

WRITING REQUIRES TIME ALONE

BY DANNY HEITMAN

My dining room table is the same one I knew as a child, an heirloom that ended up in my house after my mother died. I've been lucky to share meals with my wife and children around a table that, from my earliest memory, has meant family and fellowship.

But this table, through all these years, has also been a place where I've occasionally written in solitude. As a boy, when I tackled my first writing assignments for school, our dining room was typically the only quiet room in the house. It was there, after the Sunday dishes were cleared and everyone else had moved on to other things, that I was left by myself at the table with pencil and notepad — or, later, with a keyboard.

I could hear, from nearby corners of the house, the faint sounds of others having a better time. The low murmur of the TV told me my father and brothers were enjoying a ball game. Rustlings in the kitchen meant that someone was hunting a snack. In the laughter that sometimes spilled down the stairwell, I knew that siblings on the floor above me were goofing off. And there I was, lonely me, eking out a few sentences in the final hours of a weekend.

None of this is supposed to be an argument against the craft of writing, which can bring many other satisfactions and rewards. But anything good usually involves some measure of sacrifice. Good writing, in most cases, requires us to be alone.

Sometimes, paradoxically, we can be alone together as writers. We do some of our first writing in classrooms with other students. As a journalist, I spent many years writing in crowded newsrooms. But even when we write in groups, the work of writing demands that we mentally set ourselves apart for a time, alone with our thoughts.

This doesn't mean that writers must live as monks. We can still have lives filled with friends and family, and these connections make our creative lives better. Beyond that



Annie Dillard receives the National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama in 2014. Dillard reflects on the connection between writing and solitude in her 1989 memoir, *The Writing Life*. Photo provided by National Endowment for the Humanities.

enriching social interaction, though, our craft needs time when we have only ourselves for company.

Annie Dillard makes this clear in *The Writing Life*, a lovely memoir of her career as an author. She recalls an evening one Independence Day when a book project required that she toil at her desk while, in the distance, fireworks lit the night sky. “It was the Fourth of July,” she writes, “and I had forgotten all of wide space and all of historical time. I opened the blinds a crack like eyelids, and it all came

exploding in on me at once — oh yes, the world.”

Her point isn't that writing always or even usually requires us to skip holidays. Dillard shares her story, I think, to offer a particularly vivid example of the kind of apartness that writing does ask of us as a matter of routine.

What's also memorable about Dillard's anecdote is the way that she slowly wakes to the news that revelers are celebrating another national birthday. In the trance of creation, she's lost track of the calendar and the clock.

That sort of focus can give a writer a feeling of sublime consonance, what athletes might call being in the zone. It's one of the nicest gifts of writing — a compensation, of sorts, for those hours by yourself.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to

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