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# What's the Point? Five Writers Offer Lifelines for Post-MFA Despair

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A weird thing happened the other day. A writer-friend contacted me to say that she felt lost and low and miserable about writing. *What's the point?* she wrote. *Why the hell am I doing this?*

In and of itself, the note wasn't so strange. But consider this: I've gotten two other notes like it in the last month, all from writers a couple of years removed from their MFA programs. Most MFA grads know about the rough patch that often hits the first six months after the program. You feel burned-out and disconnected, and you have to adjust to life without deadlines and mentors and all that *esprit de corps*. My pastor-friend calls this a "coming down from the mountaintop" experience. For a lot of grads, this is the end: they never write again.

Many of the writers who slog on find themselves in another trough. Somewhere between two-to-four years out of your MFA program, you realize that no one is reading your work: it's either not getting accepted for publication or it's landing in obscure lit magazines that few people read. You get tired of answering your super-supportive Uncle Frank, who, every time he sees you, says, "How's that novel coming along?" which is like *every two weeks*, and when you say, "Heh. It's coming," he offers up some bit of advice, most of which can be boiled down to *Be more like Stephen King*.

Maybe you thought there would be more by now. Maybe you thought, by this time, you would have "arrived"—whatever that means to you.

Ha.

Call this the "falling into the crevasse" experience. Like the tumble off that first mountaintop, it's going to claim some (professional) lives. But some writers will climb on out. How do they do it? Are there any lifelines out there?

To find out, I've reached out to some of my favorite writers. I asked them all the same question: When fellow writers tell you they feel lost and down and like *What's the point?*, what do you tell them?

### **Robin Black, Author of *If I Loved You I Would Tell You This***

Whatever the cause of the despair, the basic strategy is always: try your best not to think it means anything. It's just a natural part of being a writer. Sit with it. Tolerate it. And don't assume that the only way through a bad patch is to be banging away at the keyboard, diligently, every day—as so many advise. Sometimes what's needed is a break. Do some gardening. Take a walk. Despair is in some sense the result of thinking things have to be a certain way, a fixation of a kind—so challenge those assumptions and do something that

breaks your idea of what you're supposed to do to make this writing thing "succeed." Or even of what constitutes success.

**Erin McGraw, Author of *The Seamstress of Hollywood Boulevard* and Other Books**

A. Taking a day off is okay. Sometimes despair is cured by a little rest and getting your blood sugar up.

B. Nobody else can write the book you can. Nobody. And the only way you will discover things is by writing your way to them.

C. Read Flaubert's letters. He was a world-class whiner. If he could piss and moan that much about the book that became *Madame Bovary*, then all of us have license to feel bad about our work—but keep writing anyway.

**Andrew Scott, Author of *Naked Summer***

Isak Dinesen recommended writing "a little every day, without hope, without despair." I wish I could embody that sentiment. On my worst days, however, I think: *Easy for you, Baroness*. (Is it easier to write when one is wealthy and aristocratic? Or did that great philosopher of the 1990s, Christopher George Latore Wallace, have it right when he posited that "no money" elicits "no problems," a hypothesis I hope to one day test?)

There's that word again: *hope*. We hope for readers. We hope for critical and commercial success, even when we know it's not good to harbor such thoughts. With that hope must come despair, though, the scarred other side of the artist's coin. It's easy to walk into a bookstore, glance across towering shelves of books written by thousands of authors, and think, *What's the point? How do I fit into this?* Dozens and dozens of authors I know are troubled enough about their own work to question the central role or purpose of writing in their lives. If a writer is just getting started, it's hard for hope to win out. There is no shame in quitting, if that's what you decide. Don Kurtz, the author of my favorite novel, *South of the Big Four*, wrote another book and then called it quits. He's happier, he says, than when he was writing every day.

In my own experience, hope wins out because I am too stubborn (and/or stupid) to quit now. There's a fire inside that keeps burning. When it's only embers, I don't write much, or even at all, and that's OK. Antidepressants help, too—I am willing to bet that the use of antidepressants among writers is higher than, say, landscapers or lawyers.

You can't write for other people. You can't write for your agent, your editor, the prize committees or tenure committees, your spouse, friends or pretty strangers. When you question what the point of writing is, you're really thinking about other people. Stop

thinking about other people. Seriously. What have they done for you lately? Write for yourself. Because you get something out of it, even if it's just the small pleasure of one sentence locking into place. Because you are interested in the workings of language and stories and history and people. Because you can, even when you think you can't.

**Cathy Day, Author of *The Circus in Winter* and *Comeback Season***

Figure out a way to make it fun, because if you don't enjoy writing—actually sitting there and doing it, getting lost in it—or if you only do it for the external validation, then you're sunk.

I honestly wasn't sure if I could write another book after *The Circus in Winter*, wasn't sure I had another book in me, and then one day, the Colts lost to the Steelers in the playoffs, and I was full of this inexplicable emotion. I started writing an encouraging note to the Colts players, and the next thing I knew, I was writing and laughing and having a grand old time. That's when I knew I could write more books. So, hip hip hooray! Eureka! I'm saved! And I have so much fun writing my next book, *Comeback Season*. And it bombs.

I thought, "What is the point? Can I really put myself through this again?" I honestly wasn't sure. I read [this essay](#) by Andre Dubus over and over, particularly the last paragraph. And it was during this time of despair that I read a biography of Cole Porter, who was born in my hometown. We think Cole's career must have been one sparkling success after another, but the truth is, he got panned. A lot. Sometimes, he'd get so depressed, he needed electroshock treatments. I read that and thought, "Man, do I know how you feel," and boom: I knew I had another book in me, and I was having fun again, and I had an answer to the question, "What's the point?" Because if Cole had stopped after his first failure, or his tenth, we wouldn't have [these songs](#).

(For an extended take on a similar question, see Cathy's excellent blog post, ["Am I a Writer?"](#))

**B.J. Hollars, Author of *Thirteen Loops: Race, Violence, and the Last Lynching in America* and Other Books**

I think we're all sort of stuck in limbo until the book actually emerges from the ether, but even when it does, only sometimes does anything actually change. Fame and fortune rarely follow, but at least we have something tangible to document our toil (by which I mean something to prove to our parents that dropping the pre-med major wasn't the worst idea ever).

I suppose my only real advice for this involves the word solidarity. That this is a limbo we've all faced, one that many of us continue to face, and that there's nothing wrong with doing

what 95% of the writing world does—working a day job and writing by night (sort of superhero-like, right?).

**Bryan Furuness** is the author of the novel [The Lost Episodes of Revie Bryson](#). His stories have appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Southeast Review*, *Hobart* and elsewhere, including *New Stories from the Midwest* and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He teaches at Butler University, and is the editor-in-chief of the small press, [Pressgang](#).

\*This craft essay was adapted from [Pressgang's blog](#).