



Believing: Planning and Optimism

A Writer Tries to Emerge from a COVID Fog

I am sitting here at my computer screen, trying to do something that has been easy and familiar for a long time.

Before the COVID took over our collective consciousness in early 2020, I had kept myself happily engaged with my writing. To illustrate, during the twelve months of 2019, I wrote 21 stories and essays that I posted to my website at ConVivio-online.net. Prior to that, I had posted 20 pieces in 2018 and 18 pieces in 2017. I also wrote several chapters of my “long family story”; I wrote three chapters of “The Flying Pig Novel”; fabricated two time-travel pieces, and started thinking about writing Act Two of the one-act play I had written in 2013 called “Some Explaining to Do.” Friends of mine got to contribute their favorite poetry as guests to a series of ConVivio posts celebrating “National Poetry Month.” In addition, each month during those years I prepared a piece of writing to read to the group at monthly meetings of The Whistlestop Writers at The Swirl — a wine bar in Livermore. So, my writing was humming along pretty well in 2017, 2018, and 2019 — and well before that — AND that writing had an audience.

But then, a dramatic change happened — COVID-19 arrived and took possession of us all. In all of 2020, and through July of 2021 — over the span of 19 months — I posted only eight (8) pieces of writing to my website and I wrote NOTHING for The Whistlestop Writers, which had been suspended because of the virus. I couldn’t count the number of times, I sat at my computer and stared at drafts of ‘next chapters’ and got nowhere. I guess we can say that was a dramatic drop-off, eh? In conversations with other writers, I have learned that this effect has become fairly common. So, what happened?

A Change of Venue

One big change was the fact that, because of COVID-19, the Pleasanton Public Library closed.

Over a couple of years, I had gotten in the habit of packing up my computer, driving across town, settling into one of the desks in the back half of the library, and spending an hour or two writing. It was, by definition, a quiet venue with few distractions and a comfortable place to sit. Perhaps being surrounded by thousands of books contributed to the stimulation that desk provided. I got a lot of work done there and was quite pleased with the results. Driving to the

library had a familiar, and comfortable feeling of “going to work.” In that setting, I wrote three time-travel fantasies set in other times and places — Paris, San Francisco, and even my old home town of Antioch. I conjured up a fictional but plausible story in which my alleged fifteenth-century ancestor worked on Brunelleschi’s Dome project and then decided to leave his family’s marble business to escape the turmoil that engulfed Florence in the 1490s and moved south to a less prosperous but “safer” location in Calabria. While that story was 100% fiction surrounded by historical facts and some real characters, it set up a believable answer to a family question: how and why did members of my family end up in Southern Italy so, four centuries later, they could emigrate to America from the small town of Savelli in Calabria? In turn, that story led me to imagine that my grandparents, who traveled from the extreme poverty of Southern Italy in the first decade of the 20th century, certainly must have left behind family members in southern Italy whose descendants, 100 years later (right about now), might wonder what became of those relatives who got on ships and sailed across the Ocean to Ellis Island a few generations before. That library writing desk also brought to life stories of appreciation of the work of one fictional artist and one very real one (Gretta). That desk also provided a platform to write about our seven trips to Europe and the local connections Gretta and I made there. I suppose I can’t give the library desk full credit for all of that, but it seems to have helped.

But then ... the library closed and I found that the dominance of COVID in America caused me, and so many others, to focus unwillingly on some very unsettling factors: the very real dangers of the virus, the nearly complete shutdown of the social interactions that had mattered so much to us with friends and family and places (like libraries, bookstores, and restaurants) before COVID, and the frame of mind that came with all of those features that stimulated my writing, and that of other writers, prior to 2020. For so many of us, that pre-COVID frame of mind certainly contributed to our ability to focus on topics larger than ourselves and the “normal realities” that were driving our world. In 2020, many of us learned that “Zoom” and “Facetime” meetings were an imperfect substitute for REAL family gatherings and REAL meetings. During that time, crawling toddlers became walking, running, talking kids. Middle schoolers showed up remotely on laptop screens as high school students. One painful memory will stick with me for a long time — the day Gretta and I showed up at the home of two of our grandchildren to celebrate an important day. When we appeared at the kitchen window, the kids, aged three and five, were expecting us and were delighted to see us. They yelled: “Papa! GG!” with big smiles on their faces. When we placed a gift on the front porch and left after just a few minutes without coming inside, they cried. While driving away I wondered: had we done something good by visiting today? I dunno.

So, many of the effects of the COVID life are emotional. Adam Grant wrote in the NYT:

“I started watching standup comedy specials, hoping to get a taste of collective effervescence while laughing along with the people in the room. It was fine, but it wasn’t the same. Instead, many of us found ourselves drawn into a dark cloud. Emotions are like contagious diseases: They can spread from person to person. Emotional contagion is when we are literally infected with other people’s emotions.”

AND it turns out that those emotions can be spread by the absence of other people, as we become accustomed to avoiding contact with others to avoid the COVID.

So, it seems that some writers have found themselves in a fog that had the effect of limiting the quality and quantity of our productivity. It was a COVID-induced partial Writer’s Block.

Progress?

Can we PLAN our way out of this? How about:

- mask up and go to a grocery store (and stop ordering delivery) — **Done, done again** ✓✓
- go to a restaurant (Esin) in their outdoor tent (for their famous pot roast) — **Done** ✓
- go to a restaurant (Esin again) and (wait for it) sit INDOORS! — **Done!!** ✓
- visited Yosemite in April (✓) scheduled to return in October — **got reservations** ✓
- plan to go to a Giants’ game — **planned, scheduled, got tix** ✓
- consider taking BART to game — **considering ... it’s a maybe ... we’ll see ...**
- plan to spend time at the library desk — **planned ... when the time is right.**
- write about it — **got started, right here** ✓

It turns out that one other factor, added to hopeful planning, becomes the key:

optimism.

It’s one thing to plan for a time when we can do things the way we used to do them, with the people we used to do them with, in the places we used to go. It’s another to believe that such “re-opening” (to use what is becoming a well-worn phrase) will become a sensible thing to do and will soon become a routine part of our regular lives. We’ve heard it before and now we’ve learned from real-live experience how important believing really is. During a very dark time, Eleanor Roosevelt taught us this (and, as usual, she turned out to be right):

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

So, it’s not that complicated. Even if the “dreams” are relatively simple. We know what life is supposed to be like — we’ve been around awhile. We just have to believe it will return.

So, will the progress we’ve made, and our belief in even more progress, help reduce the Writers Block? Will that optimism lead to more progress in other aspects of our real lives — the lives that stimulate writing and enable everything else we do? My first answer was:

We’ll see ...

But I think, after exploring it further, the better answer that is emerging is, simply:

Yep ... It’s coming back. We believe it. And THAT can help make it happen.