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THE UNHAPPY WRITER

by Robert Shea

Is anxiety a distinct cause of writer's block, apart from rebellion against self-regulation, or are anxiety and rebellion somehow linked? Working daily at writing can be painful when one is anxious about how good the work is or how well it will be received. The more painful it is to work, the more effort it takes to get oneself to work. My libertarian approach to self-regulation is meant to show how to get oneself to do what one wants to do despite the discomfort involved. But, of course, reducing the discomfort makes self-regulation a lot easier. Anxiety, depression and pessimism are all sources of discomfort to a writer.

I maintain that writing is enjoyable in itself; you don't

have to make yourself enjoy writing; you have to eliminate what prevents you from enjoying it. The less one is able to enjoy writing, the more one is likely to succumb to writer's block.

The basic guideline for self-regulation is to try to do in any situation what we think we need to do to take care of ourselves. Libertarians believe that people should only act in their own best interest. I believe that we don't simply do what we think we should do, because living in an authoritarian society in which we have to take orders--and in which we are expected to be willing to sacrifice our interests for the sake of some entity bigger and more important than ourselves--has led to our developing psychological mechanisms that thwart the direct expression of our thoughts and feelings. As a libertarian, I believe that freedom is the natural human state, and that growing up in an authoritarian society therefore distorts character and is the cause of much inner conflict.

We are used to having our faculty of self-control work in the service of the authorities--parents, politicians, clergy, teachers, bosses. If we try to take charge of our own lives, we sometimes act like a newly independent nation that collapses into disorder because it doesn't know how to govern itself. There's nobody to tell us to clean the house, so we let the house turn into a garbage dump. We tend to forget that we are in control of our own lives, and we rebel against our efforts at self-government. To become a free-lance writer for instance is to take charge of our own work. But if we haven't yet learned

how to get the different parts of our psyche to work together the experiment in self-employment may have disappointing results.

However, people don't refuse to do things they think they ought to do just to be ornery, although a sense that what one is doing is obligatory can dim the enjoyment of even the most pleasing activities. Usually there has to be some other reason for not wanting to do the desired activity, such as that it's uncomfortable or inconvenient. If an activity is accompanied by a lot of anxiety, that makes it uncomfortable and therefore a likely focal point for an inner rebellion.

What is the anxious writer anxious about? Just doing a bad job, or doing a job that is scorned and rejected by the authorities? For most writers, I think, the two concerns are mixed, in that the writers are trying to do a good job by their own lights but also trying to produce something that will pass muster with important others. But I don't think the writer's own criticism of his or her work is the main culprit in writer's block. I believe that the conviction that one must achieve extrinsic goals is what has a paralyzing effect.

In an authoritarian society, we learn that the only important thing about any task is whether it pleases the bosses. We learn that what's worthwhile about our own ability to judge our work is the degree to which we can foresee what the bosses want and win their approval. We learn to do things for extrinsic reasons like approval and money rather than for qualities intrinsic to the work that please us.

Extrinsic goals should be made secondary or eliminated altogether. Possibly the writer should suspend the critical faculty and just rely on unconscious growth processes. Or it might be more interesting and enjoyable to try to achieve one's personally chosen intrinsic goals, where both the choice of goal and the judgment of the result is something the writer has full control of.

Linked to anxiety about their work, for many writers, is a tendency to be pessimistic about how successful it will be. From this pessimism arises depression. Depression delivers a double whammy to the unhappy writer: First, it makes them more sure that the writing is no good and will be received with scorn and rejection. Trying to write in the face of this belief is hard and painful. It's just like when I speak and feel the audience is bored or hostile, I enjoy speaking less and tend to dry up. If they look eager and interested, I enjoy talking to them and I warm up and expand.

Second, the depressed writer doesn't believe his or her efforts at self-regulation are worthwhile. Why bother to force oneself to do this painful thing--writing--if it isn't going to get me published and make some money for me?

Not every creative person who writes to please an audience or to make money is afflicted with inner rebellion, anxiety or depression. Mozart wrote music which followed accepted forms, and he wrote what was popular and what would showcase the singers he was writing for. In effect, Mozart was what we would call a

hack. Perhaps because he had confidence in what he was doing, this seems not to have kept him from writing beautiful music, from enjoying composing and from doing a lot of work.

Similarly, Balzac was enormously prolific, spent most of his waking hours writing and seems to have been sure that his work was the product of genius. He was driven by anxiety to work his way out of debt, but his inner unity, confidence and optimism protected him from writer's block.

So, you can write to please others and still not be anxious, if you expect to be successful in pleasing others. But it is hard to be optimistic about accomplishing something that is more or less out of your control.

Increasing hopefulness works on two levels: it makes it easier to follow the regimen directed by self-regulation, because we believe it will work; and it makes it easier to enjoy the writing itself, because writing is enjoyable when done in a hopeful spirit. When I write with optimism and enjoyment, the flow of ideas is swift and abundant.

Optimism and confidence can be increased, pessimism and anxiety decreased, through cognitive therapy methods. What these boil down to is inner discussions and conversations. Similarly, to overcome inner rebellion we have to have regular self-meetings and internal conversations--parleys between the new independent government and the guerillas. By a process of self-education, we have to commit ourselves to the belief that we are best expressing our freedom and individuality when we do what we think

we should do. We have to dispute and reject the belief that when we decide not to do what's in our best interests we are somehow being more true to ourselves.

Our inner peace conferences have to make certain: a) that we are, in fact, employing our faculty of self-direction entirely in our own best interest, that what it proposes is truly what we need to do to take care of ourself in this situation; b) that we have contemplated all the things we want to do, each of which is probably good in itself, and we have made a decision about priorities.

If I've made my inner peace, then I will no longer act to defeat myself. I will no longer divide myself, alienate parts of myself. If I'm right in thinking that one who has adopted the libertarian approach to self-regulation will have more success, more inner unity and more energy, then these successful experiences and good feelings will make them more optimistic.

In Alcoholics Anonymous they solve the problem of getting themselves to do what's best for them by turning their will over to the direction of a Higher Power. If you think you're just getting direction from yourself, then you may try to rationalize yourself out of doing what you think you should do, and you won't respect the side of yourself that argues for what you should do. This is especially true if you are used to needing an authority to tell you what to do. Whereas if the spokesperson in your mind for what you should do represents the will of a Higher Power, you will be able to distinguish more clearly what you should do from

all your other impulses (you know good and well that your Higher Power isn't going to tell you to go out and get drunk) and will be less inclined to resist it, having made the commitment to follow the directions of the Higher Power.

If one is a libertarian and believes in God, then one would believe that God is a libertarian. A libertarian God would want us to govern ourselves, not take orders from him or from people claiming to be his representatives. So whether the libertarian is theist or atheist it would seem to come down to the same thing, they will want to maximize their ability to regulate their own lives.

When I discover some promising new writing method, I always work with more enthusiasm, because the notion that I've found a magic secret increases my optimism. However, I have learned from experience that no magic secret is going to make me a better writer or make writing easier for me. In the past when I've realized that, I've tended to get discouraged. I see now that the only thing I can change is how I think about the process of writing, about the quality of my writing and about the hardships involved. If: a) I believe I'm truly doing what's best for myself and therefore what I want--even love--to do; b) I am optimistic about how good my writing is and about my ability to handle hardships, then I can truly enjoy my writing.

To enjoy our work, to enjoy life in general, we need to place our ability to judge our work at the service of what we like and don't like. And we need to place our ability to control

our behavior at the service of what we believe we need to do to  
take care of ourselves. And if we believe in God we need to  
believe that this is what God wants us to do.

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