

One Year Off

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It's almost that time again. And I'm not talking about the beginning of the new school year, the scattering of the leaves by autumn winds or the closing of the pools on Labor Day weekend. No, it's almost time for the National Book Festival on the Mall, a wondrous event for writers and book lovers who come together to celebrate writing of every genre.

I remember the first time I went, or maybe it was the second. October 9, 2004, a cool fall day, sun shining above the crowds that had gathered on the Mall. I was wandering from tent to tent, listening to one author after another speak about and read from their works. Absolute bliss for an English teacher with a penchant for writing. The universe spoke to me that day, in the voice of author Christopher Paul Curtis. I was standing in the back of the Teen and Children Pavilion listening to him telling the story of how his first book came into being. He was working on the assembly line in Flint, Michigan, hanging doors on cars and writing on breaks to escape the noise. He said that what changed everything were three magic words his wife said to him: "One year off." He took her advice and wrote *The Watson's Go to Birmingham*—and never returned to the factory. As I left the tent, those three magic words, which I had scribbled on the paper bag I was carrying, echoed in my mind.

But I didn't listen to the universe right away. I kept on teaching so I could pay the mortgage, and I kept writing on the side. It wasn't the first time I ignored such a message. The first one came from John Guare's commencement address to my graduating class at Georgetown. It was an unusually hot and humid day in late May, and we were sweating underneath our black robes as the sun beat down on our heads and baked the asphalt beneath our feet. Sensing our misery, Guare promised to be brief and then began his speech: "Johnny, don't get a job." Our parents, comfortable until now in the shade of the trees on the grassy quad behind us, gasped audibly. Guare went on to explain that his father had said these words to him, hoping that his son would not make the same mistake he had. He told us, as his father had told him, to get a job doing whatever it was that we loved, rather than settle for one that would just pay the bills.

But practicality won out in the years after college. I followed in the footsteps of some of my favorite high school teachers and became an English teacher. I put my whole heart into it and taught with a passion for learning that my teachers had passed on to me. Teaching fueled my creativity and stoked my authenticity as I met the challenges of each new class I faced. Although I was slightly intimidated by my high school students at first, I learned to love them once I figured out how not to take them so personally, especially on the bad days. But as the call to write grew stronger, it became hard to ignore the fact that I had gotten the kind of job John Guare had warned against.

It is my belief that you can only resist the call of the universe for so long before it catches up with you. I

wouldn't take the leap on my own, so the universe sent me a parachute in the form of a husband who understood my deep desire to write. I finally got around to taking that "one year off" and spent it living the writing life. No longer obligated to live from bell to bell, I created my own schedule, dedicating at least three hours each morning to writing, or when I ran out of things to write, to reading. I tackled NaNoWriMo in November, writing over 50,000 words in 30 days. I made it through the dark days of winter when I let the critic's voice and other people's inquiries about what I was writing (translation: producing, publishing) make me question my purpose. I learned to appreciate hours of silence and solitary time that allowed me to write whatever was on my mind.

For those who dream of making the transition from being a teacher who writes to a writer who teaches, here are a few important discoveries I've made during the past year:

- 1) **Time, alone, is not the magic answer.** I had this idyllic vision of sitting down to write each day and the words flowing out unimpeded, of the complete and total bliss that would accompany the unlimited time I would have for writing. It didn't take long to discover that too much time can be as formidable an enemy as too little. Gone is the sense of urgency that guards against procrastination. Without some sort of dedicated writing time built into the schedule, and without a deadline here and there (even one of your own making), the days can slip away like water. Writing is a relationship. If you ignore it, it will ignore you. More time together doesn't guarantee a better relationship.
- 2) **Guilt is not a productive feeling.** And yet, sometimes I feel guilty. Guilty that while my husband is out being the wage earner whose salary will pay the mortgage, I am writing, doing what I love to do. Guilty that I can sit outside on the porch enjoying the morning sunshine and a cool breeze or at a bookstore cafe drinking a caramel latte while I do my writing for the day. Guilty that going to the bookstore and spending an hour or two just browsing is an integral part of my work. It doesn't help that there's a public perception that writing full-time is somehow less of a job than being a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant; or that spending mornings AND afternoons engaged in reading and writing is overindulgent, a life of leisure; or that getting paid somehow validates your contribution to society. My advice? Skip the guilt; it only leads to missed opportunities and empty calories.
- 3) **Misperceptions of the writing life abound.** Like teaching, writing is very much about the process. Unfortunately, the rest of the world focuses on the product: The grades and test scores, the feature articles and bestselling books—products they can see. People are not really sure what goes on behind

closed doors and have no way to measure the value of the process. As teachers, we all know the real learning takes place in the process, where things get messy and don't fit into neat little categories or line up in formation like toy soldiers. As writers, we know that the book doesn't show up in a neatly wrapped package tied with a bow of inspiration, but emerges from the messy first attempts and the daily practice of showing up at the page.

4) A writer without readers is like a teacher without students.

Maybe Emily Dickinson could be content living the life of a recluse and keeping her poems mostly to herself until her death, but not me. My yearning for an audience's response to my writing grew so strong that I ventured into the blogosphere, on tiptoe at first. Until I realized that if I wanted readers to come, I had to invite them. If we want our voices to be heard in the world, we have to put our words out there. I invite you to visit visvoice.blogspot.com if you want to read a few of mine.

5) Just like teaching, the writing life has its good days and its bad days. Writing can, and will, take on the drudgery of scrubbing toilets or folding socks if you let it. I had to remember to take Julia Cameron's advice and take myself out on writing dates to my favorite bookstores, cafes, and outdoor spots. Equally important, Anne Lamott's advice to

build a community of support—a writing group or three, a handful of friendly readers who will provide encouragement when the going gets rough, and at least two or three trusted readers who will give you an honest critique. I am lucky to have many such people in my life, some of whom have been there all along and others I've found in the course of this year's adventure. I am glad to have them nearby as I continue down this path.

Implicit in every ending is a new beginning, and even as my year off comes to an end, there are new things on the horizon. I'm taking on a freshman composition course at Towson for the fall, thanks in large part to my Maryland Writing Project connection and teacher-consultant status. I will share my passion for writing with my students, who may not have found their adult voices yet. And I will continue to write and to share my voice with the world.

If you are a teacher who longs to write but you don't have a knight in shining armor to support you financially, I strongly encourage you to do whatever it takes to go on sabbatical. Save up and take just one year to live the writing life. And when you return to your classroom the next fall, enriched by that experience, I can almost guarantee that you will inspire your students to awaken the writers within.