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## Wishing Not to Write

By Noelle Sterne

At my usual Friday table in the mall Starbucks, writing materials ready and tall cardboard ambrosia cooling at my elbow, I looked around. In the atrium café, people sat, sipped, stared at passersby, looked back at me. A grandmother corralled her kidlets, two stylish females exchanged gossip, a young couple propped bulging shopping bags against their knees and whispered over their whipped toppings. A man alone, munching on mixed nuts, read a foreign [newspaper](#), and a very senior woman rummaged in her handbag.

### Sighing and Wishing

I sighed, glanced down at my notes, up again, and around the atrium. Pulled out my purse notebook and added a few items rattling in my head to the perennial errand list. Put the notebook away and swept the area again. The foreign man had left his newspaper on the nearby table, but I resisted reaching for it. Almost got up to go drool over the vampy shoes in the shop window behind me but stopped myself. I sighed again and eyed my clipboard with something close to resentment. And let myself be drawn back to the customers and mall shoppers.

I just didn't want to write.

What if the Phoenicians hadn't invented the alphabet? What if the Sumerians hadn't whittled their cuneiform writing sticks, parents of our Bics and Parkers? What if Gutenberg had kept his wine press pressing grapes rather than spewing printed pages? What if my parents hadn't subscribed to *The Saturday Review* and *The [New Yorker](#)*?

Then, ah then, I wouldn't have to write. Just think. I could be free to "enjoy" life, the American unworking dream: visit the mall daily, eat out incessantly, read magazines and [romance novels](#), watch every prime-time TV show every night of the week. I could take long walks, snooze in the sun, chuckle at children playing in the park, even stop and talk to their mothers. I could take in the latest shows, indulge in long, giggly dinners with friends, or sign up for a course in Greek culture. I could go everywhere without a notebook.

And more. I wouldn't have to take incessant notes that interrupted every activity, or wake at 3:00 a.m. with brain dictating brilliant dialogue that I know would vanish at first light if I didn't get it down. During social occasions, I wouldn't have to excuse myself frequently to run to the bathroom, others staring at me like my bladder had quit, to surreptitiously capture the worst cliché I'd heard in two years. Watching movies or TV, I wouldn't have to reflexively trumpet every plot flaw and, to my partner's perpetual annoyance, announce the final outcome before the second commercial. I'd use my computer only to email cross-

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country friends pictures of the sunsets from my balcony. On the way to boot up, I wouldn't have to trip over the huge stack of embryonic writing projects whose births alone will take me 250 years. Ah, I wouldn't have to write.

Sitting at my mall table, frozen before my clipboard, I thought of, and empathized with, the admission of a novelist: "Occasionally I envy normal people. . . . They never have to disappear during a party. (I lack the social graces to explain my actions as I rush away to capture a certain phrase on paper before it falls through my memory sieve.)" His wife, he confided, "dreams out loud of a serene life married to an easygoing, regular guy, content to watch television without yelling at the announcer or blurting comical dialogue for the actors."<sup>[1]</sup>

## Facing Up

Okay. I could just not write. Have you ever really tried? I'm not talking about a block that locks your brain and hands like a strait jacket. Or an illness or legitimate depression at losing someone dear, although writing about it can prove great catharsis and excellent work, as Joan Didion proved in her acclaimed book about surviving the sudden death of her husband of forty years.<sup>[2]</sup>

I'm talking about stopping in the regular middle of life, with only the usual traumas to deal with-- refrigerators too often emptying, laundry too often mounting, car too often failing, and unexpected astronomic bills too often shocking. At these times, have you ever almost dared yourself-- and your life-- not to write, rebelling like a tween at the insistent inner parent who shoots you that look decreeing you must write, if not daily at least regularly?

Once in a while, I've tried not writing and, sorry to tell you, it solves nothing. I've discovered and rediscovered, as the novelist said, I'm not one of those "normal" people who can be content with anything less than constant creativity, attempted to actualized.

## The Threat and the Promise

Facing my nature, despite fantasies of "normality," probably comes from an admonition that has long haunted and spurred me. It's Jesus' words from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas:

If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not [bring forth] that within you, what you do not have within you [will] destroy you.<sup>[3]</sup>

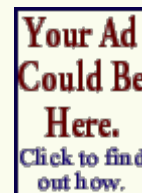
When we admit and accept who we really are, allow and discipline ourselves to write, the doing itself will "save" us. But when we deny and stifle our writing drive by convincing ourselves we shouldn't have it, don't need it, and don't want it, and so deprive ourselves of even a little writing time, we suffer the unavoidable repercussions.

We feel guilty because we're rejecting our gift, and we harm ourselves by slowly killing our creative drive. The drive, bottled-up, convolutes, grows ugly, and finds other outlets-- we become depressed, get sick, overeat, overspend, oversleep, overTV, overWeb, and snap at everyone within mouthshot.

Most of us can tolerate a day or a week "off" from writing. We may even return refreshed. But to turn our figurative backs and literal productions on writing won't give us happiness,

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peace, or minimal contentment. As bad, our self-denial will probably sour other, more ordinary, pleasures.

## Writing Our Music

The warning in Thomas isn't the only one that reminds me of the crucial sacredness of surrendering to our gifts. In a radio interview, the magnificent American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein made an unwittingly sad and cautionary statement the summer before he died. As if recognizing the terrible gap, he told the interviewer, "There's so much music I still have to write."<sup>[4]</sup>

Later, I read inspirational teacher Wayne Dyer's words about our "music," directed to all of us. The second of his ten secrets for success and peace, an often-quoted dictum, is this:

Don't die with your music still in you.<sup>[5]</sup>

Have you felt the shaking truth of this advice? It's at the source of my petulant rejections of writing and finally, again, coming home to it.

## Reconciling

What's the solution to wishing not to write? For me, it's heeding such counsel, accepting our need to produce, and recognizing we're not like "normal" people. Corollary to Dyer, my sane self centers again with the reminder of George Bernard Shaw:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap . . .<sup>[6]</sup>

Yes, I want to be thoroughly written out by the end. The only way is to yield to the drive and desire and rejoice in it. Sure, go out occasionally with friends for lunch, or to a movie or a class. But come back, always come back to your calling.

Now, at my Friday table in the mall Starbucks, I turned from the outer scene and let my eyes go where they wanted to-- my clipboard. No need for sighs, anger, or shopper-watching. I spread out my notes, took a divine sip of latté, and picked up my pen.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>[1]</sup>Jean Rosenbaum and Veryl Rosenbaum, *The Writer's Survival Guide* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1982), p. 21.

<sup>[2]</sup>Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

<sup>[3]</sup>Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random

[House](#), 2003), p. 257, Verse 70.

[4] This was probably an interview on NPR in the summer of 1990.

[5] Wayne W. Dyer, *Dr. Wayne Dyer's 10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2001), p. 19.

[6] George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*. Quoted at <http://www.quotationspage.com/search.php3?homesearch=shaw&page=6>

*Noelle Sterne's latest hard-copy magazine piece, on the virtues of not reading while you're writing, appears in March issue of The Writer. Writer, editor, writing coach, and academic consultant, Noelle Sterne holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University in English and Comparative Literature. She has published fiction, essays, poems, and writer's craft articles in many magazines and online resources, including Absolute Write, ByLine, Children's Book Insider, Writer's Digest special issues, Writers' Journal, The Writer, and, most recently, the 2008 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market. Her children's book, Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles (HarperCollins) was in print for 18 years and featured in the first dinosaur show of the PBS television children's series "Reading Rainbow." In 2006, a short story won an award and was published in the CrossTIME Anthology, Vol. V. She continues to write and publish motivational and how-to articles for writers, with additional pieces scheduled in national magazines for 2007 and beyond. Current nonfiction projects include a book based on her academic consulting practice, Grad U: How to Survive and Succeed in Graduate School, Get Your Degree, and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live with You; a book specifically for children's writers, Give Great Children's Presentations; and a collection of essays for all writers, First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy.*



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