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Daily Writing, Daily Bread

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All eyes were upon us as my colleague Jim Stubenrauch and I stood before our first writing class for undergraduate nursing students. We were checking in with them about a month or so into the course to find out how they were faring with one of the requirements: keeping a daily journal. They hesitantly admitted that they rather enjoyed writing in a journal, but that word daily was presenting a big problem. Why every day? Why not every other day? "I barely have time to brush my teeth," one weary Emergency Department nurse said.

As a poet, an editor, and a journalist, I can understand such lack of enthusiasm. As Donna Nickitas asserts, writing is hard. And there's another cold fact right alongside that one: writing doesn't get any easier by avoiding it. Jim and I recommend daily writing to nursing students because it pushes them to begin to think differently about writing, to see it as a process whereby they better understand themselves and their work as nurses, and it gives them practice. It's like any other skill you want to acquire, we tell them. You aren't adept at inserting an IV into an actual person until you've rehearsed a few dozen times on oranges, right?

The journal is to the writer as the orange is to the nurse, except the writer is always rehearsing. My onetime journalism teacher Donald Murray conceived of writing as a three-stage process: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Prewriting, he said, consists of everything that happens before the writer produces a first draft; it takes about 85% of the writer's time and might include "research and daydreaming, note-making and outlining, title-writing and lead-writing" (Murray, 2009, p. 3)—the stuff of the writer's journal.

As a longtime nursing editor and now a nursing educator, I have seen plenty of evidence (rampant plagiarism, for instance) that tells me that most nurses have never been taught writing as a process, one that takes time and thought, assessment, collaboration, and revision, just as the nursing process does. Jim and I have co-taught this course to undergraduate and graduate nursing students for two years now, and every semester we watch as the light goes on for students. As they take ownership of their own ideas and experiences by presenting them in their own, original words, they begin to realize that their writing might also matter to others.

That might sound vague, too "creative," or difficult to assess. But an essential part of writing well is self-evaluation, and so we have incorporated another of Don Murray's basics of teaching writing: the student conference. In these required student-led meetings with an instructor, students describe what is working well in their drafts and where they need to go in revision. It might take them almost all semester, but many students learn to become their own editors. It happens, I believe, because we encourage the writer before criticizing the writing.

That bears repeating. *We encourage the writer before criticizing the writing.* As an editor my job is to work with an author to get an article in shape for publication, which can involve significant revision, even rewriting, of the author's work. As a teacher, though, my job is, as Nickitas notes, to create an

environment wherein students might discover thoughts, emotions, and meanings previously unrevealed to them. Daily journaling is essential to such discovery.

I have, in my sixth decade, made room for daily writing. I am not always eager to get to it each morning, often having to resist the call of email or an unclean fridge. Still, most days I do it. I scribble in my journal, craft poems, and draft essays, blog posts, and news articles. Some days all it takes to make me less irritable, more relaxed, more accepting of myself and others is producing a single line that takes me by surprise. Friends have said I look younger since I began this devotion.

Devotion. That's a word you don't hear much in academia. And I wouldn't use it in the first class with students. But it's a word I believe in, count on. If we don't bother to nurture nurses' devotion to their own minds and experiences through writing, how can we expect them to be devoted to the lives of others? Writing every day isn't a burden. It's a kind of power.

References

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