

Deadlines and other Terrors

January 28, 2018

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She looked at me sideways, “Really? Sounds like a lot of work!” This is my friend’s response to my new adventure with a writing group, Our Lives, Our Stories. Her look of doubt is justified, she knows me, and my Achilles’ heel. Why place myself in the firing line of adrenalin charged deadlines; why resurrect my procrastination tendencies? Why reenter a world of assignments and deadlines when I clearly recall the relief of leaving these work challenges as I stepped into my well earned retirement years.

At the onset of my university studies, I developed a habit of fretting over assignments, a preemptive dread of failure insinuating itself into my brain. ‘This time, for sure, they will know that I do not belong here’. I enjoyed the course work but the assignments were another matter. For each paper, I fretted and delayed setting pen to paper, all the while obsessively researching the project. Despite this, I managed to submit my work at the stroke of the due hour. Success, with each of my submissions, was but a momentary relief, as I feared I would be found out, at the next round. I was an imposter, posing in this academic role.

Despite these inner tendencies, I successfully completed my studies and went on to a challenging and much loved career.

But that look of concern from my friend reminded me that I might revive that dormant inner critic, the one who seeds inner doubt when decisions and deadlines loom.

Joining a writing group has been on my radar for many years. Over numerous decades, I have started many journals. Dozens are tucked in various parts of my home. Some started as travel diaries, one documented two years parenting my young sons, several journals carried me through the months of nursing my husband, and many others extolled my love of gardening and nature. At the beginning of each notebook, I am filled

with good intentions, but then, my interest wavers. In addition to the start-stop journaling, I love reading many genres, fiction, non fiction. I am especially drawn to memoirs. All suggest a prerequisite to writing, but not the discipline! I believe a writing group would help me learn new skills, develop an orderly writing schedule, expand my writer's voice.

Our first assignment was on 'Food', a delightful topic to explore and write, even if I flew into a bit of tailspin, perhaps a reawakened fear of being found out. At our initial group gathering, face flushed, raised heart rate, I hold my breath as I wait for this mysterious process to unfold.

A swoosh of expired air, a relief, a balm, as I listen to the thoughtful and respectful feedback to each story. As we go around the circle to review each submission, I discover a genuine listening, as if our written words have substance, a tangible reality, a value. Two gifts pulsate in this space, listening and being heard. I see our group as an ancient circle, in a time when tribes sat around the fire and tried to decipher their dreams, or recited parables from their ancestors, or drummed to a universal rhythm. Over the weeks, I look forward to more stories from my fellow writers. While some make me laugh, some bring me to tears and some make me wistful, all remind me of the requisite courage to just live a life. Our writing differs from the writing on social media which tends towards showcasing success, lives wrapped in success. In a writing group such as this, we accommodate both the shadow and light of our stories; through self reflection, we dig deep into our lives to discover our authentic voice.

I have learned that in writing down my memories I become more knowable to myself. I did not realize that my stories would help me feel more compassionate to long forgotten people of my past, people relegated to the shadows of my memory. As I plumb more deeply, my singular perspective recedes as I see the others more clearly, I sense their feelings, their frame of reference, our collective humanity. Some of my written stories feel enshrined in luminescent amber, a story to be cherished and revisited. Some become cathartic, as these particular memories no longer occupy real estate in my

subconscious. Some are still too tender, but with time, i know they will bubble up to the surface, all the way to my fingers. I look forward to exploring yet to be discovered journeys into the self.

Now, my friend enjoys reading my occasional story and happily cheers me on.

And I am learning to dial down the inner critic that sits on my shoulder for much of my life. This critic is gentler now. I occasionally hear her whisper, "You are enough!".