

Why Aren't I Writing? The Struggle with Resistance

Many times since I first decided to write, I have asked myself this question: Why aren't I writing?

All this time I thought it was me. Clearly I'm a lazy, undisciplined procrastinator who doesn't really have the passion to make it as a writer. The problem started when I was in graduate school. For two years my only job was to take a few courses and write a book of short stories, which would serve as the thesis for my master's degree in Creative Writing. I had more time and space to write than I've ever had in my life. And yet, I had the most horrendous time getting down to work.

I slept in until 9 or 10 most days. I let my schedule fill up with volunteer work and activities, serving on the Chaplaincy committee and working on the church newsletter. I took temporary secretarial placements to earn extra money. I kept our small apartment as neat as a pin. I spent hours watching the free cable TV. I set myself the goal of writing for four hours a day, and more often than not, I wouldn't turn on my computer until three in the afternoon. There seemed to be a forcefield around my desk that repelled me from my writing, even though it was the thing I wanted to do most in the world.

One miserable weekend, when I was hopelessly behind on my deadlines and couldn't see how I would ever catch up and finish the darn thesis, I remember thinking, "There's got to be something easier than this. I'll just find something easier than this, and I'll do that for the rest of my life."

To this day I'm not really sure how I managed to graduate. The writing, especially towards the end, was an excruciating grind, and the days when I actually enjoyed myself were few and far between. Which has caused me to wonder, on certain dark nights, whether I'm really cut out to be a writer.

But as it turns out, I was wrong. It's not me. The problem is the nature of creation itself.

I have Steven Pressfield to thank for this revelation. In his book *The War of Art*, he puts a name to the force that pushes me away from my writing: he calls it Resistance. With a capital R, because it deserves respect. Resistance, he says, is "an energy field radiating from a work-in-potential. It's a repelling force. It's negative. Its aim is to shove us away, distract us, prevent us from doing our work." Resistance collects around any creative endeavour that would make the world a better place. Any work that does not pay off in instant fulfillment. So it's not just writers who experience Resistance, but all artists, and students, and parents, and athletes, and entrepreneurs, and people fighting addictions, and spiritual seekers.

Resistance is a fact of life in a fallen world, where barriers have come between us and God, our creative source, to hinder the free and easy flow of energy and inspiration. Resistance tries to prevent us from fulfilling our purpose, from doing the work that God has planned for us on this earth.

We're all familiar with Resistance's more subtle manifestations, which pull us in because they seem so innocuous. I have the usual weak spots for distraction, the most potent currently being the Internet. Hours drain away without my even noticing while I check and recheck my e-mail, wander here and there on a trail of hyperlinks. I'll just read one more article, visit one more site, play one more round of Webboggle. I'm sure that Resistance is chuckling the entire time.

I'm also quite susceptible in the area of housework. This is a tricky one, because sometimes Resistance distracts me by using my desire to steam clean the bathroom grout, or iron out every wrinkle from my 100% cotton pillowcases. And sometimes it works in the opposite way. I refuse to clean up because I don't want to get detoured from writing, but the mess keeps tugging at me while I'm trying to work, and if I would just take ten minutes to straighten up, I could focus more clearly. Pressfield says "A professional will not tolerate disorder. She eliminates chaos from her world in order to banish it from her mind. She wants the carpet vacuumed and the threshold swept, so the Muse may enter and not soil her gown." So I need to be careful to find a balance between a certain level of tidiness in my environment, and obsessive over-the-top cleaning.

Resistance also uses an excess of other activities in my life to keep me from writing. If I'm not careful, I find myself singing in the church choir, signed up for yoga classes and Ultimate frisbee teams, serving on cohousing committees, and knitting with the local Stich n' Bitch group. Add a bit of overtime from work and a visit from my parents, on top of the chores required to keep the house going, and it's no surprise that hours for writing don't materialize. These are all good things in and of themselves, but instead of saying yes with abandon, I have to carefully mark out the writing time in my schedule, and guard it jealously.

Fear is at the root of Resistance's power. Fear that the wonderful idea I have for a story will turn to dross when I start putting it down on the page. Fear that I'm wasting my time, I should be building orphanages in Guatemala or performing life-saving surgery. Fear that I have nothing to say or no right to say it. Fear that what I write won't get published. Fear that I won't be able to figure out the right tone, the right structure for this next book, that I'll pour uncounted hours into the effort and have nothing to show at the end. Fear that I'll neglect my friends and family. I've got enough fears to keep Resistance busy for the next hundred years.

Pressfield talks about Resistance in a way that personifies it. He calls it the enemy, and describes the way it operates. I find this a very useful approach, because it switches my focus from fighting with myself to fighting a force of nature. I don't have to blame myself. Instead, I can accept that wrestling with Resistance is part of the human condition, and I can get down to doing it.

So how do we overcome the forcefield? How do we fight Resistance and win?

Here's a short answer. It's from Richard Rhodes' book *How To Write*, and he calls it Knickerbocker's Rule: Apply Ass to Chair.

In other words, the hardest part is sitting down to write. That's where Resistance is going to get me. I'll be drying the dishes after dinner, and my husband will go off to play computer games or put on a movie, and I'll think, "I'm tired. I worked hard this week. I'd rather read a book. I'm not going to write tonight."

And I'm down. Score 1 for Resistance.

Whereas, if I say to myself, "Yes, Alison, I know you're tired. Let's just turn on the computer and see what happens," if I can get myself in the chair, chances are I'll write something. And even if it's just a little and not very good, I feel better because I've beaten Resistance and I've done what I was put here to do.

Let me tell you, though, just because I beat it one day doesn't mean I won't surrender the next. Resistance doesn't give up and leave me in peace. So I have to find tricks, ways of getting myself to sit down to write more often.

Steven Pressfield calls it turning pro. Treating your writing like you would your day job or your classes: showing up every day, no matter what, staying on the job. Being committed for the long haul.

One important step that I took this year towards being a professional when it comes to my writing was a letter I sent to my friends and family, which I titled "The Year of the Book". Here's an excerpt:

For the past while I have been working on a novel. Last November I wrote a preliminary draft, but I still have much labour ahead of me. In order to make significant progress on this book, I've decided to make it my top priority this year. Since I work four days a week, I need to cut back all of my other responsibilities and commitments to a minimum.

Despite the many other things that I have done with my time over the years since I wrote my first book, writing has remained my principal vocation, and I've decided to give it the attention it deserves right now. I am the only person who can write this particular novel, and I am determined to do so.

Sending this letter was a way of giving myself permission to write more often. I made a public declaration that I was serious about this endeavour and that I considered writing my occupation. Everyone was very supportive, but it was almost more about myself than it was about them. Now, when it's a writing day, and I'm tempted to spend the time running errands or doing laundry, just frittering the time away, I think about that letter, and I go and write.

(And what sweet relief awaits when the writing is done! Do you know that anecdote? Someone asks a writer how his day went, and he says, Well, my car got stolen and the house burned down. But I wrote five pages, so yeah, it was a pretty good day!)

I think the key to victory over Resistance has to do with paying attention. If I observe the ways in which I'm tempted away from my work, I can figure out how to resist those temptations. I need to pause and make decisions, rather than letting myself drift unconsciously along the path of Least Resistance. In January I started

walking in the mornings, which gives me a half-hour every day to reconnect with my intention to write, and talk to God about how to get the job done. We had frequent conversations, in fact, about this very lecture. I think Resistance was working overtime in an effort to stay undercover. But Pressfield says that “The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it.” So I took the fear as a good sign and pressed on.

It turns out that giving in to Resistance is actually worse than fighting it, in the long run. Several years ago I listened too often to the voice of Resistance saying, “You can’t write if you only have an hour. You deserve a night off. If you don’t meet your other commitments, people will be disappointed in you. Your closets are a mess, and you should be working on your taxes. Your family needs you.”

As the weeks stretched into months and my writing ground to a halt, unhappiness and resentment escalated into depression. I lost interest in everything that had previously given me pleasure. I could find little meaning in living my life. As part of my recovery, I had to learn how to care for myself by setting boundaries and making my writing a priority. If I wasn’t fulfilling my life’s purpose, I was no good to anyone else.

So I live with this tension now, the strong hand of Resistance beating me back, and the memory of depression urging me on into the fray. I don’t know whether I’ll ever find a comfortable place between the two, where everything is in balance and harmony. For now I’m always correcting: pushing harder and then cutting myself some slack. But now that I know I’m struggling against Resistance, instead of myself, I have more courage for the fight.

[I’d like to finish by reading a story from my collection *Brick and Mortar*. I’ve chosen this story, called “Grain”, because the main character, Peter, is engaged in several creative acts that offer their share of Resistance.]