

Thinking around the Box

By Tricia Wagner

What is a writer, sitting before the blank page? She is a pilot looking at a clear sky. He is a seafarer gazing across never-ending tracks of sea. There are words to be written on all that blue, and stories can fill the emptiness on the water. When the writer, determined to create, sits down with pen in hand, the blank page seems faithful enough and waits patiently to be filled. The writer, however, is often at a loss to understand how to tap the ink well of the mind. How is one to hear the words that are silently spoken from shadows, whispers from the interior self that nudge the hand forward?

To access the ink well of inspiration, the body needs exercise, and the mind needs to learn to just let go.

“I meant to go to sea so that I would have something to write about, and because I was under the impression, gathered from the dust-jacket copies of various best sellers that it was something a writer did before he settled down and devoted his life to writing. While the captain was reading my letter I looked around. The crew consisted of one sailor, chipping rust, with a police dog at his side. It turned out that the schooner had been there for four years because Mr. Morgan couldn’t afford to use it. The captain was tired of doing nothing and was expecting a replacement the next day and was therefore not in a position to take me on. He had no idea when the beautiful, tall-masted ship would leave its berth. And I had no idea that three-quarters of the material I would need for the rest of my writing life was already at my disposal. My father and mother. My brothers. The cast of larger-than-life-size characters... that I was presented with when I came into the world. The look of things. The weather.”

~ **William Maxwell, *All the Days and Nights***

During the In Print Professional Writer’s meeting held on October 10, 2015, Mary Lamphere led participants in a series of fun activities geared to help them dip into their mental ink pots to get at the inspiration that everyone hopes is there.

“It does no good,” Lamphere said, “to try to follow the cliché of ‘thinking outside of the box.’ The box is the mind and what writers have to work with.”

Where is the writer to look for ideas if the box seems empty, and if thinking outside of it is fruitless?

“Look around inside the box,” said Lamphere.

Exploring dark corners and venturing into old places where memories lie collecting dust can help one learn to see what is lying in plain sight. Acknowledging that the raw material for writing is accessible can brighten the mind, shake tight fingers loose, and help the stories flow. To motivate participants to look around their boxes, Lamphere passed out goodie bags.

Participants felt like children at a birthday party, receiving some token that makes a wonderful day all the better. And that was the point. Toiling beneath the glower of the bespectacled, critical self just won't do when one is trying to drum up creative faculties and make the blank page sing. One must play.

In the bag was an apple, a stimulator of senses that brought deeply cherished associations bobbing to the surface. Adult coloring pages were shown and toyed with as Lamphere spoke about the benefits of letting one's writer faculties wander while the active mind is choosing between blue and green and deciding where to put them on the page. The non-dominant hand was put to work, lighting up parts of the brain that are not normally employed while writing. In practicing exercises with alliterations participants jammed together words and ideas that wouldn't normally seem to go together, but when order and rules were cast to the wind, the grouped words conjured magic. Improvisation prompts were offered to let participants practice generating material on the fly, *ex nihilo*.

Lamphere encouraged the group to consider the characters in the stories they had written and to get to know them better by imagining them in new ways, making them respond to different stimuli. To help with this, out came the play dough, and the contemplation of colors and shapes,

and participants marveled at what even a letter of the alphabet can inspire. Last came chocolate, the quintessential symbol of stimulus and reward, the dark and smooth element a spark, a strong scent and specific taste, one of many, that can transport a writer back to past times.

Inside every writer are set the eyes of a child, eyes that were engaged when the self was small and the world was new and large. Through play, writers can recover impressions of that great big world and paste it on the page. By looking within, they can learn to remember how to see the extraordinary in the everyday.

At the close of the meeting, participants expressed how valuable they found the exercises in play. They basked in the discovery that simple exercises and basic experiences can provide tools for excavating treasures from the dark corners of the box: hidden crystals that are vibrant and blooming and have been there all along, waiting to be woken.

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