

Writers' Block: Are We Having Fun Yet?

By Holly Lisle

In which we discuss that moment in your life when you're sitting at the kitchen table at three-twenty-seven in the morning with a cup of coffee that once might have tasted like something other than toxic waste but that now would make drinking from Love Canal back in the 60's preferable; when you've bitten the head off of every human being who has dared to breathe loudly in your presence for the past week; when the sound of fingers on keys (or even the scritch of a pen on paper) makes you want to weep; when any inspiration you ever had is now dead and mummified and collecting dust in the corner; when you don't remember the last time you strung three words together that were recognizably English; and you haven't written.

You haven't written.

Those words start to loom after a while, don't they? "I haven't written." What they mean is "I'm worthless, I'm talentless, I have nothing to say and even if I did no one would want to listen, I don't know why I think I can do this, and I don't think I want to and I *just can't stop*. And you don't have to be writing full-time –and counting on making your deadline in order to make the rent–for those three words from Hell to pound through your brain with the awful portent of Poe's narrator's telltale heart.

"I haven't written."

Well, maybe I know why you haven't. When is the last time you had fun while you were writing? When is the last time you made yourself laugh–when did your characters last do something that was both outrageous and perfectly right, when did your lead

rip out a zinger of a come-back that you would have given your left arm for when *you* had that argument last month? When did you last say, "To hell with literary immortality" and just allow the words to hit the paper without regard for their beauty or their perfection or their odds of winning you a Pulitzer or at least the local newspaper contest? When did you last write just because you loved to write?

When I was a kid, I loved to run. And I was fast. My best friend Laura Leonhard and I invented a game in first grade that we gave the original name of "Steal Hat". On the playground, we would swipe Mark McMath's brown corduroy hat with the earflaps and then we'd run like hell with it. I was usually the instigator of the game, because I was the one with the crush on Mark. I'd run until I got tired or until the streaming trail of kids pounding after me in gleeful pursuit managed to corner me, and then I'd throw the hat to Laura. Laura would run until the masses headed her off, and then she'd throw the hat back to me. We were the two fastest runners in the first grade, and nobody ever caught us. We didn't give the hat back until the recess bell rang and we had to go in, or until a teacher realized that we (both blonde, hazel-eyed, and entirely too angelic-looking) were the culprits instigating the screaming mobs of children that streamed like herds of really loud buffalo from one end of the playground to the other.

Christ. It was like flying. Feet pounding, legs and arms pumping, lungs going like bellows, and always in the lead. Always free, ahead of the pack, with the clear ground in front of me and triumph in my heart—and that damned brown hat clutched in my fist, symbol of my wild first-grade passion and Mark's unending frustration. I was weightless, soaring; I was the antelope and the gazelle and I was immortal.

Running felt like that to me until the day I showed up for track practice my freshman year of high school. God, I was excited. I was finally, finally old enough that I could be in

track. And then I found out about starting blocks, and form, and drills. I found out that I was doing everything wrong. Some girl two grades ahead of me absolutely blew my doors off in tryouts. The immortal in me died that day. I could still outrun every guy I knew. I was still damned fast. But there on the cinder track, eating the dust of a runner who knew how to use blocks and who was a competitor, I could no longer fly. My wings clipped, my feet turned to lead, I went home almost in tears because I hadn't known I'd been doing everything wrong. All my life, I'd been doing everything wrong. I started doing the drills. I practiced the starts from home-made blocks. I had my little brother time me, and run with me. And then, with the magic dead inside of me and the joy gone, I dropped out of track and I stopped running.

Every once in a while, when I was running to catch the mailman, or running across a parking lot after a letter caught in a high wind, a little twinge of that old hunger would well up inside of me. I would be, for just an instant, on the verge of lifting off. Half a second from airborne, three steps from once again joining the immortals. And then the voices of my past and the pain of my hard-earned lessons would bring me back to earth. Knees up! Elbows in! Eyes forward and keep your head up! Lift those feet! I'm amazed you can walk across a street, much less run! Do you call that *running*? And the magic would die back.

You started writing because you loved to write. You loved to tell stories. You wanted to let your mind run. And somewhere along the way, unless I miss my guess, some coach told you that you were doing it all wrong. Wrong grammar. Wrong style. Wrong subject matter. Somebody who had been doing it for a while blew your doors off, and you looked at him, and you listened to that coach, and you started giving up the part of you that loved to run because that part of you didn't run right. You were trying to be some other writer, someone who was already out there doing what you wanted to be doing,

because all of a sudden you realized that you weren't good enough. You got so caught up in doing it right that you lost sight of why the hell you were doing it in the first place.

Remember why you were doing it in the first place? Because while you were writing, you could fly. You could do magic. You were one of the immortals—and, dammit, isn't being one of the immortals heady stuff? Remember? You have written because of love, and you know what that blood-pulsing, heart-pounding, adrenalin-high, I-can-do-anything rush is all about. You *know*.

Yes, if you're going to write professionally, you do have to spell the words right. Yes, you do have to be able to make your sentences make sense. And you'll have to learn to type (or pay someone an awful lot of money to do it for you) if you want to be a professional. But writing cannot be about going pro. It has to be about *writing*—first, last and always. Being a pro is a benefit you get from doing what you love every day—if you hated to write, why would you want to do something so hard?

Shake off the coach and the competitors. Forget about the race for a while—sooner or later if you aren't writing for love, you're not going to write at all. Kiss off the compulsion to be Hemingway—Hemingway is dead, and so, for that matter, are Shakespeare and Faulkner and Capote. They've run their races, they're out of the game, and the game has changed. You can't compete with them. You can't, for that matter, compete with me. I am the only person in the world who can write my books. I'm the only writer who can compete with me, and you are the only one who can compete with you, and as long as you keep that truth in mind, you will be able to find your way back to the place where you can fly. You will find the part of you that has something to say. You will find the story that is yours to tell, and to hell with the person who says you aren't telling it right. It's your story, isn't it? If you don't tell it your way, it simply won't get told. Cut loose. Have fun. Run, and find the immortal. It's still there inside of you.

Have you ever lost your wings? Did you ever get them back?

NOTE: If you've found this article helpful, and if you are currently suffering from writer's block, I built a small class to help people overcome it – frequently in just an hour. If you'd like to take a look, it's [How to Beat Writer's Block](#).

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