

ON BEING

Stuck

TAPPING INTO
THE CREATIVE
POWER OF
WRITER'S
BLOCK

LARAINÉ HERRING

AUTHOR OF *Writing Begins with the Breath*

From *On Being Stuck* by Laraine Herring, being published May 17, 2016 by Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Introduction

Hear this: The block that you (and all creatives) experience at various times during your work is natural, normal, and part of the whole deal. Nothing is wrong with you. This is part of being an artist. Getting stuck is necessary. But it turns out getting stuck isn't the problem. The meaning you make out of getting stuck is the issue. We must revise the meaning we make of this natural part of the process.

You aren't doing anything wrong when you find yourself stumped. You aren't doing anything millions haven't done before when you turn away from your book—unsure, afraid, maybe even a little angry at it for somehow letting you down. Sometimes, the writing process feels so overwhelming, we just throw up our hands and stop. When we don't know what a good next step is, or what the right next step is, it's easy to panic and freeze, exacerbating the intensity of the natural pause in the creative process. Don't turn away. Things are just about to get interesting.

I don't believe in writer's block, *per se*, but I know very well the feeling of suddenly being stuck in my writing. The difference for me is that I don't see writer's block as the wolf at the door or the obstacle to be destroyed, mowed down, squelched. Instead, I see it as a pause. A signal to pay attention to something. I can't tell you what that something is for you, but I can share with you ways of finding out. Writer's block is a signpost that alerts you to where you're going. It forces you to slow down, to put the brakes on so you won't barrel forward, unthinking and unaware, into the next thing. It prevents you from publishing too quickly—pressing Send too fast. It is a safety belt, keeping you from crashing through the windshield.

The process you'll find in this book is integrative. It won't minimize your experience or provide pithy solutions. My approach teaches connection and dialogue. It focuses on inquiry, within both yourself and your work to keep yourself on track. And it's rooted in the understanding that you are in a relationship with your writing and with the work itself. Like all relationships, there are changes of plans. Diversions and miscommunications. Fights, even. But with the relationships that matter, there's an eventual circling back together. A coming home to each other, stronger for having navigated the uncharted course.

Instead of reacting to the block, I encourage you to stop and look at it. Listen to it. Touch it. Find out what its gifts are, what it's offering you. This block—this pause—emerged from you and your work. It is a part of that work, just as much as your characters are. Before you get out the ax, pour it some tea. Have a conversation. You may find you can hold hands across the table instead. You may find the block itself is the very heart of your work.

Using Inquiry to Work through Blocks

In this book, I share a Deep Inquiry Path for writer's block. We will use questioning to deepen our relationship to our writing and our blocks. We are seeking a more sophisticated understanding of our work and process, and from that new place of awareness, we will see windows where we once saw only walls. In the Deep Inquiry Path, we will not force a predetermined answer from ourselves or our work. Instead we will cultivate an essential, sacred relationship with our work and seek a deeper understanding of what our work is offering us. Inquiry is a powerful tool for exploring the nature of what we feel is blocked and for helping both our work and us as writers to move forward. We have to grow so our work can grow.

As writers, we're probably more than accustomed to the periods of seemingly endless vacant window staring that accompany the writing process. We may have heard or otherwise internalized comments from others that characterize our writing as wasting time. To some people, what we're doing may have no perceived value if there is no

product. Writers tend to have temperaments and dispositions that allow us to remain alone in a room as long as it takes to bring back the fruits of our labors. We're OK with being by ourselves. In fact, we thrive in the company of the page and the characters in our heads and hearts. This ability to be alone and look inward is a fantastic skill set to use to move through blocks. We are perfectly positioned to use the tools we can already access to deepen our work through questioning. You may think active questioning and experimentation have more to do with the sciences—with inventors and researchers. But remember that writing is also an experimenting art, and goodness, are we ever inventors! Writing is also a science of questions.

Too often, we're taught to track only an outcome—a result. But what about pursuing our curiosity? What about following the bread crumbs we find along the way? There's not much room for that conscious wandering, this soulful meandering, in modern life, but increasingly, research is showing us the value of unstructured activity and time—the value of unregulated play, not just in children but in adults as well—and the importance of creating space for surprises. It is quite hard to be surprised if everything is planned out in advance.

You may fear that you will lose momentum if you keep questioning everything. Perhaps you're afraid you'll just get lost in the work. Won't everything just be worse? We can attach so deeply to what we think we have and where we think we're going that any deviation is a threat to the work itself. The Deep Inquiry Path that I'll show you will allow you to have these necessary diversions—these times of conscious meandering—but the questions will also keep you focused on the work at hand. You won't have to worry about not finding your way back. You'll have left your own bread crumbs along the way.

This book offers lots of different kinds of activities to help you deepen your relationship with your writing and move you forward when you feel unsure of the next step. They won't all work for you. Some that are effective today won't work tomorrow. That's the shape-shifting nature of practice. That's the dance we do with our work. We grow the relationship slowly, and our breakthrough moments arise from that steady pace. The Deep Inquiry questions, which are the heart of this book, can be applied in as many ways as you can imagine

to your stories and your process. Please don't be afraid to listen to your inner wisdom. All of the activities in the book are doors. Where you go when you step through them is entirely your journey to make.

To that end, I encourage you to create your own Foundation Tool Kit. This kit will consist of practices, prompts, movement activities, playlists—anything you can think of that will help you move forward and deeper into your work. These tools will be your tried-and-true touchstones, your allies in your process. You can think of them as micropractices, things you can do in just a few minutes to realign yourself, stop the free fall into fight-or-flight responses, and break unhelpful thought patterns.

Before we dive in, remember these points:

- » Writing is a slow process. It is not typing. It is a synthesis of past, present, and future. It's the condensation of an idea, a vision, or an experience into a focused sensory experience on the page. It's the deepest form of sharing—one imagination to another. It's the most intimate form of communication—mind to mind, heart to heart. This synthesis does not happen in one sitting, one week, one month, or one year. It happens slowly over months and years of paying deeper and deeper attention to your process and the fruits that come from that work.
- » It takes many drafts and lots of revision to get to a final product. Think of painting a room. The primer coat goes on first, long before the edge work gets done. Your early drafts are the primer coats. Let them be that. Avoid going back and reworking an early draft.
- » Writing is worthwhile. Our work matters.

Throughout this book, you'll use questions to enhance your work and life. Think of them as living questions. They may promote more questions or prompt you to take a slightly different approach to a question. That's perfect. You don't have to accept this work exactly as it's presented. Please make the questions and activities your own. Use them flexibly and intuitively. You can modify anything to suit your circumstances. Don't be afraid to take ownership of your process. Who else will?