

Musing About Writer's Block

There is an ongoing debate about the reality of writer's block. One author, Mercedes Lackey, wrote: "There is no such thing as writer's block. What you are experiencing is a conflict between where you *think* you want the story to go, and where it *should* go."

Well, fine. But I had reached a point in writing *Empty Luck*, my third novel, where I was absolutely stuck. I simply could not figure out how the story could end. I had no idea where it *should* go. In the book, an immensely powerful person pursued my characters and I could not imagine how they might defeat him. There was no way they had the experience or resources to win that battle. I ruminated on the problem for weeks and found myself on the verge of giving up completely. But the book really mattered to me and I had a lot invested already.

So, what did I do? Several tactics occurred to me and it turned out I needed more than one to cure the paralysis. Here is what helped me:

Let the characters solve it

My first method was to stop trying to solve the problem and let my characters solve it for me. I decided to have each character do what they would realistically do in their individual circumstances. And that included even the bad guy. He was, after all, human and had to make choices just like everyone else. So, as I found myself thinking about and jotting down each person's actions, it became clear to me that my antagonist would himself run into some trouble accomplishing his mission. I hadn't thought about that before, but it was true. And realizing that, I knew he would have to turn to others for help. And that led me to realize where things could go drastically wrong for him. I still didn't know the specific actions he would take, but I knew he was not invincible.

That got me over one big hurdle, but there was more that I needed.

Meditation

I have long practiced meditation and that helped me break up my attack of writer's block.

Before I explain how, let me say a little about my version of meditation. I confess I have never formally studied the subject. I just picked up pieces here and there and formulated my own technique. Here's what I do:

I sit upright on a soft, comfortable easy chair or sofa, with my legs crossed yoga style. My hands resting on my knees, palms up, thumb and middle finger touching, and I close my eyes. I don't try to control my thinking nor do I say a mantra. I do notice if I am cold or uncomfortable in any way and adjust my body accordingly. It is necessary to feel physically settled. I keep a pen and paper handy because a lot of thoughts come up that I want to remember. (It doesn't seem to stop the process to write a quick note.) If I do write something, I then resume the position. Most

importantly, at some point, usually some five-to-ten minutes after I've begun, I feel a sense of calm come over me. It is a physical sensation of alert relaxation.

At that point, I am open to whatever thoughts come into my head. I don't force it. Whatever comes, comes. I often find myself thinking about people I care about, what they may need, and what I can or should do for them. But just as often, ideas for my writing float through my mind. And during one recent meditation, I suddenly understood on a deeper level what *Empty Luck* was really about. It was not a superficial tale of stealing money. Instead, it was a tale of transformation and growth. I was re-inspired because I realized the book had something to say.

That helped immensely, but additionally I knew I was struggling with getting a higher level of dramatic tension into the book. And as I meditated, I found myself picturing my antagonist, really seeing him, almost inhabiting his head and grasping his thoughts and feelings. It was not a conscious choice. Instead it was more a sense of being him and knowing what I/he would do. I discovered that, as him, I wouldn't take "no" for an answer. I would stubbornly persist in pursuit of my goal against all odds. I knew that would heighten the tension and I was able to move ahead.

Outlining:

As I said above, I felt I had written my characters into a corner. I'd created a situation for them and could not see a way out. Even after meditating and getting into the minds of my characters, and admittedly making some important progress, I still felt stuck, still blocked. I wasn't clear what came next in the story, what happened when. It seemed I needed a roadmap to finish. I needed an outline.

I have been an inveterate discovery writer, a "pantser," i.e., one who writes by the "seat of his pants," making it up as I went along, discovering as I wrote. That worked pretty well for my first two books.

But I found it necessary to identify the sequence of plot steps in *Empty Luck*. Some 35,000 words into the book, almost half-way, I struggled to pin down the steps in the story that would lead to a believable and satisfying ending. It just wasn't feeling organized. Writing by the "seat of my pants" was not working any more. I had the insight and the motivation now, but I needed the structure of the plot.

So now I am working out the story and outlining it before I resume writing. I'm not finished outlining yet, and there are multiple layers of danger and plot lines to resolve, but I have already charted a way for my heroes to escape their immediate predicament. That is only one first step. Many more answers are needed and they need to be known in order before I can finish the book.

Conclusion:

The lesson here is not to allow paralysis (writer's block) to defeat you. Immerse yourself in the situation and personality of each character. If you think about what each would likely do, what problems they might encounter, what solutions they would choose, and perhaps most importantly, how they need to change, the answers about what ultimately happens may emerge. It may help to meditate, to open your mind. And to be sure you stay on track and clear about your plot sequence, you may want to outline some of the book.