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DEVELOPING A WRITING PRACTICE THAT WORKS

BY JILL DEARMAN

(BECAUSE YOU WORK IT, DARLING!)

Dorothy Parker once said, "I hate writing. I love having written." I've been working as a writing coach in New York City since January, 2003. I've been working as an astrologer much, much longer than that. In both lines of work I've noticed a similar phenomenon: almost everyone wants to write, and considers himself a writer of sorts, but it's the rare, brave soul who puts his laptop where his mouth is (don't try that at home) and actually does the work it takes to finish a project.

Ancient Kabbalists had a word for the level of endurance necessary to commit oneself to a worthwhile endeavor and see it through to completion: Netzach. It's a concept that we can easily apply to the modern world. Think about anything in your life that you care about — from your home, to your kids, your job, your body, your friends, etc. In order to make any of those areas of your life thrive you have to put in some time and commitment, right? If you didn't set aside the rent money every month your landlord would kick you to the curb faster than you could say, "I'll have it for you tomorrow!" He doesn't care about your intentions and your promises; he wants his money. In exchange you receive the shelter of your choice. And once the rent is paid you can do whatever you want in the privacy of your


own home (well, actually these days don't be so sure, but that's another story!) The point is, your home isn't simply a given, it's something you took steps to secure and to maintain, and which you work to keep every month. If you suddenly decided to stop putting money into it, you'd lose it. It's the energy you spend to obtain and to keep the things you care about which add

up to Netzach.



ILLUSTRATED BY JENNIFER ELLIOTT

Netzach, the Kabbalistic term for endurance is basically the Hebrew cousin of Saturn, a planet we all have in our charts somewhere, which gives us a clue as to how we should be managing our time. When developing your writing practice, Saturn can be a great teacher and role model. Saturn's way? Start small, and build up your endurance incrementally. Saturn is all about how we budget our time and how we bring things to fruition in the real world. Whatever it is you want to do: from learning Italian, to paying off debt, to writing your novel, Saturn can be a very helpful (if crotchety) old chum of a friend. How to work with this wise cur-mudgeon? Common sense, my dear. First, make a decision, and hopefully share your decision with your inner circle, who will then nag you about your progress. Next, set aside the time to make your goal a reality. If your aim is to play guitar and you only practice an hour a week, that's how good (or lame) you will be. The more time you put in,



frontload the hard work and commitment, the sooner you will become Jimi Hendrix. And don't panic yet: you won't die at age 27, choking on your own vomit: I can almost promise you that. (But take it easy on those tequila shots, dude).

The great Italian writer Italo Calvino, an astrology aficionado himself, heavily referenced Saturn in an essay on writing called "Quickness" (published in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*). He understood that although Mercury symbolizes the swift thoughts that run through the brain, it is Saturn, the concentrated, dedicated craftsman who brings those inspired thoughts into a permanent form.

Just remember this, excited scribes: consistency works much better over the long haul, than working at a fever pitch, merely to prove that you can. Approaching your writing in a manic way is a lot like going to the gym for the first time and picking up a 400-pound barbell. You may be able to do it. And the victory, for one second, will be sweet ... until you are in the hospital moaning and groaning and swearing to never work out again.

So before you end up in traction, eating Bon Bons (is that physically possible? Someone fact check, please), do yourself and that novel or play or essay waiting to be born a favor, and commit to a series of writing hours.

Southern writer Flannery O'Connor wrote this in a letter to a young scribe, back in 1957: "I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them, but most of us only have talent and this is something that simply has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away. I see it happen all the time. Of course you have to make your habits conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and I have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact that you sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there." (from *The Habit of Being*, letters from Flannery O'Connor).

O'Connor said it half a century ago, and all committed writers say the same thing, you'll find. In O'Connor's case, she fought lupus and other physical problems, so literally did not have the energy to write for more than two hours at a time. But that schedule worked out pretty well for her, wouldn't you agree? In this letter she goes on to advise her young writer friend to approach her writing hours when her mind and body are fresh, for instance, not after a day of teaching.

You need to choose times that will be the most productive for you. Figuring out those times is a process, but you have to start somewhere. You can always adjust your hours later. That's the long of it, and here's the short of it:

- Choose either two 3-hour blocks or three 2-hour blocks that you will commit to as your "Writing Hours" over the next six weeks. During those hours you cannot answer the phone, go online, do the dishes or do time-filling "research."
- Specify where you will do your hours and with what tool. Example: In the library, on your laptop. (Sounds like the boardgame *Clue*, doesn't it?)
- Write them down in your notebook and on your calendar.
- Show up and write.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? It is...in theory. Of course we all have ways of undermining our best-laid plans. Just keep in mind, the point here is commitment. Flexibility is fine. If you have to skip your Tuesday from 8-10pm slot one evening, because of theater tickets bought months ago, or some other lame excuse (yeah, yeah... I know, I know) that's fine. You then must make up those hours to yourself before week's end. Don't split hairs; give yourself over to the magic of the Saturnian process. That magic, however, like all magic, is both dark and light.

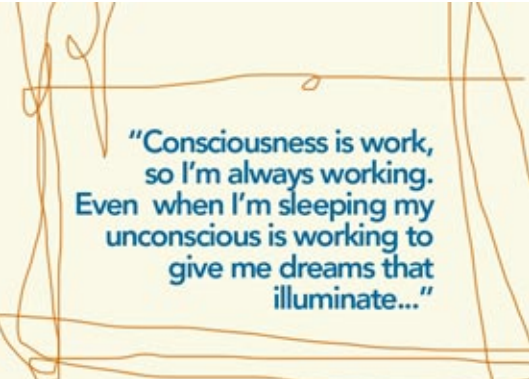
I guarantee you, once you make this commitment all sorts of strange and confusing distractions will line up to get in the way of you and your writing hours. A few months before starting my first writing workshop, I read a profile in the *New York Times* of surrealist painter and

writer, Leonora Carrington. The journalist who journeyed to Mexico to interview the great artist, then 85, encountered many mischievous misfortunes on this assignment and noted: "The Hasidim believe that when you are embarking on a spiritual quest, which in a way I am, the forces of impurity do their best to interfere."

When I was about to begin an advanced version of my writing workshop, I bought a painting from an abstract expressionist painter whose work I passionately connect to. The artist, Iris Lezak, (mother of my friend, performance artist Clarinda Mac Low, former wife of Jackson Mac Low, the esteemed poet), impressed me with her work, and with her working habits. This tiny, dynamic woman, who was pushing 80, got up at 5 a.m. to paint ... for decades ... and still follows this stoic routine.

I asked her if she had any helpful thoughts for my workshop participants in regards to developing an artistic practice. I wanted to know: How does she stay so disciplined? How does she "show up" for her practice even when she's not in the mood?

She wrote me this reply: "Consciousness is work, so I'm always working. Even when I'm sleeping my unconscious is working to give me dreams that illuminate my awake time. I'm always either coming down from finishing a painting or preparing to start again. Even when I'm not actually doing something, there seems to be a constant undercurrent of speculation about what to do next. Discipline and mood are not words that enter into my thinking about my process. Desperation does, and that has often been some physiological and psychological impasse that I can clear up only by painting. Take the pain out of painting and I'd be out of a job. Recently, and this possibly has to do with the mellowing of age, I rarely have to work from that kind of motivation. Now its more restlessness: nothing is happening, and nothing is going to happen unless I make it happen, so I do." The artist, by the way, is a Capricorn — ruled by Saturn. Not surprising. Saturn isn't mysterious at all; the only mystery is why we all don't use Saturnian methods more in all aspects of our lives. Well, I think I'll ponder that in another piece. I'm off duty now and need to play for awhile. God, I love having written!



**"Consciousness is work,
so I'm always working.
Even when I'm sleeping my
unconscious is working to
give me dreams that
illuminate..."**

(The above piece is excerpted from *The Art of Obsession: Tools for Developing Your Writing Practice* by Jill Dearman)

Jill Dearman is a writer, astrologer and writing coach. She is the author of *Queer Astrology for Men and Queer Astrology for Women* (St. Martin's). Her short fiction has been anthologized by Cleis Press. A sample of her most recent nonfiction can be found at <http://www.mrbellersneighborhood.com/story.php?storyid=1742>. She is a part-time Professor of Journalism at New York University and is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at The New School. She can be reached at JillDearmanNYC@aol.com. Keep your eyes peeled for her website, remarkably called: www.jilldearman.com, in early 2006.

