

The Write Work: Reflections on the Writing Process

Doing the Work



Success is hardly ever convenient.

Almost every day I have a visitor. The visitor often arrives in the early morning hours, long before I have awoken from sleep. I am usually lulled to consciousness by her presence, but I seldom greet her right away. When I try to ignore her, she becomes insistent that I “GET UP,” and give her due respect. I make excuses and tell her, “We can talk later,” or “I’ll tell you what you need to hear as soon as I get up.” At times, the visitor is relentless, so I’m forced to stretch my heart, mind and soul to life because she never accepts only part of my attention. She requires ALL or nothing. Even after I have conceded to put aside how unreasonable it is for me to be up at such a dreadful hour, she demands that I get to work and reminds me that this process will take hours.

Sometimes, in spite of the visitor’s prodding, I am able to go back to sleep. Just like the poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, described, my retreat back into the “coolness of snug unawareness” is a small but sweet victory. Even though I promise myself (and the visitor) that I’ll do the work at another time, I rarely do. The visitor matches my stubborn will with silence. If I’m lucky, she only stays away for a day or a week, but during the absence, I’m listening, looking, hoping and thirsting for her voice so I can do the work.

The visitor always returns because she knows that the work is the only reason I’m alive. Each time she visits, she brings a key that gives me access to all the tools I need for every task. Today, included with those tools is discipline. Yesterday was patience. The tool box often includes love, vision and forgiveness. And always words and words and words, so that I can do the work that writing requires.

Faith

I thought I would use an app that randomly selects a bible verse to start off every day. This morning I opened my heart and mind, ready to receive the Word that would set my day in motion.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Not really what I was expecting... maybe it was too familiar. Oh well.

I had a vision of what my breakfast would be, but I got distracted, and the oatmeal turned out thick and lumpy, and my toaster settings were too high.

Most of the rest of the day followed the morning down the path of good intentions gone awry. Why add more frustration by trying to accomplish my own goal of writing something every day?

Then, just before I went to bed, I remembered the words, “God created.”

My voice, my ideas, my words begin with what God creates.

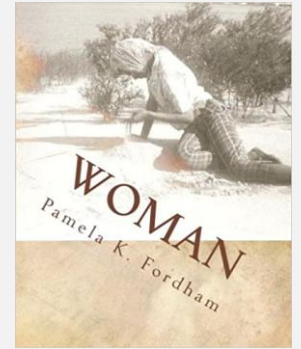
Faith.

Who Will Tell My Story?

Today I busied myself
Letting go so I could be absorbed
In images depicting the pain of New Orleans “refugees”
The dead covered in white sheets
Lying in the street exposed for the whole world to see
Nameless casualties, powerful symbols, but ultimately insignificant.
What lifeless faces lie beneath those sheets?
What is their story?
Who will tell it?
I spent the day blanketing myself in counted blessings
But that failed to suppress memories of the flood
And the silence of these walls that protect me from imaginary horrors
I am so inconsequential
When the sheet is pulled back exposing my lifeless face,
Who will know my story?
Who will tell it?

Why I Write

In September of 2005, I asked myself two life-changing questions. For days I had been watching television footage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I can't remember ever feeling so hopeless and angry. I was already down in the dumps about the end of summer and the inevitable change in weather. I was fighting the loneliness of my daughter going back to school six hundred miles away and missing the man whom I had loved and lost that only lived a few blocks away. My fall had gotten an early start; the winds were blowing from all different directions, and the leaves were changing and dropping quickly. Individually, none of my issues were cause for alarm, but when gathered together for close examination, I felt heavy and discouraged.



The initial news of the flood was a welcomed distraction. The images were appalling and grotesque at times; nevertheless, even more disturbing than the drowning houses, the stiffened outstretched hands grasping for help and life - more disturbing than the bloated drifting corpses were the countless white sheets. First, one that might have just been clothing or a blanket; then another, molded in the shape of an arm or leg or torso. And finally, the realization that a body was beneath the blanket - a body filled with flesh and blood, but no pulse or breath. Not a "refugee" or victim, but a man or woman with a name and a face. Beneath the white sheet was a human with a soul - someone's son or husband, someone's teacher or barber. The shape wasn't just a random arm or foot; the hand belonged to someone who had recently waved hello. The fingers belonged to a nail-biter or a secret thumb-sucker. What was that person's story, and who would tell it, now?

Almost a week passed before the official decision was made to pick up the bodies, and my attention turned away from the unimaginable horrors on the television screen to the imminent ones patiently waiting outside my door. In the days that followed my return to normalcy, I began to ask myself two life-changing questions. Who will know my story? And who will tell it?

Those two questions stalked me. The questions were like two fingers tapping my forehead, trying to release the answer to a complex theorem trapped behind layers of memories and self-esteem. No matter how I reconfigured the variables, the answer was always the same: me. Writing had always been my

best form of expression. Shyness, fear and every awkward social tendency could be laid low by a word and a pen. I have spent most of my life explaining and examining the world through journal entries and complaint letters. I have written editorials and imaginary stories filled with people that I know and those I would love to meet. I have written book reviews and essays, poems, songs and edicts. Those two questions lifted me outside of the confidence and comfort that I had always associated with writing and exposed the blank page that was my story told by me.

Once I was able to create and gather the written pieces that best represented my story, I needed to share the story with someone who could appreciate (and maybe even benefit from) my gift of transparency. I never considered sharing the work with anyone other than my daughter: her birthday was quickly approaching, and I thought, what better gift could I give than my most intimate reflections on womanhood? I spent months editing and perfecting every piece – reshaping words and phrases. I included pictures and fonts that offered my most honest self. I didn't try to distinguish or explain the context of passages that exposed the good, the bad, and the very bad characterizations of my development into a woman. The finished product, entitled *Woman*, emerged almost a year later, and it represented my most secret self that was never intended for anyone else to see. The final product was filled with evidence that I had fully intended to burn moments before my death. The value of this gift to my daughter was in what was revealed through the writing and not just the possession of the pieces themselves.

I guess in the excitement and fear of giving over my writings to my daughter, I neglected to actually say the words, "Please don't share this with anyone." So, when she received the package in the mail, she went to a restaurant and read each piece from beginning to end. She cried and laughed and reacted to each word exactly as I had hoped. When she called to thank me, I could hear the gratitude bubbling up from her heart, so again, I guess I never said that the gift was just for her. I'm sure if I had, she would have never shared it with anyone – but I didn't, and she did. First she shared it with her husband, and then she shared it with her friends. A few months later she surprised me by adapting the gift into a play and sharing it at a gathering with my closest friends, family members, and even several of my colleagues from work.

That experience was the first time I defined myself as a writer, and the first time I could see how my words could potentially affect another person. Throughout most of the play, I wrestled with humiliation as I anticipated the words from my story that would be spoken out loud, but as I stepped outside of the condemnation and guilt that was coming from my own spirit, I was absorbed into the reactions of the people around me. No one was thinking about me, analyzing me, judging me because of what the passages revealed. The actors in the play were performing my story, but the audience was hearing their own. They laughed, cried, nodded, clapped, gasped and talked back to the actors in hundreds of ways that validated and transcended my story. It was terrifying and wonderful.

To me, writing represents release and expression, and it is not necessarily an activity that defines a person as a writer. Being a writer involves being consumed with fulfilling a purpose that cannot be accomplished without the written word. The vehicle for a golfer is a club; for a swimmer the vehicle is water; for the writer, the vehicle is the written word. For me, writing is the means through which the story can be told, and I believe there are as many stories as there are people. I've been writing my entire life, but I've only just recently considered the fullness of what it means to identify myself as a writer. Being a writer means submitting to misunderstanding and disagreement, submitting to both criticism and praise, and most of all being willing to tell the stories that make life terrifying and wonderful.