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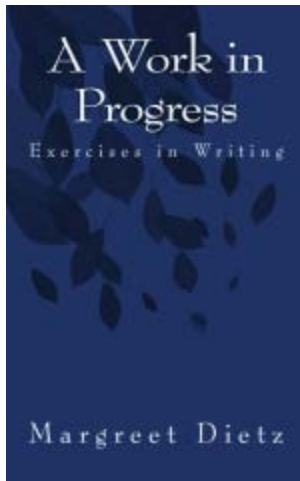
A Work in Progress: Exercises in Writing

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A Work in Progress

Exercises in Writing



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First edition

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ONE

REMEMBERING

My first serious attempt at writing a book has been harder than I anticipated. Making the transition from journalist, which I have been since 1996, to author has been challenging, even more so than I thought it would be. Many times I have been on the verge of giving up. My struggle has been stressful for Tim who works from home and who has seen my initial enthusiasm about my book project turn to frustration and desperation. He has been as supportive as possible. One of Tim's key recommendations has been to Just Do It, advice I neither wanted to hear nor helped me—until two books I read helped me see merit in that approach.

The first one was Ralph Keyes' *The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear*. Ralph's message is that the best writers are anxious, worried and struggle to write. Rather than fighting that concern and allowing the different types of fears we wrestle with overwhelm and stop us from writing or seeking publication, he recommends we accept the angst and use it to propel our writing.

Reading that all my anxieties were a normal part of the writing process, instead of a sign that I didn't have what it takes to become an author, was liberating. I wanted to contact Ralph to let him know how much his book had helped me. Thanks to Google I found Ralph's website and used the contact form to send him a note on March 12, 2009,

three weeks before I started on the project that resulted in the first draft for this book:

Ralph, Just a short email to thank you for writing The Courage to Write. I've been struggling for the past year with writing my first book and started reading yours feeling quite desperate about my seeming lack of progress and my level of anxiety about that.

Having worked as a journalist since 1996 I thought I knew how to write. And with a topic I am so passionate and knowledgeable about, I didn't anticipate it to be anywhere near as hard as I have felt it to be.

*I didn't expect that writing a book, especially a first, was going to be easy. But lying awake at night with a brick in my stomach, wondering why I couldn't do something I've wanted to do for years, was not what I had anticipated. And it made me question whether I really was a writer after all. How could I feel so reluctant and unable to write? William Zinsser's book *On Writing Well* had already told me that "A writer will do anything to avoid the act of writing."*

While that helped, it is your book that has changed my entire outlook on the past 14 months and—perhaps more importantly—about the months ahead. It's made me realise that my experience is not abnormal—it in fact may prove that I am a writer (as long as I complete my manuscript and send it to a publisher or 10). After enjoying your book so much that I read it in two days, I've felt so relieved. Today my writing actually made me laugh—it was not perfect but I was able to simply write words to describe an awkward

situation and enjoy that process without the nasty critic in my head ruining it. I have no doubt there will be more anxiety and probably sheer terror ahead but I will learn to use it—and know that I am not alone. As a marathon runner I am familiar with turning anxiety into excitement and performance. Even if worse comes to worse, you can still reach the finish one step at a time.

I've never given up in any race, though the desire to do so was strong in nearly every single one of them. I've never regretted finishing, and some of my most cherished memories are those of my toughest and slowest races. And I'm using that approach to completing my book as well. Your book has made me feel so much more positive about getting to that point. Thank you very much, Margreet

Ralph responded the next day thanking me for the note and wishing me well. He mentioned he is a long-time runner too and suggested I might want to friend him on Facebook which he had recently joined. Feeling honoured, I did and saw on his Facebook page a photo of a blanket-sized quilt his wife had created from the book jackets of the 15 titles he has written so far. The image of this quilt has been on my mind often since and inspires me.

The second book that helped me appreciate the value of Tim's Just Do It advice in the struggle with my manuscript was Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. In this book she recommends an exercise that sounds scary and compelling: setting up a spontaneous

writing booth at a local bazaar, carnival or rummage sale. “All you need is a pile of blank paper, some fast-writing pens, a table, a chair and a sign saying ‘Poems on Demand’ or ‘Poems in the Moment’ or ‘You name the subject and I’ll write on it,’” Natalie says in her book.

She describes how she set up her booth three years in a row at a bazaar. The first year she charged 50 cents per request, doubling it to a dollar the following year. She had a line of people waiting throughout the day, she writes. “My rule was that I filled one side of a piece of standard-size paper, did not cross out, nor did I stop to reread it. I also didn’t worry about putting what I said in poetic stanzas. I filled a page like I did in my notebook. It was another form of writing practice... It is practice in unselfconsciousness. Write, don’t reread it, let it go into the world,” Natalie writes.

An absolutely terrifying and exciting idea that helped inspire the process that led to this book.

Exercise: Think about the very first time you considered writing a book. Describe everything you remember about that moment, how old you were, where you lived, what the topic of the book was, whether you started on it, and what happened to your plan. Remember what it was, and perhaps still is, that held you back from writing that book, or any other, and put this to the page now too with as many details as you can. Do not judge your words and sentences now—just write.

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