

BEHIND THE BOOK - DEMONS OF THE BLANK PAGE

I've been writing - pretty much every day - since 1978. Thirty-eight years of putting words on a page, making up stories, reporting on events, spouting opinions. In that time, I've done a fair amount of teaching, too: Berkshire Community College, North Adams State College (Now the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts), seven years at Bennington College, a couple of years at Amherst College, and short stints at the Lesley University Low-Residency MFA, Solstice Writing Programs, Writers in Paradise, Queen's College (NC) Low-Residency, Stonecoast Low-Residency, and various workshops. I've also done - and still do - a very small amount of paid editing for individual writers.

In all that time I've read the work of more than a thousand writers - friends and students, both - and I've seen, in my own writing life and in theirs, the various 'demons' that stand in the way of producing good work. In the years I taught at Bennington - 1993-1999 - faculty members had as many as a dozen advisees. In my case, sensibly enough, most of them were involved in creative writing and so there were numerous conversations about successes and failures, finished pieces and obstacles, moments of elation and times of despair.

It became clear to me during those years, and largely through those conversations, that there's a lot more to writing success (however one defines it) than issues of craft and imagination. I saw so many students who had much more native talent than I and who wrote essays, stories, novels, and non-fiction pieces that were of such high quality that I felt twinges of jealousy. But very very few of them had what they, themselves, would have called 'success' with their writing.

For some of them, success meant becoming rich and famous. For others (I'm in this group) it was making a living from writing. Others defined success as simply being paid something for their work, or being published by a good house, or even just finishing a story they'd started and being able to show it to friends and family members and give them a bit of pleasure.

It occurred to me that what stood between these writers and success had little to do with their talent. Something else was getting in the way. I spent a lot of time thinking about it and came up with this idea of the demons - too strong a word, probably - that most serious writers have to deal with at some point in their careers.

Fairly often I am invited to speak to writing groups, college and high school classes, seminars, MFA students, and other creative types, and at those events I started to talk about these demons, or obstacles, or barriers. After a while I refined the ideas and then sat down to put them into book form, thinking it might be helpful to people who want to finish a project, get published, earn money, become famous, etc. There seemed to me to be an abundance of books about craft, so I wanted this to be different. In *Demons of the Blank Page* there is almost nothing about craft. All the advice is psychological, emotional, mental, but I've come to believe that learning to conquer the demons is more valuable even than learning to write a good sentence or a nice paragraph or making a fascinating character or plotting an engaging tale. What good are those skills if you can't overcome writer's block, choose the proper readers, deal with constructive criticism and setbacks, manage your time, believe you have something to say, make yourself do the hard work of rewriting, or conquer the painful moments of self-doubt that afflict anyone who spends any amount of time staring at a blank screen or a blank page?

So, I set down the ideas and brought them out in a small book that's meant to complement all the technical advice writers hear. From time to time I still give these talks, and still encounter aspiring writers who think the only thing standing between them and success as they define it is some trick of characterization or description or plotting or some new way of putting sentences together. Those things are important - as is a measure of luck - but writing is not dentistry or carpentry. There is no such thing as one set of necessary tools and skills, no one right way, no straight path to publication, no degree that guarantees employment or income, not even any interior roadmap that can be followed. It's a different challenge for everyone, but certain aspects of that challenge are common to all of us at various points in the work.

I wrote *Demons* because, at one time or another over these 38 years, I've dealt with all of them and I thought my experience might be of some use to those who, like me, have a passion to make contact with other human beings by putting words on a page.