

# Are You Holding You Back?

By Sandy Boucher

Writing requires courage. The very act of picking up the pen or turning on the computer can raise fears that seem more appropriate to a quaking elementary schoolchild than to the competent adult you know yourself to be.

In my 30 years of writing and teaching, I've identified six major terrors that leap up to derail us from working on our most valued projects. Here's how to eliminate those fears and get on with your writing.

## **Fear of Nothing to Say**

As writers we share a core belief. Somewhere deep inside we know that our thoughts and feelings, when clothed in language, will be of interest to other human beings. They may even be inspiring, moving, enlightening, amusing and, at the least (or most), useful. It is this conviction that coaxes us to the desk or computer and sits us down to write.

But a fear may arise to stop us in midsentence. Most of us, from early childhood on, were trained to suppress our feelings, keep our mouths shut, and not only to not express our experiences but even to forget them. Is it any surprise, then, that when we sit down to write a story or essay that tells the truth about something, alien voices begin to whisper, "You have nothing to say. Your thoughts are worthless?"

It is an insidious and debilitating message, one that may cause us to abandon the writing that is important to us. How, then, can we get past this fear and reconnect to our original urgency—complete with the conviction that our words are valuable?

One way is to summon a representative of those alien voices and communicate directly to him or her. Here's how.

Sit in a comfortable chair with a notebook and pen beside you, or your computer keyboard on your lap. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, let the tension leave your body as you exhale. For a minute or so just sit quietly and pay attention to your breathing. When you feel relaxed, see before you a good friend or cherished relative. This man or woman loves you no matter what you do, and is endlessly interested in everything you have to say. Remember the last conversation you had with this person, how openly you shared your ideas and feelings, realizing their significance as you spoke, knowing they would be received with understanding. Now, in your imagination, place this friend across

from you there in your writing room; see his or her receptive, caring face and simply begin to tell your story. Open your eyes, pick up the pen and write *to that friend*.

Soon you'll find that the fear has dissolved. Warmed by your friend's interest, you'll find what you want to say and *know* that it is important. You can now simply go ahead and tell it.

## **Fear of the Blank Page**

Sometimes the voice that stops us is one that suggests, "You're not good enough. You'll never be able to do this." Perhaps this lack of self-confidence comes from within; perhaps it was reinforced by parents. Or this fear might spring from teachers who intimidated rather than encouraged us. Somehow, in their well-meaning defense of Grammar and Literature, they convinced us that "literature" is written only by geniuses—or certainly by no one as average as we.

This is different from the fear of nothing to say. We know we have something to say, but repress it. "I don't have the *talent* to write," we tell ourselves, "so I might as well not even try."

One way to short-circuit such crippling self-judgments is to first give them their day in court. Instead of fighting them off, take out a new notebook or open a new computer file, and label it "Why I Can't Write." Jot down every one of your doubts about your ability, your talent, your intelligence, your perseverance, your capacity to produce. Wallow in self-denigration. Write down all the worst opinions of your abilities you've ever had or heard. As you do so, recognize that these are only *ideas*. Like all ideas they have no concrete reality beyond our belief in them. Allow yourself to wonder a bit at these notations: "Gee, how did I start to believe *that* about myself?" or "Where did I pick up such a weird idea?" Think of this exercise as giving you a peek into shadowy corners of your mind that you might decide to explore later. (You might even find this material useful to flesh out a character in a story or incorporate into an article. Remember, for a writer, *everything* can be grist for the mill.)

Now close that notebook or file, open another one, and label it "Why I *Can* Write." Here detail your actual accomplishments in the world, the actions by which you proved your intelligence, writing capacity and talent. Go back as far as you can remember, to think about all the papers you completed to earn whatever academic degrees you have (if any). Remember the letters praised by relatives, the creativity you displayed in promoting those PTA events. Remember the times you believed your teachers' criticisms to be dead wrong. Remind yourself of the excellent ideas and outlines you've created for works-in-progress. And appreciate the stories, poems and articles you

*have* written. If you've been published, look at your name in print and the satisfying blocks of your words on the page. Maybe you've even won a prize or two for your writing. Note all this. And make this pact with yourself: When the fear of the blank page trips you up again, you will refer back to this list of accomplishments and hear the voice of your belief in yourself speak loud and clear.

## **Fear of Failure**

Perhaps the greatest fear that prevents us from writing is our fear of failure. But if you cannot bear to appear awkward, if you cannot bear to make mistakes, how will you learn? *All writers experience failure*; there are always pieces of writing that we aren't ready to accomplish, that are beyond our understanding, that we begin wrongly or bring to a wrong conclusion. Over time, we put our not-quite-realized works in context. If we persist, there are successes. And one beautifully written, fully realized piece can make up for several clunky, not-quite-successful efforts.

The first thing to remember about our early tries is not to globalize their significance. If I see that a paragraph is awkward, I have several choices of how to react. The hysterical, all-or-nothing approach is to say, "This paragraph stinks. I'm a failure. I quit." We all say this now and then; you might even develop a sense of humor about it.

A more useful reaction could be: "This paragraph doesn't work. How can I make it better? Should I stop everything and deal with it now, or should I make a few quick notes, go on to finish the piece and deal with it later?" This reaction emphasizes not the writer, but the writing; it is the workmanlike approach that allows you to continue the task at hand.

Doubts are universal. Even after years of writing, with fairly reliable success, I now and then experience moments of despair. Maybe it's body chemistry, the weather, a passing ghost, but suddenly I'll look at what I wrote yesterday and think, "This is not as good as it should be." I'll go on to chastise myself that maybe I'm in the wrong profession. Earlier in my life I periodically built a bonfire of my stories in the backyard and watched them go up in smoke, vowing to never write another. Such doubts and blanket self-judgments may crop up more often when we are first writing, but I've heard accounts of such insecurities from some of my most accomplished writer friends and read of them in the autobiographies of other professional writers.

It may give you comfort and support to realize that you aren't the only person who occasionally rushes to harsh judgment on yourself. It's a common human failing, a little devil that periodically rears its warty head. We don't need to give it much energy: Simply recognize it and send it on its way.

You can help this little devil pack by being patient with your first efforts. As a young writer I was accepted for a two-month stay at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Most of my co-colonists were in their forties or fifties, established artists with careers and awards and many years of production behind them. We pursued our crafts separately in little cottages in the woods, but met each evening for dinner in the main house.

My first week at MacDowell, I worked furiously, producing 50 pages of a novel. On Monday of the second week, I sat down to read what I had written and was appalled. Most of the material was thin, on the wrong track, stumbling or stiff. Only about ten pages of those 50 were usable as material to work with and go on from. I spent the afternoon wandering in the woods wondering why I had ever thought I was a writer.

That evening I sat at dinner with three painters, a writer and a composer, all older than I. Someone asked me how my day had been. Pushed by despair, I went past my usual reticence to tell them what I had discovered that morning. There followed a moment of silence before a painter from New York exclaimed, "But my dear, you're so fortunate! If one of out of five of my drawings turns out well, I count myself *lucky*! It's a great ratio, really!" I was stunned, and I glanced around the table to see the others nodding, looking at me kindly.

Whether she was telling the truth about her own work or not, her message was clear: *You must be willing to write a lot to get to the good stuff.* And you can only hope, over time, that your ratio will improve.

When we read a finished work, we don't see the author's failures, the piles of pages thrown away, the directions taken and changed, the dead ends reached, the new beginnings. I've found that sometimes the first two or three pages of anything I write turn out to be warm-up. When I read them later, I throw them away and start the piece on page 4. I've learned to not grow too attached to my words. There is nothing inherently precious about them, despite their connection to me. If they don't move the story forward, they are better thrown away or put aside. That's why it's good to go past those first few pages at any sitting, to give yourself time to do five or six, then, even twenty more so that you can use the momentum you built in writing the first two.

Sometimes we may harbor the belief that we can't sacrifice a paragraph because we have only so much material in us. We're afraid that no new ideas will come to take the place of the discarded one. First, you don't have to destroy that paragraph, sentence, page. If it isn't right for this piece, it may be a terrific kernel for a new story that you'll write later. Keep your "outtakes" in file folders or on a special disk, and mull over them when you're searching for new story or article ideas. They can provide a rich resource.

And learn to trust that your store of ideas for writing is inexhaustible. When ineffective material is cut from a piece, the door is open for more relevant and exciting ideas to come in. You may have to wait for them, you may have to go look for them, but they will come. When they do, you'll be glad you got rid of the paragraphs that didn't work.

Remember, nothing is wasted. Suppose you finish a piece, rewrite it several times, give it your best shot, yet after all this effort you realize the piece never caught fire, never came together as a satisfying story. And now you can't think of any way to make it better.

This is an opportunity. You can perhaps learn more from this piece that didn't work than you can from your successful efforts. Take some time to study it. Where did it go wrong? Was it in the planning, the beginning, the characterization, even the conception itself? What decisions of yours sent you down the wrong track? Ask yourself how you can use this information to avoid the pitfalls in your next piece.

And don't throw this one away. As you've done with those rejected paragraphs, put this piece in a file folder. Maybe two years from now you'll have a brilliant idea of how to rework this story and make it sing.

If you learn to acknowledge and use the things that don't work, you will grow both as a human being and as a writer, and you'll pave the way for success.

## **Fear of Criticism**

Some of us bear lasting wounds inflicted by an overly critical parent, another family member or an insensitive teacher in whose eyes we could do nothing right. Now when we sit down to write, we leap ahead to the piece's completion and imagine someone very much like our relative or teacher tearing it apart. The vision stops us before we're able to put a word on paper.

Obviously, that critic must go.

The ideal mental state for producing a first draft is the utterly selfish, wholehearted concentration that children bring to their play. Remember an hour in childhood when you sat on the floor or out in the yard with your clay or your blocks and gave yourself completely to the embodiment of a vision. You built a town, raised a mountain, put together a wagon train, and acted out your fantasies with what you had built. You didn't worry about what someone else might think of your creation; you simply gave yourself fully to it.

You can achieve that protected, self-confident state of mind as an adult by exiling all critics from your writing environment. Put up a sign over your desk: No Critics

Allowed. See yourself tying up your critics, one by one, taping their mouths shut, and carrying them out the door. I advise chuckling viciously as you do this.

Now you're alone. Go to it.

As a piece develops from the first draft into more finished drafts, we *do* need to call on our internal critical capacities to help us shape and polish the material. And we may want to show the story to friends and colleagues to solicit their suggestions on how to make it better.

To soften this exchange, try revising your image of “the critic.” Give up your picture of a sadistic martinet. Instead, imagine a cultivated, kind, literary, brilliant and generous mentor. Possibly a favorite older writer. Imagine that this “good critic” is your friend. When you show him or her your latest effort, *this* critic responds with honest praise, encouragement, and precise, insightful suggestions for how you might improve it in revision. Since you trust this good critic, you receive these suggestions with enthusiasm, eagerness to learn, and a renewed commitment to making your story the best it can be.

This is *not* an unrealistic vision. Cruel teachers and editors do exist, but most people offer criticism in a sincere effort to help writers achieve their ends. Critics intend no harm, and express their opinions as carefully and clearly as they can manage. A thoughtful critique of your manuscript is not an attack: It can be a gift to be grateful for.

It may also be a gift to be tossed. Sometime the question of a work's success is a matter of personal taste—one reviewer may love the piece and another be not at all impressed with it. All criticism is subjective. Your task is to take the criticism that makes sense and can help you, and throw out the rest.

When receiving someone's comments on your work, examine each suggestion to see what seems right and true. Step back a little from your feelings of pride and ownership of the piece to be as honest as you can: Is he right about the ending? Does it need work? Or is he just expressing his own preferences for a particular style? She says the opening is weak, but could it be that she is not understanding my point? Do I simply need to clarify that first sentence?

Sometimes when a reader suggests a change, we may need to look behind the *specific* suggestion to recognize the element in the piece that made the reader uncomfortable. We may then ask ourselves what about that element could cause discomfort, and may decide that a change is needed. But the rewriting we do will come out of *our* knowledge of the piece's internal logic and background, and may be quite different from the change our critic recommended. Stay flexible when reviewing the

comments on your work. Examine the recommendation not at face value, but as an indication that something isn't working. Then experiment with ways to make it right.

Responding well to criticism isn't easy. It takes practice, and sometimes courage. You may be left with uncertainties, particularly if you get conflicting opinions from different readers. But if you view the criticism as a potential tool for improving the work, you may learn to derive great benefit from it.

## **Fear of Finishing**

Some people have drawers full of excellent pieces of writing that only lack endings. "I can't seem to finish anything," these writers complain. But if a story or article, novel or play has no ending, the writer can always claim, "Well, I'm still working on it." It's a foolproof excuse for any faults a reader may find. Plus, an unfinished piece can't be sent out for publication, so the writer avoids the risk of rejection—or acceptance!

What is the fear of finishing? When we complete a piece, we are fully committed to it. We have done the best we could, and there it is—ready to go out into the world with our name on it. It may even be published. And we will have no control over how it will be received. Someone may not like it. Another may like it for the wrong reasons. Someone may think us weird or wrong or not a good writer. And we may have to look squarely at our strengths and limitations, for a completed piece is never perfect. While the story or article as a whole may succeed, *we* know the small failures embedded in it, the places where we just couldn't go far enough, or reach deep enough. Finishing brings us up against our own imperfections, with no excuses now.

But isn't that what life does anyway? We can't really know what a relationship, a job, a project will be like until we give ourselves to it, meet its demands, fail or succeed, as we carry it through to its completion. In the process we learn about ourselves. Some things we'll like, some we won't. But to finish each piece of writing you begin is to take yourself seriously and give your writing its due. The results will inform and strengthen you as a writer.

After all, your writing is much larger and more fascinating than any one piece of work. You are going to write a lot before you turn in your word processor. Instead of incessantly laboring over each piece to bring it to perfection, you may need to finish it and go on. The ideas begun there, the problems posed, may find further development in your next piece.

Sometimes we have to get certain material out of the way in order for other, perhaps more promising, material to come up. I perceive this almost physically, as if each of us is stacked full of stories, and the top one must be removed (written, completed,

realized) before the next one can have access to our brain and capacities. A given piece may not be perfect. But it may be a stepping-stone to the story you'll write tomorrow, in which the elements worked out in that first piece come to life and dance. Trust your developing capacities. Finish what you start, then go on to the next piece.

## **Fear of Success**

You say to yourself, "What if I did write something and it was good, and was published, and people read it and liked it, and thought of me as a writer! Then I'd be exposed, out in the light where everyone could see me. And I would have to *keep* writing good works."

It's true that success brings exposure. Fear of that nakedness is natural. Writing is a solitary task. We spend hours, in lonely communion, struggling with material that so moves us that we're willing to give it our best. We gestate the cherished baby in the privacy of the womb. The prospect of its emergence into the world, to be handled by strangers, can awaken terror in us.

Remind yourself to be brave. Speakers, athletes, actors—anyone who performs publicly—know that there is a moment just before you begin when fear grips your throat. It's physical. Most writers I know experience fear before a book is published. But this very natural anxiety must simply be borne.

There are ways to dull its edge, though. Spend some time remembering situations in which you took a risk and acted courageously. Pick situations that turned out well. That phone call for an important date. That first day on the job. A good presentation at work. An illness or financial crisis you faced resolutely and with good cheer. Remember the fear *and* how you overcame it. Acknowledge what a courageous person you really are. Now tell yourself that you can withstand the pressures of success. It will be like every other challenge in your life—ultimately manageable, and maybe even good for you.

## **Entering the Magic**

When I begin a piece, often I don't know whether I can accomplish it or what will emerge in the writing. And this, while scary, is the *adventure* of writing. It isn't just the risk of finding out whether you can shape something coherently. It's the adventure of discovering what is in the material itself that may interest or enlighten or enrich you.

The challenge always reminds me of a childhood summer when I decided to dig a pond behind the garage of my family's house. I dug about a foot deep into the moist dark earth, until the pond was some three feet long and two feet across. I left an island in the

middle. All this I did with utter concentration and belief. When the pond was finished, and I was tired and aching, I brought the hose and filled it with water. Then I sat with my feet in the water, gazing at the muddy island and enjoying my handiwork.

But something magical lay in wait for me. The next morning, when I came out to look at the pond, there sat on the island a beautiful green frog!

Writing at its best can be like this. After long effort, there will come the charmed moments or hours in which the writing seems to flow through you like a gift from beyond, bringing surprises, unexpected depths and connections, humor, pathos, a sense of having touched and expressed your own human truth.

When you begin to work at and dissolve those fears that have disrupted your work, you can enter into the magic of real accomplishment. When fears rise up, imagine how good it's going to feel to finish your piece, to send it out, and to believe there will be someone who likes it; how rewarding it will be to begin the next piece, to map out that book and to write Chapter One. Let this vision inspire you to confront your fears, using the techniques outlined above. And trust that one day—not too far from now—the fears will be only memories.

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