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First Things First: Writing Strategies

Marilyn L. Grady

Adages to Guide the Writing Adventure

A book title attracted my attention as I rummaged through a new, offbeat bookstore. The book, *Writing to Change the World*, is written by the author of *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher. For those who have embraced the discussion of social justice issues at recent academic conferences, the book offers the perspective of an author who has written extensively and successfully about social justice issues.

My “take aways” from the book, however, were in the chapters that offered reminders of the serious work of writing and the insights of well-known writers. Following are some comments from Pipher.

Pipher notes, “long after buildings and aqueducts have crumbled, writers’ words live on” (p. 9). Although I am not convinced that the writings in the field of educational leadership will “live on” longer than the aqueducts, I am reminded of a retired professor friend who lamented that in his career, he did not take the opportunity to write more. At the end of his professorial career he remarked that he had been involved in important innovations and collaborations in K–12 schools, had participated in change activities that have persisted in school districts, and had worked with exceptional school leaders. He regretted his failure to document this important work. This lament is a constant feature of the work of school leaders. Those who “do” have little opportunity to record their successes and failures. By writing, we “pass it on.”

Pipher states, “a blank page can feel like cold water . . . we have to dive in. . . it can be miserable until we warm up. Then we relax and write without effort” (p. 76). The analogy is a familiar one to those who work at writing. It is a pleasant reminder that writing is not easy. Writing is not easy for the experienced, successful writer and writing is not easy for the novice writer. Writing is a challenge. Writing is work. Yet writing is possible for those who have the will to write. Pipher provides Agatha Christie’s statement, “The secret of getting ahead is getting started” (p. 76).

Willa Cather’s statement, “It’s easy to be a writer. You just open a vein and bleed over every page” (p. 110) is reassuring to those who write. If you have the sense that you are the only person struggling with the writing process, you can take solace from knowing that great writers and novice writ-

ers endure similar struggles. Those who write understand the Cather and Christie analogies.

Perhaps the glib comment by William Stafford provides a path to greater productivity. “When the poet, William Stafford was asked how he was able to write a poem every day, he responded, “I lower my standards” (Pipher, p. 77). In the work of writing, perhaps we are our own enemies because our expectations are too high, our fear of cold water is too intense, and we hesitate to start.

Reference

Pipher, M. (2006). *Writing to change the world*. New York: Riverhead Books.