

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I want to be a writer, but have been plagued with writer's block for years. My life is busy raising children and working a full-time job, so the time I can spend writing is limited at best. But even when I scratch out the time to work on my novel, I sit in front of the computer and my thoughts focus on all the negatives...the reasons why my writing is a waste of time. I feel like my creativity is being stifled. Is there a cure for this?

-- Allison

Dear Allison,

Let me see if I can guess some of the thoughts that race through your mind as you sit down to write: "Man, what a stupid idea!" "You are never going to get it right." "You're going to say that?! Yeah, right." "You're too old (or too young) to start this now." "You don't have anything to say." "You are a terrible writer!"

Am I close? If someone else said those things to you, I bet you'd want to punch their lights out, or skulk into a corner to lick your wounds. You certainly would have a hard time being friends with someone who said such negative things to you.

But what happens when that verbally abusive voice is your own? Psychologists call this voice "negative self-talk." Writers refer to it as "the inner critic." Regardless of the name you put on it, this nasty and faultfinding part of the psyche puts the brakes on creativity, and makes us feel miserable about ourselves. So what do you do?

You close your eyes and try to picture that nasty naysayer, and you tell it to put a sock in it. That's right. The mere act of recognizing that inner dialogue and confronting it goes a long way towards quieting it down. When you pull back the curtain — like in the Wizard of Oz — you see that this is not the almighty voice of truth. This is no almighty wizard. The inner critic is instead, simply the voice of our own fears and doubts. Sure, it has a booming and persistent voice, but you can unplug its microphone.

The next time you sit down to write, listen carefully to your negative self-talk and when you hear that nasty commentator, pull the plug. Gently, kindly tell it to go away for now.

Writing, in fact all creative acts, are really made up of two separate processes: First, a wild, openness that draws from some deep, inner place that we can call the Inner Muse. This is about inventing, experimenting, taking risks, breaking rules, and making mistakes. It should be fun.

Creative ideas almost seem like they come from somewhere else rather than from ourselves. Perhaps that is why the Greeks envisioned the Muses as goddesses who presided over the arts and sciences bestowing inspiration on us mere mortals. It seems to be what Puccini was talking about when he said, "The music (*of Madame Butterfly*) was dictated to me by God; I was merely instrumental in putting it on paper and communicating it to the public." Or what artist Robert Motherwell meant when he decided, "In the brush doing what it's doing, it will stumble on what one couldn't do by oneself."

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Once you've released all your creative ideas, the second phase of creative expression asks you to invite the inner critic back into the process. Because it is the rewriting or refinement of your work that will make your words sing. But the inner critic has to play by certain rules. It can say: "That doesn't work for me" or "I think there is a better way of saying that." It is not allowed to be mean-spirited or non-specific as in "That sucks!" or "You suck!" And, to be fair, a real "reviewer" would also comment on what works and is good, "Hey! I like the way you made that point!"

By becoming more conscious of your own inner self-talk, you can find ways to keep this part of yourself from stopping you in your creative pursuits. It may help to realize that most writers, artists, musicians and other creative people struggle with the same self-doubts that you do.

And don't give your writing just scraps of your time. You don't honor your own creative process when you offer only leftovers: "I'll write when the kids are in bed and I'm exhausted after a long day. And, oh, I really should put in a load of laundry." Integrate some time to write into your schedule even if you have to find creative ways to do that. Enroll in weekend workshops or take a writing class at a local college. Consider joining a writer's support group. Subscribe to writing magazines to keep you in the know about techniques and opportunities. Check out www.jonesbrehony.com for some excellent links to websites with great resources for writers and creative people. You can do this, Allison.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.

