
Bird *by* Bird

*Some Instructions
on Writing and Life*

A n n e L a m o t t



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W r i t e r ' s B l o c k

There are few experiences as depressing as that anxious barren state known as writer's block, where you sit staring at your blank page like a cadaver, feeling your mind congeal, feeling your talent run down your leg and into your sock. Or you look at the notes you've scribbled recently on yellow legal pads or index cards, and they look like something Richard Speck jotted down the other night. And at the same time, as it turns out, you happen to know that your closest writing friend is on a roll, has been turning out stories and screenplays and children's books and even most of a novel like he or she is some crazy pot-holder factory, pot holders pouring out the windows because there is simply not enough room inside for such glorious productivity.

Writer's block is going to happen to you. You will read what little you've written lately and see with absolute clarity

that it is total dog shit. A blissfully productive manic stage may come to a screeching halt, and all of a sudden you realize you're Wile E. Coyote and you've run off the cliff and are a second away from having to look down. Or else you haven't been able to write anything at all for a while. The fear that you'll never write again is going to hit you when you feel not only lost and unable to find a few little bread crumbs that would identify the path you were on but also when you're at your lowest ebb of energy and faith. You may feel a little as if writing a novel is like trying to level Mount McKinley with a dentist's drill. Things feel hopeless, or at least bleak, and you are not imaginative or organized enough to bash your way through to a better view, let alone some interesting conclusion. You know where every idea, quote, and image came from; none of them is fresh. You're so familiar with what you're saying that your words all sound utterly commonplace. Writers are like vacuum cleaners, sucking up all that we can see and hear and read and think and feel and articulate, and everything that everyone else within earshot can hear and see and think and feel. We're mimics, we're parrots—we're writers. But knowing the source of all our stuff deprives it of its magic, because then the material feels mundane, clichéd; you didn't have to discover it because it was already there for all to see. You may start to feel that you are trying to pass off a TV dinner as home cooking.

We have all been there, and it feels like the end of the world. It's like a little chickadee being hit by an H-bomb. Here's

the thing, though. I no longer think of it as block. I think that is looking at the problem from the wrong angle. If your wife locks you out of the house, you don't have a problem with your door.

The word *block* suggests that you are constipated or stuck, when the truth is that you're empty. As I said in the last chapter, this emptiness can destroy some writers, as do the shame and frustration that go with it. You feel that the writing gods gave you just so many good days, maybe even enough of them to write one good book and then part of another. But now you are having some days or weeks of emptiness, as if suddenly the writing gods are saying, "Enough! Don't bother me! I have given to you until it hurts! Please. I've got problems of my own."

The problem is acceptance, which is something we're taught not to do. We're taught to improve uncomfortable situations, to change things, alleviate unpleasant feelings. But if you accept the reality that you have been given—that you are not in a productive creative period—you free yourself to begin filling up again. I encourage my students at times like these to get one page of anything written, three hundred words of memories or dreams or stream of consciousness on how much they hate writing—just for the hell of it, just to keep their fingers from becoming too arthritic, just because they have made a commitment to try to write three hundred words every day. Then, on bad days and weeks, let things go at that.

* * *

I remind myself nearly every day of something that a doctor told me six months before my friend Pammy died. This was a doctor who always gave me straight answers. When I called on this one particular night, I was hoping she could put a positive slant on some distressing developments. She couldn't, but she said something that changed my life. "Watch her carefully right now," she said, "because she's teaching you how to live."

I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I am dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in the way that life is for children. They spend big round hours. So instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?" Then I can decide to read Wallace Stevens for the rest of the morning or go to the beach or just really participate in ordinary life. Any of these will begin the process of filling me back up with observations, flavors, ideas, visions, memories. I might want to write on my last day on earth, but I'd also be aware of other options that would feel at least as pressing. I would want to keep whatever I did simple, I think. And I would want to be present.

* * *

In the beginning, when you're first starting out, there are a million reasons not to write, to give up. That is why it is of extreme importance to make a commitment to finishing sections and stories, to driving through to the finish. The discouraging voices will hound you—"This is all piffle," they will say, and they may be right. What you are doing may just be practice. But this is how you are going to get better, and there is no point in practicing if you don't finish.

I went through a real crisis of faith about two-thirds of the way through my last novel. The thing is that I had gotten twenty-seven bad reviews in a row on my previous novel, and I was feeling just the merest bit unsure about my skills and the joys of publication. But during that crisis of faith, I made a commitment to the characters in the new novel, instead of to the book itself. So I spent a little time at my desk every day, just writing down memories of my family, my youth. I went for walks and to lots of matinees, and I read. I spent as much time as I could outdoors while I waited for my unconscious to open a door and beckon.

It finally did. I did not have some beautiful Hallmark moment when I threw back my shoulders with a big smile, dusted off my old hands, and got back to work. Rather, it was like catching amoebic dysentery. I was just sitting there minding my business, and then the next minute I rushed to my desk with an urgency I had not believed possible.

It helps to resign as the controller of your fate. All that energy we expend to keep things running right is not what's keeping things running right. We're bugs struggling in the

river, brightly visible to the trout below. With that fact in mind, people like me make up all these rules to give us the illusion that we are in charge. I need to say to myself, they're not needed, hon. Just take in the buggy pleasures. Be kind to the others, grab the fleck of riverweed, notice how beautifully your bug legs scull.

All the good stories are out there waiting to be told in a fresh, wild way. Mark Twain said that Adam was the only man who, when he said a good thing, knew that nobody had said it before. Life is like a recycling center, where all the concerns and dramas of humankind get recycled back and forth across the universe. But what you have to offer is your own sensibility, maybe your own sense of humor or insider pathos or meaning. All of us can sing the same song, and there will still be four billion different renditions. Some people will sing it spontaneously, with a lot of soulful riffs, while others are going to practice until they could sing it at the Met. Either way, everything we need in order to tell our stories in a reasonable and exciting way already exists in each of us. Everything you need is in your head and memories, in all that your senses provide, in all that you've seen and thought and absorbed. There in your unconscious, where the real creation goes on, is the little kid or the Dr. Seuss creature in the cellar, arranging and stitching things together. When this being is ready to hand things up to you, to give you a paragraph or a sudden move one character makes that will change the whole course of your novel, you will be entrusted with it. So, in the meantime,

while the tailor is working, you might as well go get some fresh air. Do your three hundred words, and then go for a walk. Otherwise you'll want to sit there and try to contribute, and this will only get in the way. Your unconscious can't work when you are breathing down its neck. You'll sit there going, "Are you done in there yet, are you done in there yet?" But it is trying to tell you nicely, "Shut up and go away."