



Sowing Seeds in Clay:

How to Keep Creativity Alive When Your Brain Is Dead

A few years ago, as a new mother for the second time with barely enough time each day to brush my teeth and comb my hair, I went to lunch with my girlfriends. Since our single days, our lives had spread all over the marriage/kid/career map.

One of my friends, a gifted fine artist who was making a good income by creating logos for local software companies, turned to me and asked, “What have you been writing lately?”

My face fell and my eyes welled with tears. With certainty in my heart I answered, “Nothing. I don’t think I’ll ever write again.”

It was the truth. There were no lush words left in me, no more profound metaphors, or dazzling imagery. The poetry had packed its bags and moved on to a fertile soul. These days, I was filled with fears, lists, and exhaustion through and through. My creativity had bought a one-way ticket from Hana to the Mojave.

Someone then told me about “morning pages,” that pump-priming exercise to purge the fears and prime the creative pump. I loved the idea, but for a new mother whose baby needed changing, feeding, cuddling, and stimulation, those three pages took me all day to complete. Still, the need to write nagged me like a mosquito bite.

I knew I had been born to write. Hadn't it been the one, constant, burning desire since I could hold a pencil? Never one to give up, I decided to try again when I returned to work a few months later. "But," I reminded myself, "I have nothing to write, no ideas, and no energy. Besides, I'm paid to write technical user manuals, not stories."

The urge to write was too strong to ignore, so I laid down some rules. Whatever I wrote had to be one page and had to be written quickly. So, I began. Each morning after turning on my computer, I opened a new file and wrote. Some days I'd write about a dream from the night before; other days I'd recount a childhood memory. Other times I wrote crazy, bizarre stories about crazy, bizarre people (like I imagined myself at the time).

After I finished each one-page story, I printed it off and put it in a paper folder. I never read these stories because I knew they'd make me cringe. This continued for about three months, when I suddenly had more time, energy, and confidence to develop ideas into longer, deeper pieces. The folder got buried in a pile somewhere in my home office.

One day a few years ago, I found that folder. Curious and a bit fearful, I began reading those pieces scraped from the dry riverbed. The first one wasn't bad, the second less bad, and the third made me laugh. I was amazed at their freshness, vitality, humor, profundity, and bizarreness. They were not literary masterpieces, but they were far from the contemptible, embarrassing ramblings I'd imagined. Almost every one held something from which I could develop a scene, a character, even a complete story or book.

I learned two things from that exercise:

- You can't keep a writer down. I was created to write, and just like the seeds God creates to sprout in dry clay, nothing can stop me from writing.
- You, a writer, need to obey the calling, regardless of your circumstances. Because when you obey, fruit grows.

New babies, aging parents, fulltime jobs, illness and injury, relocation, and so many other circumstances need your time, attention, and energy more than your writing. If you find yourself unable to write because of your current circumstances, there are several things you can do to keep going until you adjust or the situation changes.

Here are some exercises for planting seeds that will one day sprout. Before you begin, remember these two rules for success:

- Keep your scope narrow and focused. (You want to meet attainable goals.)
- Lower your naturally superior standards. (Don't overwhelm yourself with expectations of perfection. You're not after high literature here.)

1. Buy a small book with lined pages and keep it by your bed. Make sure it's small. Every night (after you climb into bed is a good time), write the date at the top of the page and then what happened that day. Don't write about how you feel and don't get poetic. Write just the facts: the weather, what you did, what your husband, wife, or kids did. Something funny or odd you observed or heard. How your baby pronounced a new word that day. You can only write one page; you cannot write any more. Don't read what you wrote.
2. Create a new folder on your computer and call it "Dailies." Create and save a template, including margins, font, paragraph spacing (double-spaced). Every morning, sit in your chair at your desk, open the template document, and save it as a new file with today's date. Then type the date and a title, and write a story—your dream last night, a memory, a page filled with: "My soul is a wasteland; I have nothing to write. I don't have a thought in my head, I'll never amount to anything as a writer. I'll just give up right now." Fill one page, double-spaced. Do not edit it, and do not read it. Print it and put it in a nice-looking folder (a colorful plastic one with a flap and a clasp).

Or, buy the most inexpensive spiral-bound notebook you can find, and title it "Dailies." Do the same as above, with one story on each page every day.

3. The next time you're at the drugstore, card store, or post office, buy ten postcards of your city and some stamps. Once a week, write a postcard to yourself. What did you do this week? What did you see? What gripes or prayers do you have? Address it to yourself and put a stamp on it. The next time you're out, drop it in a mailbox. When you receive it, rejoice that someone sent you something other than a bill or an ad, then read it and put it in your nice-looking folder.
4. Buy yourself a wall calendar that you love—not one that matches the room's décor. (I love folk art and buy a calendar by the same artist every year.) One with large daily blocks. Every evening (dinnertime is good, if the calendar is in the kitchen or dining room), write one sentence that sums up your day. Something that happened, a proverb or scripture verse given to you, something you heard. Something your child did or told you about. A praise that you lived today, or a prayer that tomorrow will be better.
5. Print off personal emails that you send during the day. (After my children were born and I emailed updates to family and friends and printed them off. When I re-read the print offs later, I could remember what my child was like then, and recall the blissful chaos of new motherhood.) Put the printed emails in a nice-looking folder.
6. If you have enough time for a shower, or when you hand wash dishes or do some other repetitive task that doesn't involve mental activity, ask for a seed to plant. You will be amazed at what you're given! As soon as you finish your task, grab your writer's notebook

and your writer's pen, or create a new Dailies file, and write it down. Don't edit or read it.

7. Still dry? Go to a (short) passage in your favorite book or a favorite Psalm in the Bible. Open your writer's notebook or a new file, and write it—in your own words.
8. Set a timer for three minutes. Open your notebook or create a new file, and make a list of any of the following topics (or one of your own). Write as fast as you can until the timer goes off.

All the people you know right now.

Everything you can remember that was in your first bedroom.

The names of all the teachers you ever had.

The best times of your life.

The worst times of your life.

What you would pack if you were going on a vacation to an exotic island.

To a ski resort.

The questions you want answers to before you die.

The regrettable moments of your life; how you would have lived them differently.

If you can't write a list, jot down your grocery, to-do, or Christmas list.

Did anything on your list pique your interest? Put an asterisk next to it and a brief explanation why. Then don't look at it again.

In a month, six months, a year—whenever you know you're ready—open your notebook, your Dailies folder, or your colorful file and read what you wrote. And be prepared to be amazed at what you produced during a time when you thought you had nothing to offer. In those desperate efforts you will find seeds for stories, poems, articles, devotionals, songs, and books—which have already begun to sprout.

So what are you waiting for?