

Getting Stuck, Getting Unstuck

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Back in the early spring, I was wearing my State Writer hat talking to students in Skagway when a seventh grader asked me if I ever got writer's block. I told him the truth: No, I don't.

The term itself is a bafflement to me. Is writer's block akin to kidney stones? Does it hurt? Truly, mostly, writer's block is an excuse, an excuse not to write. Maybe a writer comes to this by frittering away his writing time playing solitaire on his computer or watching junk television. Writers write.

And writers get stuck. Writers should get stuck. It's part of a good writer's life to get stuck regularly. What I mean is that if a writer is actively pursuing worthwhile questions, risky and challenging questions, getting stuck should be part of the process. We come to hard questions, and we need to stop, catch our breath and think hard about our next move on the page.

I'm mistrustful of writing that flows too easily, that goes onto the page with little resistance. Yes, there are days when the brain seems to find a groove and writing seems effortless. But at some point, at some critical juncture either in drafting or in revision, hard questions need to be asked, questions about the direction of the piece, about the choices that need to be made to carry the work to the next level. We get stuck.

But there are ways to get unstuck, too. Here are some that work for me:

Never let your desk or working file empty out. If you have a few pieces going at once, you can always shift to one that you can make progress on and wait for the next idea to come on the stuck piece.

Get up from your chair and go for a walk, ski, run or bike ride. When I do this, I often read through the whole of my manuscript as it stands before I set out. Maybe I think about it when I'm out there, maybe I just let it simmer in the back of my mind. Sometimes something shakes loose.

Read. Read almost anything: the paper, a magazine article, even a comic book. Read writers you have an affinity for and read writers you don't. Our medium is words and the words of others can sometimes make connections. The next idea may suddenly take you by surprise.

Wait. Sometimes a piece can be so stubborn in giving up its possibilities that the only thing to do is put it in a desk drawer or in a working drafts file on your computer and sit on it for weeks, months, maybe years. Yes, that does sometimes happen. But remember, you have other pieces that are on-going. (See my first suggestion). You aren't dead in the water.

Admit that some ideas that seemed good when you started have worn themselves out, have delivered too little of their promise and may have to be let go. They're no longer worth the effort.

Forcing. This is a term I read in an Alice Munro interview. After acknowledging that she sometimes did put stories aside for considerable lengths of time, she went on to say that sometimes she just had to try to force the next action. This is a tough job, plugging material into a

piece to see if it works, testing its value and either dumping it and starting over or feeling like you've found a workable direction. I think of it as a last resort, but it does happen, and I do force things when nothing else seems to work.

Sometimes what I write in an early draft can be called intuitive. Ideas just come to me from somewhere inside my head and they feel right at the time. Other times my more thinking brain kicks in, particularly when I feel a piece is beginning to find its shape or direction. I feel I need to keep my question alive until it's done as I can make it be. There's always a temptation to go down a quick exit ramp and get out from under the demands the piece has now ended up placing on me.

Recently, I pulled out a draft I got stuck on back in the winter. It took me a while to find its rhythm again, but then, after a pretty frustrating day, a forcing kind of day, the next idea came to me. Then I got stuck again. I picked up a magazine and began reading a review of a book on the history of Western philosophy. Somehow, the next idea I needed slipped into my head. I can't explain how this idea worked for me at that moment, or how any such oblique maneuver works, but it did and often it does. While searching for that next step in the short story, I started writing this little essay. Three tricks that worked in just a couple of manuscript pages.

Mostly, though, as useful as any of these tricks may be to me, the most important way not to stay stuck is to keep my writer's brain active every day. Ask yourself your writer's questions and be stubborn in looking for answers.

These ideas or versions of them can even work for a seventh grader at the Skagway school. As I left the school, I did wonder about him and his question about writer's block. Did he have a writing assignment of his own due the next day, and was he looking for a reliable out? If so, he wouldn't be the first writer to try this disingenuous dodge.