



Joy in the Dark

A 12-DAY WRITING JOURNEY

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Prep Work: Space to Dream

Life has a way of expanding to fill all available moments, and pushing out into the nooks and crannies of our physical spaces. I don't know about you, but I have had trouble in the past finding the time and the space to Think Big Thoughts.

Before the onslaught of All The Holidays eats the next two weeks of your life, let's set you up for success.

That means we're going to **gather the resources**, scope out **the space situation**, **strategize our calendars**, and **set expectations** with other people.

Even the little ones.

Step 1: Gathering your materials

Writing is a pretty easy practice. It can be accomplished with a pencil and a stack of looseleaf paper, if it comes to that. But if we're going to make this into a retreat, you might want a bit more.

At very least, we want everything to be together so "finding a pen" doesn't become a barrier. The next step (which is still a pretty low bar) is that you shouldn't actively dislike the materials you're working with. So let's start with the physical objects, and then work on the space. To set yourself up for success you should start with:

A Pen You Like to Write With

This doesn't have to be expensive; one of my favourite pens is a fine-point Bic that I think comes in a package of 12 for \$3. If you're feeling fancy, a few fine tipped colored markers might fit the bill. And if you're feeling *really* fancy, you might treat yourself to (or dig out) that lovely fountain pen you've been wanting to use.

The point is that you should enjoy writing with the pen or pens that you choose, and you should put them somewhere that you can find them.

Paper (That Feels Good)

Now. Paper. I'm going to send you a printable PDF every day that will have lines on it, and minimal other stuff on the page so it doesn't eat your ink. If you prefer a journal, (and especially if you've got a pretty one lying around that you never get around to using), pull that out and put it with the pens. If you are planning to use the PDFs, you're going to need a surface to write on, because floppy pages propped up on the knees is not going to cut it. If you're planning to sit at a table, perfect... problem solved. But if not, give some thought to a nice thin but large book. (I've done a lot of work with a kids' picture book as a "desk" over the years.)

Cozy Things

The third thing I would recommend is, "Things that make you feel cozy." Blankets, fuzzy sweaters, a special mug, snacks... you know what this is for you. Imagine "future you" as a friend you are giving a gift to, but you know *exactly* what will make them happy.

Step 2: Choosing a Space

Question: **Do you have a desk?**

Second question: **Does sitting at your desk help you focus** (and get people to leave you alone)?

Third question: **Does it make you feel happy?**

If the answer to all three questions is "yes," then you have your writing space. Otherwise, let's keep going.

An awful lot of us have... constraints.

We share our office space with the spare room, or the kids' play space, or the kitchen, or we don't have an office space at all. I did years of writing at the kitchen table while people played and careened around me. I have many times relied on headphones to make it look like I was listening to music even if I wasn't.

All of which is to say that I hear ya.

The Quest for a Quiet Space

What you're looking for is a "good enough" space. Not where you won't be interrupted, necessarily, but where you won't be interrupted every 30 seconds:

- Is there a nook? Can you make one? (I have, in fact, worked in the cupboard under the stairs. Also in the shed, but it turned out to be too cold. Or too hot. Depending on the season.)
- Is there a time of the day that it will be easier to find space? (This overlaps a bit with "finding time," but the people in your living space may change from hour to hour.)

If there's a cozy corner with a bookshelf next to it to stash your stuff... claim some space.

What if it's Right Next to the Gaming System?

We have some video games in our house, and they are very annoying, in the most comfortable room in the house, a lot of the time.

I do not recommend trying to do this work with somebody yelling at the screen in the same room (or even in the room next door.) If you have to choose between a noisy space with a desk and a quiet space with a book on your knees, the quiet space is probably your better bet.

In either case, if you are going to use a consistent space and you know it, stash your stuff nearby so you are ready. If you know you're going to be nomadic, find a nice box or backpack, and gather your materials into a compact and portable form.

Next: Time

Step 3: Finding (or Making) Time

Yes, You Probably Are Too Busy

Let's just be really clear. Everybody is swamped. The exact nature of the swampedness varies from person to person, but nobody has the corner on overly stuffed calendars.

I just wanted to get that clear before you said, "But, but!"

It is unlikely in this day and age that you have swathes of time going unclaimed. You probably don't "have" the time to do this. But you probably have things that you can push back on to *make* the time.

Structures and Control

I take issue with one of the things that I hear frequently, and that is, "We all have the same 24 hours in a day."

That is sort of true, if we were isolated automatons with no connections to other human beings, but we're not. We have responsibilities, and obligations, and expectations, and varying degrees of control over our schedules.

Some people have dependents who will *die* if they don't take care of them.

Other people have staff.

The amount of time you have for discretionary spending is much higher if you have staff than if you *are* staff. So stop it with the, "everybody has the same 24 hours." (AKA, "Don't 'should' on yourself.")

That out of the way, the first question is, "Do you have control of your calendar?"

Because then it's a question of selecting a time (that may vary from day to day) that works for you and doesn't conflict with other things you want to be doing. Like Christmas dinner, for example.

Not while you are eating dinner, obviously, but you might be able to sneak in half an hour while things are in the oven. *If you can block off dedicated periods of time each day, that would be your best bet.*

No, REALLY, Seonaid...

If time is a serious issue (and it very well may be), I would recommend at least *reading* the prompts as early in the day as you can. I promise, your mind will work on them in the background. If you find yourself unexpectedly alone... five minutes of free writing will bring you astonishing insights.

(If you need to distract the kids, I made you some coloring pages of varying difficulties for different ages.)

If you miss a day, no worries. Read the prompts, see whether they are still relevant on the next day. Write them both together. Pick which one means more to you. Write about how hard this is. Take three weeks to work through the pages. Object to my framing...

There are no rules.

This is for you.

Step 4: Setting Expectations

I remember when I started taking time for myself, I felt really, really, really awkward about it.

Yes. Three “reallys.”

I made up all sorts of excuses as to why I needed to learn new things, I focused on things that I could earn money at, and I tried to minimize how much impact it had on my family.

It still impacted my family.

This is a small thing that you’re doing right now, but it could be the beginning of setting up some new patterns. If you can, try telling anybody who shares your space and responsibilities: “I signed up for a short writing program that’s going to take me about half an hour a day for the next couple of weeks. Could you [something that would be helpful here]?”

(That’s not a mistake in the guide... you’re supposed to figure out what to ask for.)

If that seems impossible, and you don’t want to tell them what you’re up to, just carve out the bits of time that you can. This time of year there’s lots of sneaking going on... you could try, “Oh, I need a few minutes.” And if it’s kids, there’s always, “Mummy’s busy, but I will be done in...” Again, if they’re the right age, don’t forget that I made you some colouring sheets.

Phew! That was longer than I expected. I hope that it helps, and that you find the time and space to make the most of this.

Gathering

What bit of this (time, space, other people) feels most challenging to you?

Do you have any resistance to making space for your own practice?

Is there anybody you could ask for help to make this easier?

[illegible]

