

What keeps you going? Muses, splinters, and balancing on the edge

What do you do when your muse deserts you? What keeps you going when today's tight market seems to be saying you should give it up?

The midlist is growing, we're told. The task of getting the right manuscript on the right desk at the right time and selling a book has never seemed more Herculean. The average writer watches seven to ten years go by before she publishes her first manuscript. With odds like that, is it any real shock that from time to time the excitement that once inspired you to keep going just up and vanishes? We've all been there.

And let's face it, nothing feels worse than to find yourself stuck in the quagmire you affectionately call your *%#&! work-in-progress, meanwhile everyone around you is effortlessly producing at Mach 3. You used to be producing, too. But now, plucking a fresh description or an unforgettable character out of what was once your boundless creativity is about as effortless as pulling a splinter from your hysterical six-year-old's fingernail. There's lots of screaming and tears involved, lots of wasted time trying to pin the little bugger down, only to have him scoot away just as you're starting to make real progress. Finally at the end of your rope, you give up wrestling and wonder if you'll ever be able to get the darn thing out.

So how do you recapture your muse?

Adjust your writing environment, a friend suggests. Change the lighting. Natural lighting is more organic. Use music or candles to set the mood. Tape inspirational affirmations prominently about your writing space. That's the ticket. Watch an old movie, read a book by your favorite author, paint your child's bedroom or weed the flower garden. Wash the dog, the car, the windows, the grass. Anything but sitting in front of your computer and facing the head-banging-against-the-desk nothingness that awaits you. You could force yourself to BICHOK (keeping your Butt In the Chair, your Hands On the Keyboard) until your eyes resemble a metro-Atlanta roadmap. But chances are, whatever you salvage from your efforts won't be good enough for your cat to read, let alone your critique group.

"Just where the heck did my muse go?" you ask the blank page before you.

But what if that's the wrong question? Perhaps the question you should be asking yourself is, "Why the heck did you let your muse slip away in the first place?" Did it really just up and vanish, or did it wilt away slowly from neglect and lack of nourishment? In the midst of the hectic, non-stop compromise you call your life, did you put all your creative energy into the actual act of writing, or did you spend some of that treasure on the things that inspire your gift of imagination?

Let's face it. As writers, our lives are a study in conflict. Many of us have families or day jobs or both. Writing will never be our only priority. So we dutifully steal time away for our writing, often at the expense of other activities that once brought us joy. What choice do we have?

But what if the key to keeping your muse from sprinting for the hills and staying there is something as basic as balance? You have to balance your expectations of your writing schedule with an understanding of what you need to be a happy, energized human being. You're not a writing machine. You need exercise, friendship, and basic interaction with a world outside your kids, your job, your significant other, and the exploits of your latest hero and heroine, Bert and Bubbles.

Single-minded devotion to writing, admirable though it may be, can strangle the life out of your muse. You can't pour all your creativity into your work without stopping to refuel. You can't crawl off into a cave to write day after day and not eventually burn out. But isn't that what you often expect yourself to do? Write, write, write. There's never enough time for writing, and every spare minute must go to your work. In order to sell or make your deadline, writing has to be the number one focus of your free time, right?

Absolutely not. Without balance, you'll one day find yourself staring at a blank screen with no clue how the heck you're going to keep going. It's a precarious balance, I'll grant you. There's still your family and your

day job to keep up with. You need to meet deadlines. You have to keep producing. But it's essential that you make time for other things, too. Lunch with friends, exercise, volunteering at a favorite charity, or even just goofing off for an afternoon. Taking a daily walk, painting, or teaching a child and watching his self-confidence blossom. Find what feeds your writer's soul and do it!

And I'm talking about scheduling these activities into your life every week--that's right, every week. Make them as much a priority as writing. Then when you return to your work-in-progress, your mind will be full of the people, places, and things that travel back with you. These are the seeds of your next great inspiration. These are the things that keep you going. In no time, you will find yourself turning out more quality work, quicker, than ever before.

The reality of what we face in our writing careers has never been clearer. We've chosen a tough, unforgiving, often disappointing business as our passion. Protect your muse. Nourish it. Keep your "other" life in balance with your craft, and the next disappointment that will inevitably come your way won't stop you in your tracks. Make a life outside of your writing, and your muse will still be waiting for you when another long day comes to a close and you need to keep going.