

HONOR YOUR WRITER'S LIFE

4 Truths & 4 Secrets

About Writers Who Make Contributions to Their Fields

by Jeffrey Davis for CENTER TO PAGE Clients

4 truths:

1. They don't stick it alone.

No doubt, writing requires long stretches of solitude, and popular media perpetuates stories of writers holing up cabins with their demons and coffee pot for weeks on end. But almost every successful writer has someone – a trusted spouse or partner, a fellow writer, an agent, an editor – who gives honest, expert perspective. Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe had the writer's editor of editors, Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's. New fields of "social psychology" and "social creativity" explore this fact.

2. They apprentice themselves to the craft.

Such an apprenticeship takes most writers years to complete. You know the 10,000 hour rule that Malcolm Gladwell writes about in *The Outliers: The Story of Success*? That it takes 10,000 hours of doing something before you come close to mastering it? It applies to fields of science and medicine *and* to fields of art and humanities. Most writers find one or more mentors by studying other writers' works and sometimes by learning directly from another writer, editor, or coach.

3. **They learn how to focus.**

Whether by force, by yoga, by running, by meditation, or by bouncing balls, writers learn to center the mind's errant thoughts on the task at hand. Most of them are not born with that feat of focus. They create habits and rituals to enter their zone. Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Olen Butler calls his writing state of mind a "trance." He gets up and moves and talks to himself. One writer I know stares quietly at a screen for ten minutes without thinking about anything. Joyce Carol Oates runs. Tom Robbins practices yoga.

4. **They enjoy both the unobstructed flow and the inherent challenges of a creative, intellectual life.**

Writers who make contributions don't simply write when they "feel like it" or "get inspired." They learn *how* to feel like it. They stoke an indomitable fire. It burns at bright moments of novelty and through dark hours of disappointment. Joan Acocella, writer for *The New Yorker*, notes that genius is not born of neuroses but out of "Sunday school-like virtues" such as tenacity and the ability to endure disappointment. Go back to #s 1 and 2 to see how they do it.

4 secrets:

1. **They experience waves of self-doubt, fear, and self-criticism.** A well-known text among yogis notes that even gurus suffer fear and doubt. In fact, a healthy dose of fear and doubt might mean that you're pushing yourself to your familiar creative limits. You're taking creative and conceptual risks. You're in unknown territory. *All of that* can be a good thing.

2. **Their brains and bodies change and age.** Several of my clients are established writers who confide in me that their wits seem dimmer than they used to be. The middle-aged brain does slow down its processing rate. But that fact is not necessarily a bad thing. With the

right tools and guidance, a middle-aged brain can outlast and outperform a spring chicken one.

3. **Their lives are not free from obstruction or setbacks or devastating surprises.** I once asked an advanced teacher at a Zen monastery how his practice was any different from what it was ten years ago. He chuckled at the question and then said he still gets angry, he still gets lusty, and stuff still happens that makes him react. The difference is he has a set of tools to lessen the anger and lust, and to be less reactive. Writer-adepts basically do the same thing. The world will never conspire and whisper, "Okay, here's all the problem-free time you need to create." It just won't happen.
4. **Return to #s 1-4 above to see how they do it.**