

Finding Time to Write

by Jane Lenz Elder

At the ATLA pre-conference in Atlanta this year, I attended the open session about writing for *Theological Librarianship*. A wide variety of people came and went. All of them had a desire to write, but their common lament was the inability to find time to do it. Given that I am a woman of strong opinions, statements of this sort plunge me into a weird sort of bifurcated mental frenzy because each of these good folks is absolutely right. And absolutely wrong.

Of all the platitudes that exist about writing, the one ringing truest is — with apologies to Nike — “Just Do It.” Take five minutes here and twenty minutes there and put some words on paper. It is really that easy. Seize the idle and semi-idle moments that fill your day and write something. Wake up fifteen minutes early or go to sleep fifteen minutes later and use that time to write something. Stop reading the headlines of the *National Enquirer* as you wait in the grocery line — we already know that Susan Lucci is a space alien who abducted the Princess of Wales — and write something.

The remnants of time we throw away waiting for a meeting to begin or stuck in traffic can create glorious patchworks of words that one day might actually amount to something publishable. I say this as someone who wrote the introduction to her first book in an elementary school carpool line. Time, tide, and the need to pick up the kids at school are relentless in their regularity. That fifteen minutes sitting quietly in the car every...single...day eventually yielded, not exactly a masterpiece, but a history thesis I could present to the committee in galley sheets.

This way of writing cannot be considered glamorous. It involves no pipes, cardigan sweaters with elbow patches, or windows overlooking serene autumnal landscapes. Grasping time in this way leaves little room for stroking one's beard and looking sagacious — which is how I hit upon this method in the first place. I was a full-time university staff member with two small children when I began graduate work in history. A professor in the research methods course — who has now gone to meet his maker (and I swear I had nothing to do with it) — invited each of us to suggest ways of doing research that the others might find useful. When I suggested keeping a notepad to write down ideas that occurred to you while doing weekly errands he rose from his chair in six feet of New Haven indignation, sniffed, and said, “You must come from the Donna Reed school of Historiography.” Then he poured everyone a glass of sherry and explained the *right* way to do graduate work. In his mind it involved long hours of reading and contemplation amongst like-minded colleagues — like cloistered monks, but with a faculty club and martinis.

And that attitude, I realized, is the trouble. Writing is not for the elected few. Writing does not require long stretches of quiet time. Or just the right ink, custom-sized index cards, and an office dripping with literary atmosphere and breathless secretaries. These are myths perpetrated by the movies and old-school Ivy League tweedy professors. What you do need is determination to get it done and a great deal of organizational planning.

Organizational sessions actually require a couple of uninterrupted hours every so often. These are where you create an outline, set your daily word-count goals, and break your upcoming work into short topical chunks to be assembled later. Knowing where you are headed in this way is essential for cultivating the ability to pick up and leave off somewhat abruptly. Furthermore, before you stop for the day, you must leave the way clear for yourself, so that you are excited to return to your work and know exactly what you are going to do next. Leaving your work in a snarl to face the next day is the cruelest and most effective form of self-sabotage going. The next most effective way of sabotaging yourself is letting your work grow cold, which is the beauty of writing in short bursts every day; you don't lose time retreading old ground trying to remember what you meant to say. Or why.

I invite you to give this method a try. Consider doing a short article for *Theological Librarianship* that draws on your expertise. Write a little every day for the next few weeks and you'll be surprised at how easy it is to come up with something substantial. Then send it in.

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