**Bribes and Guilt as Tools for Writing**

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I haven’t been writing enough.

There are always excuses not to write and, on occasion, there are also reasons.

Here are mine: The end of the semester hit me hard this year; I’ve had non-writerly obligations to fulfill; I’ve been coping with the behind-schedule manuscript/uncorrected-proof stage of my next book; I’ve been napping.

When I’m not writing, I get cranky. The better part of myself becomes eclipsed by the creepy stalker side. I start reading what other people write, not to learn what they’re thinking or to get their perspective on an issue or topic, but to torture myself. “I could have said that,” I pout.  “And he thinks this is original?” I sneer. “Whine, whine, whine,” I chuckle, falsely cheerful, “At least I didn’t write this.” Because really, I am  hissingly envious of those who are cranking out the stuff.

And, of course, I start to use terms such as “crank out” and “the stuff” to indicate my contempt for productive writers only when I don’t consider myself one of them.

I believe it was David Lodge who once described a character as disapproving of a certain kind of car until the moment he could afford precisely that kind of car, at which point he  bought himself one. That’s how I feel about what other people are putting on the page when my own are blank.

So how, as I was asked at a talk I gave on Saturday at the first-ever Connecticut Book Fair, do I force myself to put words on the screen when I would otherwise prefer to read David Lodge or nap?

I use bribes and guilt. I suggest to other writers, experienced and otherwise, academic and trade, that they do the same. (So what if it’s not healthy? You want to be emotionally balanced, swim with the dolphins. You want to write? Learn to deal with the sharks.)

For example, I can earn hours towards movie-night and *Nurse Jackie* if I work on the Signet introduction to *Little Women*. I have promised myself an afternoon with a new book by a colleague—*Modeling Citizenship: Jewish and Asian American Writing* by Cathy Schlund-Vials, which I’ve started and am enjoying enormously—if I finish everything on the desk in terms of the uncorrected-proof tasks and send it to the press.

Some writing is its own reward: I have permission to write this post only because I finished the three letters of recommendations which have been staring up at me with their big, sad eyes every morning as I approach my desk. The letters and their neatly addressed envelopes been eying me like stray kittens: “Please! We’re orphans! Help!” I sent them all to good homes and that means I can now play with Brainstorm.

“How does the guilt and emotional blackmail part work?” asked one aspiring writer during the book-signing part of Saturday’s events. She liked the bribes idea, but was worried that I  might have sent myself to bed without dinner. Or a beverage. Assuring her that deprivation of food was never permitted in my household, I explained that the emotional blackmail I wielded was a dangerous weapon. It was something best done by professionals in a closed setting and probably should be used by amateurs only in a controlled situation.

Emotional blackmail as a tool for writing should be saved for those moments when nothing else works.

Here’s what I tell myself: “Think of the privilege you’ve been given, Barreca. Are you going to take that for granted? You going to sit around, wasting time without enjoying it, and moan about how tough it is to get work done? Try really working. Remember when you cleaned houses? Remember cleaning other people’s bathrooms? Remember working retail? Remember working in Bloomingdales? Think about the younger version of yourself and how she got you here. She’s going to get you back if you don’t get on with it. She’s going to marry that guy from the vo-tech school who always drove around with one working headlight and drop out and end up living in a two-room apartment in Queens where the screen is torn and flies come in and get stuck in the grease fan.”

If guilt is an emotional response and blackmail is an exchange, I suppose I’m proposing a combination of both. “If you don’t finish this article/essay/book,” I tell myself, “You know you’re going to be miserable.”

And then I make sure it happens: Either I finish it, or I’m miserable.

Most times, however, I’m hugely relieved and wildly exhilarated when I complete a piece of writing. It’s not only a privilege—it’s a pleasure. And, as a reward, it is often literally a piece of cake (today’s is red velvet with a cream cheese frosting), because I find the bribes really work well.

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