

A Writing Life #3: I Must Write
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This column was originally going to be an overview of a few good websites for writers. Unfortunately, I ran into a little snag – I couldn't write it.

I mean, I could have forced myself, but I kept finding ways to avoid it. And when I got bored of Solitaire and Tetris, when my eyes started to cross from too much editing for the ComixPedia April issue, I went off and learned how to play FreeCell.

The problem is that I *need* to write about something else.

And that something else is death.

Aw crap, you're probably thinking... *death sucks*. Yes, well, bear with me. I do have a point that comes back to writing.

Back on Saturday, 6 March 2004, my cousin Lucy died. We weren't close. She was nearly twenty years older than I am. And she was not an easy woman to get close to, especially in the family context where I only saw her maybe once a year. I haven't gone home much in the past few years, so the last time I saw her was in the summer of 2003 and before that was probably the late 1990's. But I'd known her all my life, so I felt duty bound to drive down to New Jersey (I live in Massachusetts) and be with my family. I ended up staying nearly a week, sleeping at my Grandmother's house and hanging out with my many female relatives. It turned out to be the right thing to do and a good way to honor her memory and handle my sorrow.

I don't like to compare grief, but the hardest part for me was watching her parents and her brothers and sisters and nephews get through it. They loved her dearly and I felt for them. Lucy worked for the United Nations and contributed to the world through her work in eight countries. She was a good daughter, a good sister, and a good aunt and I regret that I will never really know her.

Through the course of the wake, funeral, and repast (my family is Catholic and these are the traditions) I met many family members I'd never met before. Or whom I'd met in some distant murky past when everything was larger and everyone was taller. It turns out one woman knew my uncle and one brief anecdote about him – nor more than a sentence or two – was enough to throw me into my own world of uncontrollable grief.

Grief not just because I was in a funeral parlor contemplating the death of a family member (although that put me into a sorrowful state of mind) but because my uncle John died when I was six years old.

My mother is the eldest of five, and he was her next sibling down. He was also my godfather. And because my mother's other brothers were nine and eleven when I was

born, he was my protector when I was old enough for their teasing and torture. He died in a car crash and it was agonizing for the whole family.

I need to write about John.

Need to, want to, and am actually looking forward to writing about John. I have already written a page and it came faster and more naturally than anything I've written in months. I want to go back to New Jersey and do research. I want to sit down with my Grandmother and look at her scrapbook. I want to know the name of the guy who caused the accident and the other victim who was in the car behind my uncle. I want to read about the weather conditions and the icy roads. I want to have my relatives tell me stories about John or relate bits of memories, or just tell me their thoughts.

I want to evolve what's left from a flash point for grief over to something substantial that will honor his memory.

I need to write about John.

This is a thing that happens to us. When it happens to writers we write about it, because we use words to interact with the world. But it also happens to people who don't consider themselves writers. It can happen to musicians and painters and truck drivers and lawyers.

And each of us **must** tell this particular story any way we can. We need to write it out or speak it or paint it or make it into music. We might sketch it or sing it or dance it or turn it into a stand-up routine.

The story, the need, and their twined existence becomes a block in our writing, a clog in our pipes, a recurring theme in our music choices. The story is talking to us, begging us to tell it, leaking around our conscious minds and bleeding into our dreams.

I don't generally agree with Freud, but repression is a very real thing. The more you repress something, the more it sublimates into other parts of your life where it can be expressed. Sometimes the form of expression is healthy, like crying at a funeral. And sometimes the forms of expression aren't really appropriate, like bursting into tears while chatting with friends or getting drunk after reading a newspaper story.

And sometimes the need teases around the edges, like inspiring a book addict (me) to buy a pile of books about New Jersey history that may never get read. I was seeking a past, a context for my life, and I didn't know where to look so I blindly flailed around in retail therapy and bought what best soothes my nerves – books.

But in the week since I've been back, as I've reviewed the time we spent celebrating my cousin's life and grieving our loss, I listened to what it told me about myself, my past, and my family. And I realized that the story that's creating the choke point in my ability to express myself is the story of John and me.

To bring this back around to writing – if there’s an elephant in the middle of the living room, acknowledge it. Write about it. If your other work is uninspiring or you’re feeling listless about sitting down to write, consider what else is lurking in your subconscious, waiting for expression. You probably won’t have to dedicate your life to it – writing down the pain and putting words to what’s bugging you might be sufficient. Just starting the process can loosen everything else up and you can work on the thing you must write while also working on other projects. I find I need to alternate between something weighty and something lighter to keep my own sanity.

Just to be clear, I AM NOT A THERAPIST. I offer these suggestions from the point of view of a writer who was blocked and managed to get unblocked. If it’s a horrible secret you can’t tell anyone, write it on paper and burn it when you’re done. Talk to a therapist. Paint the colors of your nightmare.

Do what you need to do to create your own ritual of expression and (so long as you’re not hurting yourself or anyone else) indulge yourself.