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What My Woodstove Has Taught Me About Writing

Ellen McLaughlin · Wednesday, August 3rd, 2016

When you're starting from a cold stove, lay the fire according to the principles that have lasted over the centuries, namely:

Clear the way for the new

It helps to start clean when you're dealing with cold ashes rather than live embers.

The knowledge that you've made fires in the past is comforting, but that doesn't mean you have to lay new ideas on top of the cold residue of old ones.

The memories of finished work, whether it was successful or not, just aren't particularly helpful. That work is behind you, it has already served its purpose and you may be grateful to it but often the memory of that past writing keeps you from trying something new and challenging yourself, just as those dead ashes only muffle and obscure what you need to do right now, which is to start. Transcend your fear of the unknown.

Let the past go. Shovel it out and clear it away before you begin.

Plan for the mighty abstract but start with the fine particular

Lay the big stuff (Truth, Justice, Love) as a foundation but know that the only way you're ever going to get anything that dense and significant to catch is to start with the little stuff, things that are more easily flammable, more specific, and work up to it.

Light up a crumbled bit of paper, a scrap of something, just an image or two will do (a train at night, a woman trying to get a ring off her finger, a chair kicked over, whatever) and see what happens. See if after the first flare the fire can sustain itself. An evocative image might lead you to a character (the image of a dropped hammer might give you the lost face of the woman up on the stepladder who let it go from her hand) or to a landscape (that neon sign for the 50s motel with the broken lights in the letter T might give you that February town between the mountains in Idaho) just as the crumpled bits of paper might light the larger, more substantial wands of the kindling.

But then again, they might not.

Sometimes you look in on that fire after what seemed a cheery beginning only to see that the paper has merely burnt enough to make sullen black tents over the still chilly logs and the idly smoking kindling is only blinking a few unpromising embers.

(Idaho? I've never even *been* to Idaho, what was I *think*ing?)

This is a crucial and treacherous time.

Here are a few of the worst things you can do:

Blame yourself.

Oh, what an idiot I am. I can't even make a fire, for god's sake. *Girl* scouts can do this! This is so like me. Look, I can't even write a good-looking sentence, etc., etc. Yeah, right.

You are not the first in this cottage and you won't be the last to make a bad start. Relax. No one is

watching you. And nobody cares—not even the stove, who's seen it all before.

Another thing you shouldn't do:

Panic.

Which can lead you to do several unwise things, for instance you might:

a. Try to rush it.

There are no quick fixes with fires. You can't just heave a whole lot of paper into a failing fire without suffocating it before you've even begun. (I should admit this is a mistake I made this very morning by just cramming in a sheaf of pages from an old draft I'd discarded–talk about a literal metaphor.) Yes, there will be a satisfying blaze for a few seconds (It's about *phy*sics! no, *Bis*marck! no, *macramé!* I'm brilliant!) but that doesn't actually *lead* to anything because it doesn't create *lasting heat* AND it obscures the real stuff you were actually hoping to get to (Hope, Beauty, Grief, remember?) with a shroud of useless, distracting, lukewarm ash. In turns out that you have no choice in the matter–you're going to have to let the fire take whatever time it needs to light. Patience and humility–worthwhile virtues to be reminded of.

Or you might:

b. Start shoving any old crap in there.

This comes under the heading of cynical, perverse experimentation and farting around. We've all done it. (Well, I obviously can't write coherently, so why don't I just string together some novella I'll never show anyone involving two hamsters, but never *say* that they're hamsters, yeah!… and I won't use *verbs,* …or I *will* use verbs but no prepos*i*tions, or, wait, only words with two Rs in them…) This is superficial, time-sucking nonsense, the sort of dithering that you *know* on some level can never really take hold and *warm* you and *it will not make you happy.* Anymore than treating your woodstove like a garbage can will make it burn better. Don't put anything into your fire that won't truly feed it. Plastic, chemically coated paper, crap of that sort makes lurid, nasty flames for a few seconds but stinks up your home, leaves horrid residue and can do permanent damage to your precious, unique and essential woodstove. You know what I'm talking about.

One more thing you shouldn't do:

Get angry at the woodstove.

Pointless, really, and when you're rational you know it. The fire is the fire—it isn't trying to annoy you. Still, the frustration is inevitable and, let's face it, part of the human condition. We think we should be able to control, well… *everything.* Sometimes you can control things, (I'm the MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE, I just made FIRE!) sometimes you just have to shrug and start again. Again, humility: never a bad lesson.

So here's what you need to do:

Breathe

I know. Kinda obvious, but we do forget.

Sometimes, all that's needed to make a fire ignite is the human breath. See that little image in the corner there, struggling to hang onto its pathetic bit of flame? (O.K., so there's a dirty white chicken pecking in the bald yard as a rainstorm begins to spatter the dust around her.) Give it some air. Move the crap that's covering it so you can see it and it has some room to move. (Depression Era? Somewhere in Maine? Is that the smell of the sea?) Now just breathe on it. Blow lightly. (Is that a man yelling in the distance?) Don't worry if you blow it out completely at first. (Nope. This isn't a man's chicken yard. And I don't want to deal with the cliché of some bully of a yelling man. Fuck.) Breathe again. (Huh. A phone is ringing somewhere, that particular sound, antique, of a rural party line.) Flame. (That woman drying her hands on her apron as she heads for the phone in the hall…*I know what she looks like!*)

Now lay a piece of kindling above the flame. (Her name is Sally and she's pregnant but doesn't know it yet and the woman on the phone is her *sister*…) once that first piece of kindling is burning

nicely, lay another one across it (…whose name is *Carolyn,* and she's calling to say that her *husband*…) and when those two are burning, gently place one more piece on the flaming pile, what the hell? (…whose name is *Mel,* has left her. Which is news to Sally and something of a surprise because Mel had just told her last Thursday in the junkyard that he loved *her* and because the child that she doesn't yet know she's carrying is *his.*)

And now you've got a fire you can work with.

Next:

Shut the door.

You know that roar you hear inside the woodstove when you stop fussing over your fire and just let it be because it probably knows what it's doing at this point? That's what I'm talking about.

Leave it alone. Let your process take over and stop worrying over whether you're doing it right. There's no such thing as a bad fire. (Or a bad orgasm, now that I think about it.) And there's no such thing as a bad hour's writing when you're really in the flow of your ideas, in the grips of your own creation.

Ultimately you may decide not to use what you write in that time, nevertheless, the writing that *gets you* to the writing you keep is essential too.

But you will still need to pay attention to your fire.

Don't get arrogant about it or over-confident and think it doesn't still need your care. You can't go off and leave it when you're just getting it going to write an angry letter to your insurance company or, god forbid, check your email. Open that door every now and then to see what needs doing. Time for another log? (Did her sister once push her down the stairs?) A bigger idea? (Was she adopted? Has she begun to suspect that she's going crazy?)

Until it's really burning.

Congratulations. The writing is finally flowing. Isn't it amazing? There is an intense sense of accomplishment when that creature you nurtured and despaired over finally takes over and just knows what to do. Characters surprise you, images eddy and pop with life. If the fire is going well it will accept and transform an amazing range of huge ideas if they are fed carefully, in good time, and with respect. Don't be jamming huge logs in there when it's not done with the last ones. (I didn't realize I cared so much about Transcendentalism! Oh my god, is *that* what this thing is actually *about?*)

Enjoy the heat and the light.

But be careful.

Fires are, well, HOT. You can do some serious damage to yourself if you get glib and forget the power of what you're dealing with. Don't tell yourself that you should be able to handle easily the kind of harrowing material that you can sometimes come across. You're going to lose some sleep over your work, it'll make you cry, you're going to feel hollowed out and fragile sometimes. *And that's when it's going well.* Don't expect to just shrug that off. Take care of yourself.

Wear the mitt when you move those big pieces into a roaring, orange, licking stove fire. You need that hand, protect it.

YOU WRITE WITH IT.

Just remember, the fire is never useless. It gives you warmth, if nothing else. The time you give to your work when you're really grappling with your own truth is never time wasted. At the very least, you're practicing your craft, and that gives you light to see by. At the end of a day's writing, you know more about yourself–how your mind works, how you make meaning—than you did before you started. And what is the alternative? Shivering in the cold and the silence of ideas unrealized, a soul unvoiced, that's what.

And we've all done that.

Light your fire. Let it teach you who you are.

Image: A woodstove fire, handcrafted by Ellen McLaughlin during The Artists Salon annual retreat, Ireland, 2016.

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This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 3rd, 2016 at 8:23 pm and is filed under Theatre, Fiction, Poetry
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