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Do You Know...

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How To Go With The Ebb So Writing Projects Flow: Forbid Yourself to Write

Ebb and flow, that wheezy inhale and exhale of ocean tides, is the rags to riches rhythm of writing. Being in the flow is what Csikszentmihalyi (2008) calls an optimal experience "...in which awareness of anything beyond the task, like time and self, falls away that is marked by spontaneous joy and even ecstasy." Flows make writing an addictive pleasure. It's the ebbs, those dreaded down times when progress peters out and joy gives way to despair, that make writing hell. Right? Only if you make it so.

Savvy writers go with ebbs and flows alike. In fact, they not only welcome ebbs, they precipitate them. This column, the second in a series on moving writing projects past stuck, tells the tale of a once-reluctant nurse author who's learning to ride the ebb to renew her flow. And what this can mean for you.

Pam's Story

Pam, an experienced APRN with a master's degree, opted for the clinical track when she took a full-time faculty position. Having never written for publication, she had no intention of starting now. All that changed when her Dean announced that clinical track faculty were expected to publish one paper a year. As much as she loved teaching, this new requirement caused Pam to consider resigning. Then providence intervened. A journal editor visited Pam's poster at a national conference and asked her to submit a manuscript. Imagining the smile on the Dean's face when he saw her name in print, Pam agreed and negotiated a 6 month deadline.

One month became two months. Every so often, in the midst of a busy day, Pam would see her poster sitting in the corner of her office like a guilty reminder. To be fair, Pam tried more than once to pound out a draft. Ideas that stood strong in bulleted text on her poster ~ made all the more vibrant by photographs and illustrations ~ laid lifeless on her computer page. After 3 months of ebbing, Pam contacted me for help. As I consult with her faculty group on presenting and publishing, we agreed to embark on a 12 week tutorial called a Scholarly Intensive. To revive Pam's flow on translating her poster into a manuscript, we started with a best practice called setting a still point.

How Intentional Ebbs Unleash Pam's Writing Flow

If a still point is a stop in the action for dancers, it's the pause that refreshes nurse authors (Heinrich, 2008). Pam learned that a still point is any activity ~ taking 3 deep breaths, lighting a candle, playing music, changing from work clothes into sweats, walking the dog around the block ~ that readies the mind for reflection. She memorized the 3 rules for setting still points: keep it simple,

make it quick, do it every time. Now before settling down to write, Pam lights a candle. This ebb is her signal to let go of daily concerns so she can focus her full attention on a creative task.

At the end of each of our sessions, Pam would agree to a homework assignment. This particular week, Pam was obsessed with finding the perfect story for her manuscript. When she mentioned flying home for a family reunion, I asked if she'd consider making her get away an extended still point. This meant no computer. After some hesitation, Pam agreed to pack a pad and pen for jotting down inspirations. The next time we spoke, she couldn't wait to tell me how things had gone. It seems that Pam's forsaking her computer and forgetting about her manuscript left her free to enjoy herself. When the perfect story found her, Pam knew she was back in the flow.

Sensing a teachable moment, I suggested that Pam make extended ebbs a habit and told her about my sabbaths. When I was new to owning my own business, I attended a meeting where women entrepreneurs were sharing favorite workweek refreshers ~ exercise class, coffee with a colleague-friend, or quiet time with a favorite book. Exhausted from working 24/7, I decided to give my computer a Sunday off. Come Monday morning, I had a pile of yellow stick-ems with scribbles of ideas to "upload." This experiment was such a success, I decided to go off-grid every Sunday. Regardless of whether I spend sabbaths walking, cooking, or hanging out with friends and family, these weekly ebbs never fail to refresh my creative flow.

Take Away Tips

It's a paradox! Just as time off makes people more productive (Kreider, 2012); forbidding yourself to write can unleash a flood of new insights. Here's 3 Es for making the most of the ebbs in your writing life:

1. **Expect ebbs to happen.** There are no flows without ebbs. So instead of dreading ebbs, why not anticipate them? Whenever you construct a time line, for instance, give yourself overly generous deadlines that allow for ebbs.

2. **Embrace ebbs.** Ebbs are as much a part of writing as flows. So instead of pushing yourself to write, why not savor the serendipities that come with ebbs? From the book you need to read that leaps from the shelf and into your hands to the peer editor you've been yearning to meet who walks into your life.

3. **Enter ebbs into your writing life.** When creativity pumps go dry (Cameron, 1991), ebbs keep them primed. So instead of berating yourself when your flow dries to a dribble, why not take yourself on an artist's date? Whether your pleasure is a Mac Store or a favorite café, planned ebbs can revive your flow.

Conclusion

How is Pam doing? She's still loving teaching, her Dean's thrilled that she's a published author, and she's getting addicted to seeing her name in print. Now an ebb-a-day, short or long, keeps Pam's writing flowing. Depending on her schedule, Pam's still point can be a 5 minute stroll or a 2 hour bliss trip to the yarn store. Instead of letting ebbs steal your joy and shrivel your progress, take Pam's advice. Go with the ebb so your writing projects flow.

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Author

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