to just keep going, as Brooks says. To come back to the desk/the computer/the notepad when you'd rather be doing something else, anything else. To give yourself permission to write something dreadful provided you actually write something.

And once you've done that, the second, equally important trick, is to give yourself a break for a while – especially when things aren't going as smoothly as you would like. Stop thinking about the story and do something completely different: take the dog for a walk, meet up with a friend, read a good book (which counts as "homework" of a sort) or watch TV (which doesn't). Just make sure that you commit to the other activity, whatever it is, instead of fretting about the state of your uncooperative Magnum Opus.

And when all else fails, have a nap. It is remarkable how helpful sleep, in particular, can be. One of the most unconstructive things that we do is to punish ourselves when the writing isn't going well is by keeping at it beyond a reasonable period of time, thereby more or less guaranteeing that it won't go well.

Let's face it – even at the best of times, writers tend to have a number of legitimate worries: what to write about (without alienating your entire family), how to write well, how to find an agent/publisher/readership, the list is endless. The only way to survive is to focus on the most important thing: writing.

One of the most basic challenges is to set, and stick to, a proper routine. Many writers measure their progress by word count, others by the hours spent working, yet others by how good the work produced actually is. The last of these is of course a slippery slope, because it also brings into play the Jekyll & Hyde aspect(s) of the writer's persona, when you swing perilously between the pendulum of thinking that you have written something reasonably good (or, in the case of people rather more confident than me, something brilliant) and the utter conviction that you've wasted hours/days/months on producing execrable nonsense.