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### **The Habit of Writing**

*By Rachel Toor*

Last summer I found myself sitting in front of a blank document on my computer. I had a cup of decaf by my side and was taking desultory bites of huevos rancheros. I had been sitting there for a couple of hours and knew that I needed to spend at least one more to get the draft I was working on to a place where I could stop. Occasionally I would check my e-mail. A few times I had to look something up on the Internet.

It was, in short, like every other morning.

Except that on this summer morning I was in a lodge in a national park. And not just any lodge in any national park. I was at the Grand Canyon, and yet I was inside, working.

In case you haven't heard, the Grand Canyon is one of the uncontested wonders of the natural world. I was on a weeklong trip with three 50-something frat boys still fit enough to run hard and drink harder. Two days before we got to Maswik Lodge, we had run up and down Mount Whitney, making the trip in nine hours. We took it easy on Whitney, saving our legs for the real purpose of the trip: 45 miles of canyon trail in 17 hours of through-the-night running. I was, in other words, on vacation.

It never once occurred to me not to bring my computer on the trip, nor did I break from my habit of spending at least two hours every morning writing, even when I was a little hung over from hanging with the aged frat boys.

You can find a lot of advice out there on writing. Many writers have come up with beautiful, funny, and quotable sentences about writing and what's required to make it happen. Most of them have to do with discipline. "Don't get up," says Ron Carlson. "I only write when I am inspired," Faulkner apparently said, and added, "Fortunately, I am inspired at 9 o'clock every morning." Most of them say that you need to take writing seriously, to treat it like a job.

That's probably good advice. It just doesn't work for me. For me writing has become less a job than a habit.

A friend who wanted to start running said that he'd heard it takes three months to form a habit. I don't know whether that's true. It sounds both facile and pseudoscientific. But over the years, I seem to have performed a trick of mind, managing to convince myself that getting up every day and going someplace to write was as normal as brushing my teeth, making my bed, or watching reruns of *House*. Whatever psychological move I used, it seems to have been successful. It has become as routine for me to write most mornings as it is to check up on my Facebook friends. It's just part of what I do.

I don't write every day. On the seventh day God rested, and believe me, I am no god. I need more than Sundays off, so I tend not to work on the weekends. That's when I get my long runs in. Also, I like to write in public places, in restaurants and cafes. On weekends the tables are usually taken by large parties—people who order more food than I do, leave bigger tips, and don't camp out there for hours. I try not to abuse the cafes that I use as my office by monopolizing a table on weekends.

I'm also not religious about my practice. Just as I take a day—sometimes many days—off from running if the weather is lousy or I'm feeling tired, I don't force myself to write. But after a few days of not writing, I get twitchy. When I do sit down to work, all the pent-up stuff comes streaming out.

It's true that during the school year, it can be hard to carve out the hours. I get as overwhelmed as the next faculty member with student papers, thesis meetings, and course prep—maybe even more so, since I haven't been teaching long enough to have developed good professorial habits. But I try to arrange my days, and often my nights, around getting enough stuff done that I can preserve the morning writing time.

A lot of my friends are academics who are far behind on projects. They are people who have multiple commitments and manage to do everything but their own scholarly work. I confess: I don't get that. I'm fortunate—or not, depending on your perspective—in that I don't have a family to feed, a garden to tend, or a house to clean. (I'm comfortable living in squalor.) I've made choices that enable me to be selfish, if you like, or to prioritize in my own way, as I prefer to think of it.

I find myself wondering, as my friends and I discuss the constraints and exigencies of academe, what would happen if they could just get into the habit of writing, treating it like any other everyday pursuit. Many of my friends have become runners, starting off slowly and hating every minute of it. Eventually they turn a corner and settle in. They develop a routine. They make the space in their day to run, and everyone around them begins to understand it.

It was that way for me. For years after I started running in races, my loved ones would ask me the worst, most insensitive question you can ask a runner. "Did you win?" they'd want to know. "No, Mother," I would reply, "I did not win the Boston Marathon."

By the time I started winning races (tiny, out of the way, boutique races like the Lewis and Clark Marathon in Montana), they had learned to stop asking. But they started asking a different question. When I came to visit, my mother would wonder each day, "Aren't you going to go out for a run?" She had come to see what it took me a while to realize: My running was just another part of my life, a habit that would not be broken. Sometimes, even though I didn't feel like going out, I would find myself pressured by her expectation. I'd go, and always, I'd be glad I had.

I wonder if my friends could somehow make their academic writing the same kind of thing, something that those around them come to expect. "Aren't you going to write this morning?" You could train your kids to ask it the same way they wonder what's for dinner.

The friend who introduced me to running, a biologist at Duke University, once said that serious runners never ask themselves if they're going to run. The answer to that is always yes. The only questions are where, when, and with whom. Discipline becomes practice becomes habit. It's a lot harder to break habits.

Often, during Q-and-A sessions with famous writers, people will ask about the writing process: When do you write? For how long? Where do you do it? There are as many answers as there are writers, and they're generally not helpful or interesting. The key is to figure out what works for you and then to keep at it long enough that you can answer the question without thinking, to make writing a habit, just like brushing your teeth.

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