

## DON'T QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

The Writing Shed  
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I'm gazing out the windows at the mud flats as a path of tidal water moves in from the river. The sun picks up glints and refracts them from the moving creek as it spreads itself out in front of my writing shed. Shore birds wade closer towards me plucking at the food source the tide moves in until the level of the water impels them to lift off to shallower water farther up the river. This water and bird movement happens twice a day at the whim of the moon, and I am blessed to witness it over and over again. This morning I watch the river and then the creek fill up with sea water, glancing up now and again from old journals spread before me as the tide comes in. Normally, I am so absorbed in my writing that momentary glimpses simply reassure me that all is as it should be and always will be.

The writing shed is not really a shed, except in the legal sense of the word, but a 16 by 20 foot garage-sized structure, with its capacity for a second floor only half realized by a loft at the back, away from the tidal creek. This morning the front of this little house is wide-open to the southeast light that pours in through the many purposefully planned windows, warming up its corners, lighting up the book shelves that line the back and side walls. The structure is set off in the woods where neither it nor the house can view the other. Five years ago in a brave and self-serving moment, I paid a visit to our local tax collector and asked about taxes and out buildings and found out exactly what would be the least taxable under the law. And that is what I have: a plumbing-less outbuilding which makes me one of the luckiest women on earth.

My friends helped me raise the simple post and beam structure. I hired the beams cut, and then I formed the joints, pounding with hammer and chisel until I finally lost feeling in my right arm. I gathered some Maine friends, sixteen in all, and we set up the frame and feasted. It was constructed in the warmth of friendship and by dint of my own determination, and every year it will get a little more attention. A book advance and three years' of income tax returns financed this shed. I guarded that money self-indulgently, pulling the book expenses out of my living expenses. The shed will be rough for some years to come: no window sills, its power fed by a heavy duty extension cord running precipitously from the main house, dodged by lawn mowers and frisbee players. This year I painted the plywood floor with "teal tone" and insulated it against winter cold. I've invested writing into writing. That's my rationalization. And I have a place to call my own when the house is tenanted, a place to come during leaves and sabbaticals when I'm not doing field research.

The existence of this place allows me to walk down a path and away, away from the house's intruding reminders of the never-ending chores, to writing that absorbs me. And hours later, it allows me to return home, leaving my academic work where it belongs. I leave it right here where my journals are spread for the moment, lying guiltless on the mammoth desk I've constructed so that it can stay ordered in its disorder, until the next morning. I've dreamed of this shed for years. It is still tar-papered and will be for some years to come, but to me it might just as soon be shingled in gold.

I have given myself this late spring week to get set up the writing shed for a productive summer. Yesterday, I moved all my books out here, and this morning I unboxed my old journals and have been reading them ever since. Though shelving was to be my task, I've taken up my pen because I am moved by them. Now I am writing in and around the journal entries that remind me about how deeply I have wanted this retreat, my writing shed; my yearning for it is sprinkled through the years.

April 1975

Have you ever tried to write with a blond cuddle in your lap? Someday I'll wish for this intrusion between myself and pen; now it's just a warm loved nuisance.

And it comes back to me. The hours that I would sit, balancing two year old Sarah and my journal and four year old Jed in my lap. A fellow teacher, who hadn't understand the demands of parenthood, had given me a journal that Christmas and reminded me on the card that I liked to write. So then and again I would have a thought or two beyond the demands of school and family, and I would sit down to write. By then, legos were more appealing than a warm lap to my son, but to my daughter I was a sitting target. She would be in my lap within a minute of the time that I picked up a pen. For a few weeks I thought I might be able to concentrate with her there, but sometimes her conversation, even at age two, was more engaging than the blank page. Yet in rereading I find some of these conversations recorded in writing when they might otherwise have been lost.

May 1975- A conversation with Sarah:

Linda: I'm making a list of what I want in my garden. Would you like a place to grow things in my garden? What do you want to grow in your space?

Sarah: Kitty cats and crackers and princes.

Linda: May you find all those.

August 1976- A conversation with Sarah:

Sarah: Mommy, when I growed up, can I be a Mommy?

Linda: Sure if you decide you want to be a mommy when you grow up and if you find a man that you want to be the daddy.

Sarah: And Mommy, if I grow up and be a Mommy, can you grow down and be my baby?

Isn't that enough to have melted any mother right out of wanting to write erudite thoughts in a journal? You'd think so, but I was desperate for time and space to write.

October, 1981

Why do I have such trouble concentrating when I'm home. Dad used to be able to concentrate through a full-fledged tickling battle between my sisters and me. You could stand right next to him and have complete privacy to tell secrets or plot rebellious acts. "Lets run after the mosquito sprayer. I hear it coming." And we would be out of the house, running and whooping in the cloud of DDT that was spewed out of the back of a truck to cut down on the local mosquito population, doing one of those things that were outlawed and hence intriguing, and Dad would be totally oblivious to our sudden departure. Later we would defend ourselves when neighbors told on us by saying that we had said we were going to do it right in front of him.

He would read the newspaper or scientific journals in the big old wing chair in the living room. And when you were in charge of calling him for dinner, nothing could get his attention. "Blow in his ear," my mother told me one day with years of exasperation in her voice, giving me the secret that she had learned some years ago. And I tried it, and indeed I had his attention for that particular dinner summons and for years to come in the playing-your-parents-against-each-other routine.

But here I am with a pile of linguistics problems to complete, and I can't keep my concentration on them. Too much pulls against it in this house of mine. I know Jed is avoiding his French homework. Sarah is too quiet for a third grader. And even if I were to write here for one more minute, she will sense it through the walls, and she will be in my lap. Laundry and dishes are undone. It will be another late night. I'm exhausted; I wonder if graduate school is really possible?

It has long struck me, with albeit a smallish sample, that most men's concentration on their agendas is stronger than that of women. My personal agenda at that time of the above journal entry was not to "C" out of graduate school in my first bout with transformational grammar. My concentration was fractured by the needs of my children and home. My father, with his remarkable concentration, would have been able to keep the family need from intruding upon the academic need and vice versa, but I am not good at it. And other men I have known seem to be able to keep the world of work and family more separated, even when they are going on in the same space. I made it through those years in graduate school by using late night and early morning hours. It was four years of exhaustion; it was a balancing act.

The Armful  
Robert Frost

For every parcel I stoop down to seize  
I lose some other off my arms and knees,  
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns--  
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,  
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.  
With all I have to hold with hand and mind  
And heart, if need be, I will do my best

To keep their building balanced at my breast.  
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;  
Then sit down in the middle of them all.

I had to drop the armful in the road  
And try to stack them in a better load.

The women in my Amherst women's group, only one of whom had children, tried to keep me focused on my academic agenda. With my journals spread before me and the tide fully surrounding the house, I remember that now. They urged me yearly to come up with a Wish List. And I remember the moment when I transferred it from its scrap of paper into my journal so that it would have more power in my life than a slip of paper could hold.

January 1984

Personal Wish List for 1984-85

1. take the time to my finance final year in graduate school, pay someone else to transcribe the rest of the research tapes!
2. be assertive at health clinic, try to find a female doctor who knows something about graduate student stress
3. find a place to write away from home, to finish dissertation
4. lose 5 lbs and keep it off all winter
5. get a university job by next Sept!
6. go to the movies
7. carve out time for Jed, activity we both enjoy

March 1985.

I've escaped to my university office, working on the final chapters of my dissertation, finally concentrating, my children busy for awhile with agreed upon Saturday morning chores and activities. No students, no children, locked university doors...concentration! But a noise intrudes just as I knuckle into the "affective disruption of cognitive processes" part, and I see pebbles hitting my window. Disbelieving I look down at my fourteen year old son, scooping up another handful of gravel, stopping mid-throw as he sees me rolling the window open. So he does antics outside the window to hide the fact that he is embarrassed to show me that he wants me to see his new "Miami Vice" type haircut. I grimace at the irony of what I've been writing juxtaposed with the scene below. I've been trying to write myself beyond the interruption, but know I am about to lay down my pen before it has quite begun flowing, pack up my book bag, and leave for a day with my children. The pebbles send a message.

And I remember the intensity of that last year in graduate school. I had finally cleared out the pantry that my friend Emily had lived in the year before when I needed some child care. So after she left, I made it into an office. Research materials in files on the pantry wall and a desk and an old Commodore computer. And I closed the door to

that little place and wrote from 4 AM until I heard noises of the children's rising at 7 AM. And I cherished that room and the dawn light that it provided in the fall and spring. No view, cold, but with enough sweaters and warm slippers or the dog on my feet, it worked until deep winter...as long as the children were asleep.

During the summer in which I wrote most of my dissertation, I had to find a place away from home to write in Maine: the local pastor in this fishing village, Emily's father, arranged for me to use a room in his church, until the church lady's met there at 11:00. So that summer I wrote from 5:00 to 11:00, and got home usually before my children could have their first fight of the day. And during the second summer, after the defense, I went into further debt to rent a little office in town for a month, a last ditch effort to complete the revisions. I was embarrassed to ask again for the church room, having said in the initial request that I would need it for just one summer.

And then when employed at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, having at least accomplished #5 on my wish list, I was into another level of need for writing time and a writing place. I was under the publish or perish pressure.

June 1988

I want to have a place to write, far away from the things that demand my attention; my office won't work: either students or students' work fill it and demand attention. I've been thinking about the places where I can best concentrate:

As far from my children as possible.

In absolutely clean houses, where there is absolutely nothing else that needs attention, with a desk that is far away from food, i.e. never in my house.

A place with a window looking out on something beautiful but undemanding: a little solace, but no distraction. There was a study done that I have read about that concluded that if those convalescing have a window in their room with a view that was peaceful, their recovery time was shorter. Serenity is healing; it is also something I need for writing.

A cafe where I know no one, a place with food that I won't want to eat, and decaffeinated coffee.

A place cold enough to avoid somnolence, but where I can keep my feet warm: perhaps, as before, a dog asleep on my feet, or I've heard of these electric pads to put your feet on; I want one.

Noise: continuous hums, bird noises (except for crows), humidifiers, classical music, or ironically, a very busy place in whose busy-ness I am not invested. Airports, bus stations work fine.

Having a list within reach on which to transfer an obligation I've just remembered to the page so it won't intrude on my conscious attention for the work I'm about.

No mirror.

A huge table, with writing materials at hand, where nothing gets disturbed between sessions of writing, a place for the computer so that the window light reflection doesn't strain my eyes. Absolute undemanding neatness of anything I can see.

And for awhile in Duluth, I discovered McDonalds overlooking Lake Superior: steamy, even cauldron like when sub-zero air meets above-freezing, fall water; ice moving in and out in the winter and spring. It satisfied a decent number of the requirements until....

April, 1990

Here I am at McDonalds again, a peaceful view of five salties anchored out on the lake. Deep in my writing task of the month, and in comes a couple I know somewhat well from the university. My head is down, I angle myself so that my back is to them, and I feign deep concentration. But they are involved in each other and get down to breakfast and serious conversation. Their words filter over the usual restaurant hum: familiar names, well known academic upheavals. I sink physically deeper into my untouched work, fearing I will be perceived as eavesdropping when they finally see me there. In reality their unwanted words drag on my attention, prying me from my previously engaging work. Do I move? They will notice me for sure then and try to figure out what I have been able to hear of what they have said. I used to fear someone seeing me--health nut me--at McDonalds. Perhaps I know too many people in Duluth now to write here anymore.

Now it takes a turn for the worse. She begins to cry. The voices don't rise, but the intensity and anguish do. If there was a way out, even crawling under the tables, I'd take it. Now I pretend to write. She finishes crying, eating, talking. I know they've noticed me. I write furiously, but it is not the writing I should be doing, it is this journal entry. They leave, the long way around, so I won't be forced to greet them, to make mutual acknowledgement of the each other's pretense.

Given the homeless man who is here from 6-8:00 AM, now that it is getting cold, spending, as I do, two hours on a cup of coffee (a man who twitches and who talks to people who don't exist for me), and given the group of retired men who have begun to come each morning, sometimes even taking my table, given these people who I have begun to pay attention to, McDonalds is lost to me as a place to write.

February, 1991

I'm tucked away. The university has given me a small office under the eaves of an old campus building so that I can get away from my office where I am constantly interrupted during my single quarter leave. I have a small window that looks over some of the grand old lawns in East Duluth. This garret adds a bit of peace to the grant writing that I am doing now. I consider myself very lucky sitting in the window dormer writing.

September, 1991

I just returned from a long walk home. Jed dropped me off at my Old Campus office and as I mounted the steps to the third floor, peace descended on me. I turned down the hall to my room on the roof floor, turned the key in the lock, and it didn't work. I sat on the floor to think, realized that my leave was over and that some other single quarter leave recipient had taken over, locks changed. It was a long walk home, one which resolved me to go ahead with my writing shed plans.

Early this spring my dear Aunt Mary visited me in Maine. She likes Maine, but was uncharacteristically smitten with my writing shed, as unshingled as it was. I was surprised because she lives in a well-tended, well-polished house, and I was worried that she would see my paradise as shabby. I explained somewhat guiltily that writing was part of my work. I knew she knew that because tears had come to her eyes when I gave her a copy of the book that had grown out of my dissertation, written out of my hide, in bouts of time stolen from my children. She fully understood what it had taken out of me to get that book completed. But on that morning earlier this spring, when I was somewhat apologetic, she said, "Why shouldn't you have a shed; men have sheds to do their work or offices where they can shut doors. I've always wanted a place like that. That's not self-indulgent. Everyone deserves a retreat for what they want to concentrate on, but few women get them."

Now I have a room of my own and a room with a view, and Aunt Mary approves of the concept heartily. And we joke around about men's retreats: duck blinds, libraries, deer stands, hunting and fishing camps, garages, work sheds, basements: men's domains. And then she retreats a little from a conversation that is a little too disloyal to her long-loved, recently departed husband, saying that Uncle Rauri had often taken her fishing, and that she had a desk in his office and that she guesses women have their kitchens and maybe men have to retreat from the home that has been a woman's place. And I wonder about it all. About my love of writing, about my love of home, and about the mix of the two that doesn't work for my fragile concentration.

Every morning this spring I have awakened as if on the morning after Christmas, with excitement in remembering a gift that is still to be played with, in truth a gift that I have finally found the courage to give myself. And out I march eager into the morning chill, along the path to the shed which still holds enough warmth from yesterday's afternoon sun. My feet are both in slippers and under the dog, my children who don't fight anymore, are still asleep in the house, the books are shelved, there is no undone work within view except the writing before me. All dishes and laundry are safely undone in the main house; birds sing. I've shifted the keyboard a bit to the shaded corner of my desk, the one I move to when the strong sun competes with screen light until the cursor is invisible. I have to wait until the sun moves over the peak of the highest window until I

can shift back. An hour in exile from my river view. That's my design flaw in what, otherwise, has been a perfect plan. Even the ceaseless tides can't measure my gratefulness.

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