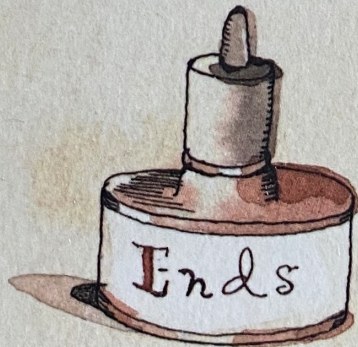


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Still Writing

The Perils and Pleasures of a Creative Life



Dani Shapiro

"A paean to discipline and solitude." —*New York Times*

my kid, and more inclined to see small things wrong with my house (the crack in the ceiling, the smudge prints along the staircase wall) than look out the window at the blazing maple tree, the family of geese making its way across our driveway. If I'm not writing, my heart hardens, rather than lifts.

And so I have learned how to live with my censor. It doesn't happen by fighting her. It happens first by recognizing her—*oh, hello, it's you again*—and accepting our coexistence. Like those bumper stickers most often seen on the backs of Priuses spelling out *coexist* in the symbols of all the world's religions, the writer and her inner censor need to learn to get along. The I.C., once you're on a nickname basis, should be treated like an annoying, potentially undermining colleague. Try managing her with corporate-speak: *Thanks for reaching out, but can I circle back to you later?*

The daily discipline of this creates a muscle memory. It becomes ingrained, thereby habit. I try to remember this, each morning, as I make the solitary trek from the kitchen to my desk. My house is quiet. My family is gone. The hours stretch ahead of me. The beds have been made, the dogs have been walked. There is nothing stopping me. Nothing, except for the toxic little troll sitting on my left shoulder. Just when I think I have her beat, she will assume a new disguise. I have to be vigilant, on the ready. She will pretend to be well-intentioned. She's telling me *for my own good*.

STILL WRITING

Maybe you should try writing something more commercial. You know, thrillers are hot. Why not write a thriller? Or at least a mystery?

Sweetheart (I hate it when she calls me sweetheart) no one wants to read a book about a depressed old man. Or a passive-aggressive mother. Why not write a book with a strong female protagonist, for a change? You know, a superheroine. Someone less . . . I don't know . . . victimy?

Under the guise of being helpful, or honest, my censor is like a guided missile aiming at every nook and cranny where I am at my weakest and most vulnerable. She will stoop and connive. All she wants to do is stop me from entering that sacred space from which the work springs. She is at her most insidious when I am at the beginning, because she knows that once I have begun, she will lose her power over me. And so I dip my toe into the stream. I feel the rush of words there. Words that are like a thousand silvery minnows, below the surface, rushing by. If I don't capture them, they will be lost.

CORNER

Start small. If you try to think about all of it at once—the world you hope to capture on the page, everything you know,

every idea you've ever had, each person you've met, and the panoply of feelings coursing through you like a river—you'll be overcome with paralysis. Who wouldn't be? Just the way we put one foot in front of the other as we get out of bed, the way we brush our teeth, splash water on our faces, feed our animals if we have animals, and our children if we have them, measure the coffee, put on the kettle, we need to approach our writing one step at a time. It's impossible to evoke an entire world at the start. But it *is* possible to describe a crack in the sidewalk, the scuffed heel of a shoe. And that sidewalk crack or scuffed heel can be the point of entry, like a pinhole of light, to a story, a character, a universe.

Think of a jigsaw puzzle—one of those vexingly complicated puzzles that comes in a big box. Almost every family room has, at one point or another, seen one of these puzzles, spilled from its box, hundreds of pieces strewn across the floor. It starts out as a fun rainy day activity and—unless the family members are both freakishly patient and spacially gifted—there it will stay, gathering dust until, finally, someone sweeps all the puzzle pieces back into the box and retires it to the far reaches of a cupboard, never to be seen again. Too many colors and shapes! Too many possibilities! Where to even begin?

This is the writer's mind when embarking on a piece of work. We sit perched in front of our laptop screen, or our spiral-bound notebook, or giant desktop monitor, and—we

freeze. After all, it's so important, isn't it, where we start? Don't we need a plan? Hadn't we better know where we're going? The stakes feel impossibly high. We're convinced that first word will dictate every word that follows. We are tyrannized by our options. All sorts of voices scream in our heads. First person or third? Present tense or past? The span of five minutes? Or two hundred years? What the hell are we doing? We don't know.

Build a corner. This is what people who are good at puzzles do. They ignore the heap of colors and shapes and simply look for straight edges. They focus on piecing together one tiny corner. Every book, story, and essay begins with a single word. Then a sentence. Then a paragraph. These words, sentences, paragraphs may well end up not being the actual beginning. You can't know that now. Straining to know the whole of the story before you set out is a bit like imagining great-grandchildren on a first date. But you can start with the smallest detail. Give us the gravel scattering along the highway as the pickup truck roars past. The crumb of food the wife wipes from her husband's beard. The ripped bottom of a girl's faded jeans. Anchor yourself somewhere—anywhere—on the page. You are committing, yes—but the commitment is to this tiny corner. One word. One image. One detail. Go ahead. Then see what happens next.