

Inspirational guide for writers.

It's Worth the Struggle: Inspiration for Contemporary Writers

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# *It's Worth the Struggle*

Inspiration for Contemporary Writers

AQUARIUS PRESS  
DETROIT, MICHIGAN

# *It's Worth the Struggle: Inspiration for Contemporary Writers* *Ebook Edition*

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Published by AQUARIUS PRESS

PO Box 23096 Detroit, MI 48223 313-515-8122

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[www.aquariuspressbookseller.net](http://www.aquariuspressbookseller.net)

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ISBN 978-0-9819208-2-5

Printed in the United States of America

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# *Writing through the Pain*

Debraha Watson

My love of writing began when I was given a 3x5 white diary with a gold lock and key for my eleventh birthday. My foster mother gave it to me along with a lopsided chocolate covered cupcake with one used unlit birthday candle. I was fascinated with what I called my *secret book*. I grew up during the 50's when the belief was that children should be seen and not heard, yet by the age of eleven I had lived through neglect, sexual abuse, the death of a parent and three foster homes. I had experienced these painful and traumatic events with no positive outlet to release feelings that I was too young to fully understand. Adults were the enemy. They were not to be trusted. I would often turn on myself, hearing an inner voice that told me that I was ugly inside and out. During those times I'd close my eyes so tight that they would tear and I would pray to disappear. I was a child with an emotional cancer growing inside.

The pastel multi-colored sheets of paper within my diary allowed me to record my deepest thoughts. I discovered I could write what I dared not speak. I would rush home daily and retrieve my diary which I kept behind the radiator in my bedroom wrapped in a dingy white face cloth. I'd find a corner in my bedroom and sit Indian-style while I painstakingly wrote

in small print to save space. I wrote about my remembrances of my mother, whose face was fading from my memory; the boy who teased me at school; and the bad things that happened in the dark.

I kept my diary for almost a year. Unfortunately my foster mother found it while cleaning up my room. She read the passage where I wrote, *Uncle George showed me his thing*. Uncle George was her brother. She ripped out the pages, tore them in small pieces and burned them in the trash barrel in the backyard. She then whipped me naked with a wet peach tree switch, all the while calling me a “Lying fast little heifer.” The next day, almost like magic, I found a notebook on the way home from school on the playground. Its light blue cover was muddy but the pages were clean and intact. I wiped it dry with the sleeve of my coat, ran home and found a different hiding place for it and continued to write. This is when and where I learned to write through pain.

During my chaotic and painful route to maturity I have learned other ways of dealing with emotional distress. I have used counseling, meditation and natural-holistic therapy. But I always return to writing as a coping mechanism.

I am the first to admit that most of my work reflects real life experiences. I develop characters based on people I’ve known and scenes around places where I have been. However, in honing my writing skills, I have learned to not only capture the emotion, but to analyze the events and give voice and personality to the characters. I also have learned to not only capture horrible incidents but all worthwhile experiences that make up this journey called “life.”

Writing through pain involves delving into the sensitive parts of our souls. It takes courage to expose oneself to readers. Leaving ourselves “buck-naked” to the world can cause embarrassment and additional stress. I am currently working on a memoir and on one occasion when writing a scene I found



myself returning to a moment of intense fear and miserable adolescent humiliation. I found that after forty-plus years, I had dredged up old memories and emotions, and had reverted back to a scared little girl. For several nights I experienced nightmares and insomnia. But I kept writing because I knew I had to be willing to go back to the most scary and excruciatingly painful experiences of my life. Out of those few sleepless nights grew intensive writing. In the psychology community, this act is termed “energizing fear.” Writing while distressed can be raw and fresh. Strong unadorned words have power.

I remember talking with my sister, Lois, as I began my memoir. First, let me say that Lois is a child of the 40’s. Having been adopted at birth, she had a very different childhood from mine. She grew up in a sleepy southern town. I grew up, for the most part, in Detroit’s Black Bottom and Eastside living in five different foster homes.

Though our mother’s blood flows through our veins, Lois and I have very different worldviews. I gave her the first twenty or so pages of the manuscript to read and in those pages I described in graphic detail the sexual abuse I endured. A few days later I received a telephone call from Lois. She was totally enraged. She asked me why I would want to “Put my business in the street like that. It just brings shame to the family.” I explained to her that by sharing this experience I am acknowledging that it was not my fault, it does happen in the black community and that one can heal from odious acts of violence. I found that by speaking openly about my abuse I could defy fear and pain. I also knew from her response that I had touched a nerve, which was exactly the response I wanted from my readers.

As a writer, I have to make decisions about how much I want to share. Though heart-wrenching moments can be described tactfully, without exploiting or bringing embarrassment to family members, I struggle to write with integrity, fairness and

respect. Nevertheless, everyone remembers things differently. There is never going to be the same view of a shared past. The bottom line is to write about things that are important to me and to be honest with myself and my audience. Writing though pain does not mean that I write for revenge or to be self-serving. I write for redemption, understanding of others and to restore my sense of self.

I am not the only writer who has used pain to fuel her work. In one of the many books that I have read on the process of writing, Ralph Keyes, author of *The Courage to Write*, makes a distinction between toxic and nutritious anxiety. He states that “the former blocks while the later arouses.” Examples of this can be seen in the works of several authors whom I admire. Alice Walker and Maya Angelou have displayed similarities in their lives and their work. Both have written about their personal experiences with intense physical and emotional pain during childhood. Alice Walker in an essay in *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, writes about the loss of her sight in one eye at the age of eight. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou recounts the experiences of her childhood rape. Both of these courageous writers take the reader on a roller coaster ride of emotions yet they recount their traumas without malice. They touch our hearts and raise our awareness. At the end of the ride, both authors challenge the reader to find hope and forgiveness.

Another electrifying example of this is Sapphire’s *PUSH*. Though fictional, this story follows the tradition of Walker and Angelou in that the author takes her readers inside the tumultuous life of the protagonist, Precious Jones, an illiterate sixteen year old who has suffered through two incestuous pregnancies and contracts HIV. The story frays our nerve endings with the author’s graphic portrayals of Precious’ pain, but at the end, Sapphire transforms the girl’s journey into a

story of strength, community and self-empowerment.

I have often been asked, "Do you have to have live through traumatic events to be a good writer?" My response is, "Of course not." But I truly believe that we all experience universal problems such as poverty, illness and death in some form. Looking at life's challenges in terms of how, why, and what they mean to you is a healthy way to write through recovery. I am not advocating that everyone share their most intimate, painful experiences through writing. However, I do suggest that the reader be allowed to see you, the writer, at those moments when you are most open and vulnerable.

The key to my writing style is my attempt to write within a framework of spiritual principles. I write to affirm. Though a story may start off painfully, I write towards a constructive end to bear witness to both the joys and pain of life. Writing about painful experiences is like cleaning out a junk drawer in the kitchen. If we continue living, it will fill up again. We must use our pain and anxiety as an energy source and have courage to keep on writing.

## *Career Days*

Desiree Cooper

Career Days. Those are the days I dread most, standing in front of a classroom explaining what I do for a living. To avoid the blank stares of middle schoolers, or the bored yawns of high schoolers, I've learned to arrive armed with a poster to explain what it takes to be a journalist.

In the middle of the poster, there's a cartoonish girl carrying a notebook with a sleuth-like concentration on her face. Arrows point out her critical assets: eyes for seeing what others take for granted, ears for deep listening, a mind for remembering details accurately and for making interesting connections. An arrow points out her fingers that must do the writing and her feet that never tire of searching for the truth.

My favorite, I always save for last—the arrow to the heart, where every story begins long before it is written.

The poster is labeled “Tools of a Good Writer.” It's the gimmick that gets me through the hardest part of any story—the beginning. From there, I explain the difference between fact and opinion; I invite the students to explore the subjects of rap music or life on Mars or the talents of Beyoncé. As they argue, they begin to see the difference between fact and opinion for themselves.

And then I tell them that I'm a newspaper columnist, a person who gets to have it both ways. I look at the facts, weigh

them, understand them, consider them. Then I weave them into a point of view.

That usually takes about forty-five minutes. Soon, the students will be streaming out of the classroom. I fear my presentation is already fading for all but one of them who, God willing, will grow up to win a Pulitzer Prize.

But then, a palm rises in the air, pale and smooth. "Mrs. Cooper?" comes the voice. "How do you get to be a columnist?"

I wither in front of the question, weighing the answer that springs from my heart, and choosing instead the one that I've rehearsed in my head.

"I went to journalism school, then to law school," I respond, starting first on the foundation of fact. "While I was practicing law, I started freelancing. Eventually, I applied for an opening as a columnist and the rest is history."

Implicit in the answer is this: Get your education, work hard, and ace a job interview and you, too, can be a columnist. But I know that this isn't the whole story.

My life as a writer has been much more mystical than that--in fact, it has felt divinely ordered. How do I say to them that I wrote to save my life? And that it was years later that I realized that maybe my life had been saved in order that I may write?

I bought my first computer in 1992. I was the married mother of two children. I loved my children, but had underestimated the toll parenting and a career would take upon my spirit. Too many nights, I fell into sleeplessness like a hooked fish, flopping and struggling to breathe.

Somehow I found the wherewithal to start writing it all down. I did it because I could find no other way to hold on to myself. I wrote through fatigue, anger, resentment. I wrote into hope, possibility, imagination. Through the keyboard, I gave my soul CPR.

It would be nearly a decade and several careers before my words formed themselves into poems, stories, manuscripts, columns. It would be longer still before my livelihood and my love for writing began to merge. But it didn't matter. I wasn't writing for fame or outside recognition. I was writing so that I would always be able to recognize myself, even when life was swallowing me whole.

Here's what I wish I'd told those doe-eyed preteens in the classroom. Writing isn't about inspiration or money, but about self-discovery. You write to say something and you write to listen to what others have to say.

One of the scariest moments in my life was when I found I couldn't write. In that desert I learned that a true writer is always writing, even when she's not. When you are in a drought, it's time to step back, adjust your life and then live it. Let the writing sit—just maintain the intention and the discipline. When the soul is ready to unleash, you'll find a reservoir of experiences to infuse your stories. The words will come.

My favorite Bible verse is *Joel 2:25*, "And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." You're never too old, too poor, too uneducated, too sheltered or too insignificant to write.

Decide that today's the day. Let the precious unfolding begin.

# *Writing During the Lean Times*

Sylvia McClain

*Your book is on the New York Times list of best sellers. Paramount Studio has approached you about turning it into a TV movie special. Suddenly, everywhere you go there are paparazzi all around you. Your writing is the topic of conversations on all the talk shows.*  
WAKE UP! Reality is calling.

That's what happens to me when my list of bills due is longer than the last story, article or op-ed piece I wrote. Dreamland invades my consciousness. "What are you going to do?" is what I ask. "You better get creative, Sylvia" is how I answer myself. You write all the time. Take that muse and use it to do more than just write. As a full-time freelance writer, I find that my money comes in dribs and drabs. No monthly stipend, just dribs and drabs. So I have to get creative about other avenues of income and so should you.

Want to know what I do? I teach. I teach in various settings and venues. Continuing education programs abound throughout public school districts. So I use that avenue as a source of income. These programs exist to promote continuous learning after a formal education. Many individuals want to share what they know in the format of a story, a magazine article or a newspaper piece. Why not show them how to do it? I do and it helps me with the lulls that I have in writing income.

Another option I use is tutoring. Nothing feels more like a dagger in a writer's heart than a composition written by a young or older student who has gone back to school and is not ready for the written word. Lord, help the teachers who have to read written works which are riddled with grammatical errors. As returning students, they need help in polishing their old writing skills. There are plenty of tutoring organizations who love to hire professional writers. Most likely, your education and experience qualifies you to do the job. It also allows you to work as an independent contractor. This gives you the option of knowing how many students you tutor and how often. You decide how much time you devote to it, what an hour of tutoring is worth to you and go for it. I have found it to be very inspiring knowing that I help others have an opportunity to put their thoughts and feelings in writing.

Lastly, how about being a substitute teacher? This too, like tutoring, gives you the options as to where, when and how often you work. I like doing this because it gives me new ideas to write about. Not only do I meet many young students, I get to hear the stories they tell. One story I was told once became the subject of my column the next week. As I only substitute in middle and high schools, I find this gives me fodder for anthologies and columns in a way that I would never have been able to find on my own.

When your freelance writing doesn't get you quite the monthly income you wish for, get creative like I did. Look for other ways you can supplement your pocket book and your inspiration. The three ways I gave you are choices I made. But I am sure there are other sources you can come up with. Think about it. Seminars, conferences and speaking engagements are other venues where you can take your writing skills and increase your income.

As you can see, you do have other options. Don't panic like I did in the beginning. Yes, I panicked. Remember I told



you my bills were becoming a mountain I couldn't see over. I was visualizing living on the streets, standing on a corner with my hand extended and sleeping in a cardboard box. Just take a deep breath, and then begin using your sources to find ways to increase your income while you write until you drop.

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