



GINA KELLY

Readers Write

WASTING TIME

I'M NOT TEACHING THIS SEMESTER, and my husband, bless his heart, says I can stay home and write, as long as I produce two pages a day, five days a week. It's Tuesday and I'm already three pages behind. Here are a few of the activities that have kept me from writing:

Tweezing stray eyebrow hairs, which seem to grow farther away from my eyes with each passing month.

Parting my hair and flattening it with my hands to determine the current ratio of brown to gray.

Checking my e-mail. Again. And again.

Playing computer solitaire. (I am trying to get my win percentage above the 73 percent mark, where it has hovered ever since it skyrocketed from 64 percent when I quit drinking. Surprisingly, my percentage hasn't dropped off since I resumed drinking.)

Doing Internet searches for "best antihistamine," "pinworms," and "canine cardiomyopathy," among others.

Calling my sister.

Calling my mother.

Calling my other sister to see if she's heard from our sister or our mother.

Counting my thirty-three-cent stamps to see how many four-cent stamps I need to buy.

Ditto for thirty-four-cent stamps.

Pondering the disappearance of the cent symbol from the standard keyboard.

Opening the garage door every half-hour or so just in case the Carolina wren that flew in there yesterday is still trapped.

Looking up the Carolina wren in the *Field Guide to North American Birds* to see what the hell a Carolina wren is doing in my garage in the dead of winter.

Counting my teeth with my tongue.

Practicing my banjo in hopes that I have finally found "my" instrument. (I have previously abandoned the autoharp, the guitar, the piano, and the dulcimer — all for excellent reasons.)

Reorganizing my twenty-five-com-

partment pill organizer.

Rereading the inspirational sayings taped around my desk.

Checking Pick-A-Prof.com to see if anyone has written a new review of me as a teacher. (Specifically, I am looking for a review that does not include the words *smart-alecky*, *mean*, or *hard grader*.)

Printing out online dry-cleaning coupons to put in my husband's glove compartment.

Looking up the words *ersatz* and *hubris* for perhaps the twentieth time.

Contemplating the many and varied uses of the parenthesis.

I could go on, but I don't need to, because if I play around with the margins and the font size, I can make this two pages.

Bonnie Hale
St. Louis, Missouri

WHEN I WAS TEN, I WAS OBESE AND shy. My mom and dad had divorced three years earlier, and Mom and I lived

with her parents. Though terribly lonely, I was afraid to go beyond my grandparents' yard.

One summer day I was walking along the thin strip of property between our house and the neighbor's hedges when I noticed some saucer-shaped rocks on the ground. I picked up a couple and balanced them into something like a house. As I walked away, I felt a sense of satisfaction.

The next morning I returned to look at my little house. There were other stones and pieces of slate around it, so I knelt and began adding to the structure. Soon my house had four sections. I plucked the weeds around it to make it look neater.

That afternoon I came back with my toy soldiers and placed them around, on top of, and inside the house, but something just wasn't right. The soldiers looked exactly like plastic men, whereas my house didn't look at all like a real house. I took my soldiers inside and brought out some clothespins to use as people. These worked.

Over the next two weeks I built more stone houses, assigning each one a purpose: the toolshed, the armory, the brig, the lookout tower, the grain silo, the infirmary. I built a stone wall around my little settlement. Its inhabitants, I decided, lived in hostile territory and could not survive without protection.

One afternoon, while I was lost in the world of my rock houses, my stick-thin grandfather and massive Hungarian grandmother came around the corner to check on something. I dropped the clothespins and looked up.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" my grandfather snorted. "Making messes with rocks! You want something to do? I'll give you something to do: throw those rocks away and pull all the weeds, or sweep the cellar."

My grandfather frightened me, but my grandmother was the true authority in our home, a giant of a woman with arms thicker than my thighs and deep dimples at her elbows. She was loving but strict, even cruel sometimes. She used a razor strop on me and could inspire fear just by clearing her throat. As she folded her great arms over her breasts, I looked down to avoid her gaze. I waited for her

to hand down my sentence.

"Leave it there," she said. "He's making something."

*David Wood
Bowling Green, Florida*

WHEN I WAS IN THE PEACE CORPS, I spent a year in rural Mongolia, living alone in a one-room cabin with a clay-and-brick stove in the middle of the floor. In the winter, temperatures dropped far below zero, and my survival was completely dependent upon how much wood I could chop. While other Peace Corps volunteers started English clubs or business projects — or just managed to get a lot of reading done — most of my energy was devoted to getting warm, staying warm, and worrying about being cold.

Each day, after I returned from teaching English, I'd make a fire and sit and watch it, my coat and hat still on. When the house warmed up a few hours later, I'd remove my coat and boil melted river ice for tea. I was intimate with my stove and could start it with one match and no

paper. I could *hear* when it needed more wood. At eleven at night, when the daily five hours of electricity ended, the music on my little boombox would slur its last note, the light bulb would go out, and I'd be left in the dark with the fire, crackling and warm.

Now I look back on all those hours I sat by the stove in Mongolia, blank, numb, and flat-out exhausted, and see it as time wasted. All the same, there was an integrity to my life there that I do not find here in America, where I have time to worry about politics or finding a great-fitting pair of jeans. The blisters from the ax, the splinters in my fingertips, the soot in the creases of my knuckles — they were real.

*Andrea Nelson
Denver, Colorado*

MOM WAS PARTICULARLY CHEERFUL when she called. I'd been blue all day, mooning over an old boyfriend who had found someone new. I was watching my friends get married and feeling

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Turning Thirty	August 1	January 2004
Small Towns	September 1	February 2004
Deception	October 1	March 2004
Out Of Reach	November 1	April 2004
Second Chances	December 1	May 2004
Lessons	January 1	June 2004

wretched and left out. To make matters worse, my friends all felt sorry for me, the lonely one.

I wanted to tell Mom about it, but she was doing all the talking. She told me stories and relayed jokes from Dad, who was getting their dinner ready. (He had taken on most of the meal-preparation duties since Mom's cancer had spread to her bones.) They were both very upbeat, full of news about the cats and the dog and the weather in the valley.

I was about to tell Mom my troubles when she started in about her hometown in Pennsylvania: After the December holidays, she told me, everyone used to burn their Christmas trees at a community bonfire to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. "I don't know if they still do it now," she said, "but when I was a kid it was one of my favorite events."

I finally dropped my self-pity, shrugging it off like a too-heavy backpack, and I listened to my mother with all of my attention. When I hung up, I thought, *I'm collecting her stories.*

On Monday, Dad called me at work. The doctor had decided to stop treating the cancer. The chemotherapy and radiation on Mom's hip and back had not reduced the size of the tumors. The doctor didn't know what else he could do.

"I can be there in an hour," I said through tears.

"No, no," Dad said. "The doctor said we have time. There's no need to rush out here. It will only upset everyone more."

"How much time?" I said tightly.

He paused. "Two to six months."

I left my office and headed home to pack. As I drove, my tears gave way to anger, and anger to truth. I had spent — no, wasted — so much time and energy worrying about myself when, all the while, my mother had been there, ready to tell me her stories and laugh with me. I knew then that I had *never* had time to waste.

*Christiana Smith
Woodbridge, Virginia*

I'M SITTING AT A LONG, LINEN-COVERED table in a big ballroom at corporate headquarters. Pitchers of ice water on paper doilies and little dishes of hard candies are located within easy reach of every seat. The company I work for is launching a

new version of one of its software products, an occasion that apparently calls for a three-day extravaganza of fancy breakfast pastries, choreographed multimedia presentations, and enough handouts to fill an additional carry-on bag for the trip home.

It is Day Two. At what point do I stop trying to be polite and acting as if I'm interested? All this sitting saps my energy. I want to scream, run, do cartwheels, hand-springs. I'll have to settle for a brisk walk during lunch.

I hate each speaker for different reasons. One thinks she is cute, funny, and entertaining, but provides zero useful information. Another speaker is both arrogant and ignorant. He fails to explain his material and completely misses the point of an audience member's question.

Life is short. There are so many books I want to read, places I want to visit, moments I want to spend with my yet-to-be-conceived children. And here I sit, playing word games to relieve my boredom. I concoct forty words from the letters of MANAGEMENT, ninety-one from INTEGRATION. I am depressed when EXCLUSIVE yields only thirty-five, even with plurals.

Now, three years later, I am sitting on the floor at home in sweat pants, feeding my baby. An old friend calls and asks if I miss working. Once I stop laughing, I tell her no.

*Dina Haines Appleby
Kennett Square, Pennsylvania*

MY FRIEND TODD CALLED THE OTHER night. He was moving across town and wanted to know if I cared to sort through the odds and ends of the bicycle-courier business he'd bought from me a year and a half ago. Now he'd closed the business and was ready to throw out a file cabinet's worth of receipts, licenses, tax forms, half-written business plans, and old promotional fliers. Did I want any of it?

I went over and rummaged through the remains. One of the few items I decided to keep was a large three-ring binder containing all the job logs I had completed as owner-operator. I thumbed through several hundred dirty pages, each with twenty-four separate runs listed, a scribbled signature on every line. In my hands was a physical record of the thousands

of miles I had pedaled, the thousands of hours I had spent trying to build a business that would last.

The venture had been a struggle from the start, but it seemed there were always just enough customers to keep me going. And there was always that one big account around the corner, or that fool-proof marketing plan that would make everything work out. At times, I believed my efforts were finally paying off. Then the calls would slow again, and I'd spend an hour organizing my business cards or cleaning my bike in a feeble attempt to maintain the illusion of work.

I have a few practiced responses for those who still ask about the business: "It was an idea before its time for this town"; "I know more about myself"; "I've learned from my mistakes." There is some validity to these statements, but the deeper and more painful truth is that I failed. For years I earned next to nothing, and in the end I lost money on my wife's initial investment. I rode through sweltering Carolina summers and cold, rainy winters. I spent thousands of dollars on equipment, brochures, and supplies. I cold-called, canvassed, flied, e-mailed, and pleaded for business. And for what? Nothing but a big book of delivery sheets — an itemized, organized account of four years' wasted time.

*Seth Elliott
Carrboro, North Carolina*

BEFORE MY CANCER, I DIDN'T KNOW how to enjoy a spare moment. Lists of things waiting to be done, their arms folded and feet tapping, were always trying to get my attention. And I believed that if I worked hard enough, if I finally overcame my sinful laziness, I would one day get everything done. In the meantime, any spare moment seemed wasted.

As I undergo chemotherapy, there are days when I can do little except lie still. My list of things to do is simple: rest, eat something, sit outside. Stretched out in the lounge chair in the backyard, one hand on my dog's head, the other holding a cup of tea, I am aware of the sweetness of the breeze, the music of leaves and pine needles.

I have always wanted to be a published fiction writer, but I have not accomplished



RICHARD ROBINSON

that goal. Cancer has helped me see that I don't have to accomplish any goals; I don't have to make a name for myself. I have tried diligently, and that is enough. I enjoy what I am writing now, and that is enough. On days when I am too tired to write, lying outside is enough. I don't have to do more in order to *be* more.

*Catherine Hedgecock
El Cerrito, California*

DURING OUR EARLY-MORNING WALKS, my lover and I usually talk about our dreams for the future. We spin fantasies in which our every venture turns out exactly right. In our new, enlightened lives, we finish our degrees, learn to bake a rich Mississippi-mud cheesecake, obtain chiseled abs, and harvest fresh basil from our herb garden. Hardly ever do we imagine old age and loneliness. Rarely are our fantasy selves touched by disease or faced with hatred and prejudice.

In our dreams we have satisfying and lucrative careers: urban architect, auctioneer, fiction writer, jewelry maker, woodcarver. We find the perfect house, always more home-improvement project than showplace: hardwood floors in need of loving care, an ancient stone fireplace hidden behind drywall and cheap molding. Sometimes it's on a brick street.

We have a small commitment ceremony, with only our closest friends and family in attendance. His parents fly

down and, to everyone's surprise, make fast friends with mine. Our mothers decorate the chapel with spring blossoms. On our honeymoon in India, we make love in a magnificent bed, draped in mosquito netting, in a room with a view of the Taj Mahal. I can almost smell the incense, curry, and cow dung as we roam the markets looking for exquisite silver jewelry to send home.

Then the whistle blows, and our fantasy evaporates. We must return to our cells: our reality.

The truth is, we are surrounded by fences, guards, and razor wire. One of us could be transferred to another prison at any time. As for the future, we will no doubt be stuck in a low-wage existence, happy to get any job. It's unlikely we'll ever be able to afford better than a worn-out single-wide trailer on a weed-infested lot. If our parents ever consented to join us for a commitment ceremony, it would devolve into a violent shouting match.

But I know one thing for certain: tomorrow, when we're back on the yard, walking that eternal circle, the white picket fences will go up again. For me, daydreaming is not wasting time.

*William Combs
Bowling Green, Florida*

A FEW YEARS AGO, I DECIDED TO BE-come a writer. What I became, instead, is a master at wasting time.

Right now it is midmorning on Veterans Day. I had planned to spend the holiday writing, but I have already procrastinated by clipping the cat's nails, brushing her fur, and changing the litter box. Before that I prepared myself a full breakfast of freshly squeezed orange juice, a Swiss-cheese omelette, toasted-pecan-and-raisin muffins, and Blue Mountain coffee with half-and-half, all of which I ate and drank very slowly. Then I took a long, luxurious bath, hand-washed a sweater, phoned a friend, balanced my checkbook, and made a grocery list. Finally I lit a stick of sandalwood incense, took a deep breath, and *thought* about writing.

What is it about facing a blank page that makes me want to defrost a refrigerator with twenty-two years of accumulated ice inside? I also have an overwhelming desire to scrub the bathtub and clean the nooks and crannies around the base of the toilet bowl — a task I've been avoiding for a decade or more. And after I've written a few pages, I really should go out and buy a new mattress. A futon would go well in the empty space next to the bookcase. Or maybe I could take the antique chair to be repaired.

Last spring, in order to avoid writing, I cleaned and redecorated my entire apartment.

*June Glaser
Brooklyn, New York*

(end of excerpt)