

Soul Talk: Moving Through Writer's Block

By Melanie S. Hatter



Writer's block hit me, not so much like a toddler's building block, but more like a brick smashing my cranium and turning my brain to mush. Inspiration had walked out on me, and like a jilted lover, I fell, depressed by the emptiness inside my head.

Some writers argue that writer's block doesn't exist. Those of us who have gotten stuck swear it's as real as the pen and paper upon which we cannot write.

I had walked out on my husband of almost eight years and beneath our courteous separation and eventual divorce lay a profound guilt for having taken my son away from his father. I had destroyed our family unit. My inner voice accused me of being a failure, of giving up, of being selfish—she had a lot to say about my failings. I listened, and agreed. Meanwhile, my writing voice was pummeled into silence by my reprimands. So lost in my emotional mushroom, I was oblivious as to why my creativity had retreated.

I moved out of our four-bedroom, three-level home in rural Virginia with a dog and a cat and neighbors who every fall left packages of vegetables on our porch from their garden. I moved to a one-bedroom apartment in a Washington, D.C. suburb near the

Metro's yellow line, no pets allowed and neighbors who didn't speak. My five-year-old son slept in the den because I couldn't afford a two-bedroom apartment. I was restarting my career as a journalist, which I'd put on hold in exchange for motherhood and fiction writing. Freelancing and a part-time reporting job only a few blocks from the White House interviewing lawyers and judges paid the bills. It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

My mind was crammed. Rather than use the stimulation to create story upon story, I continued to scold myself for my mistakes and procrastinated on my fiction-writing projects because tomorrow always seemed to hold more time than today. Each day was filled with work-related writing assignments, collecting my son from kindergarten, playing with him, preparing dinner, doing laundry, surfing the Web, checking e-mail and calling my friends to stave off the loneliness. I was enormously successful at filling time instead of achieving what I kept scolding myself for not doing.

As my son ended second grade, I came across a brochure in the library for a two-day writing conference in Rockville, Md., the 5th Annual F. Scott Fitzgerald Literary Conference. I'd never

heard of author Maxine Clair, but I signed up to participate in her workshop. The key was that the event gave me a deadline to submit a story for critique by Ms. Clair, an associate professor of English at George Washington University. I rummaged through my files of numerous unfinished stories until I found one that was close to finished and would benefit from a professional assessment.

During the workshop, Ms. Clair was passionate and inspiring. She talked about character development and pushed the participants to reach further into their imaginations to discover idiosyncrasies of the people in their stories. Suddenly, I was stretching my brain, thinking about my story and realizing there was much more in it than I had originally conceived. At the end of the workshop, I talked with Ms. Clair and she told me about her experience as a single mother studying for her MFA on her bed, surrounded by her children, writing. I left the room feeling excited again, eager to keep my thoughts flowing, and convinced I could attain my fiction-writing dreams.

I continued the momentum and signed up for other conferences and

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writing workshops that I could afford. I attended regional writing events, many that were free, joined the Black Writers Alliance, an online writing community, and began attending a monthly writing group held at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in Rockville. Last year, I joined the African-American Writers Guild workshop in Washington, D.C.

All of these activities have kept me writing. That's not to say I don't have my lapses of procrastination (what writer doesn't), but being part of a greater writing community has opened the door for growth and encouragement to keep

working.

Instead of continually stuffing my mind with negative thoughts, I finally dislodged the self-created block by actively reaching out to the writing resources around me.

Melanie Hatter received a BA in Mass Media Arts-Journalism from Hampton University and has written for several newspapers in Virginia, and the DC Bar's newspaper and magazine. She has been published in Emerge magazine, Moxie magazine and was the 2000 winner of the RomanticTales.com short story contest. She has completed a novel and is working on a second.

Feeling stuck?

Check out the resources in your neighborhood. Libraries, bookstores or coffee shops may host writing groups or have notices of workshops and conferences. Perform an Internet search and you'll find a wealth of information including online writing magazines.