

Facing the Fear Monster

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Earlier this week I was blogging about writer's block, and someone posted the question, *How do you deal with a fear of writing?*

Wow, what an interesting question. I'm not sure I ever actually suffer from fear of writing, but I sure do suffer from avoidance sometimes! Like, I'll keep finding things to do (isn't there a load of laundry to be washed?) instead of write. In that case, I just force myself to the computer, set a timer for half an hour and say that I'll either write or stare at the blank screen for that half hour.

But fear is a different thing. We all have fears, whether they're of writing or of other things in our lives. Seems to me, if you're feeling afraid, you need to figure out what "monster" you're afraid of, and deal with that fear.

Is it the fear of failure monster? Well, you know what? Every writer – and every human being – is going to "fail" over and over. If you put yourself out there, you're not always going to succeed the way you'd like to. For a writer, we may not sell the book, we may get rejected by the agent of our dreams, we may get a bad review, a reader may write and tell us our work sucks. Is that failure? I don't think so. It's a natural, inevitable part of life. Whether it's a business/career like writing, or something personal like a relationship, things won't always turn out the way we want them to, and we have to learn how to deal with that. What's the alternative? Hang back and never try at all? No, sorry, that's not a good option.

Some of us (yes, I'm holding my hand up) have a wee bit of a perfectionism issue. This is something we really must get over or it can cripple us. The thing is, we're never going to be perfect. Never. So if our standard is perfection, we will always judge ourselves as failures. What I try to do is flip the perfectionism monster on its head so that it works for me rather than against me. I tell myself that I'll be a failure if I don't write any words, but I won't be a failure if I write stuff that's bad – because then I have something I can edit. (And every manuscript, no matter how brilliant the writer, needs to be edited.) Remember Nora Roberts' wisdom: you can fix a bad page, but you can't fix a blank page.

Then, for some people, there's a fear of success monster. That's one I have trouble identifying with. Whether it's success at a writing (or other) career, success at love, success at baking a cake, how can success possibly be a bad thing? Well, I guess there are all sorts of possibilities here. One is of the responsibilities – and lack of freedom – that come with success. Another is that, if you succeed, people may look at you differently; they may be jealous and bad mouth you, and you may lose friends (sorry – they weren't your friends if they're not happy for your success). Another fear of success is that if you succeed once, how will you ever do as well the next time? (Okay, now I'm scaring myself!)

For both fear of success and fear of failure, I think it helps to figure out your "worst case scenario" (i.e., the biggest, ugliest, growliest, most horrible monster you can possibly imagine), and make it concrete, then think about how you'd deal with it if it happened. Actually picture the

horrible thing, then picture yourself coping. Chances are, nothing that terrible will ever happen. But if you can imagine dealing with something that bad, then you can cope with the smaller stuff that's bound to happen. For a lot of us, fear is something huge and amorphous (it's the monster lurking under the bed), and we need to make it concrete, which makes it more manageable. Take a look at a lovely kids' picture book on that very subject by my writer friend, Sheri Radford, *Penelope and The Monsters* (<http://www.sheriradford.com/>). Penelope can't sleep because, when she's alone in her room, a bunch of monsters come out to harass her. How does she finally banish them? By confronting them and telling them they're not so scary.

Another fear monster for writers is fear of what you're writing and how it affects you. You may be touching on something that's very emotional for you. Like an abuse victim writing about a heroine who's being abused. A cancer patient writing about a character who's going through a horrible illness. Someone who's recently lost a loved one writing about a character who is suffering loss. These are gut-wrenching situations, and dealing with your character's life and emotions means that you can't avoid your own, so you hurt. If your writing is taking you to painful places you don't feel strong enough to visit right now, maybe this isn't the book you should be writing at this time. On the other hand, writing may be cathartic, it may be healing, it may help you come to peace with your own issues. Just remember to be kind to yourself, seek the support of loving family/friends, and, if necessary, get professional support as well.

Another writer's fear monster is, "I'm not sure I'm a good enough writer to tackle this." You may have taken on a subject or even a technique (e.g., multiple first person points of view) that you're afraid is beyond you, at least at this stage in your writing career. In this case, I think you must try to be brutally honest in assessing your strengths and weaknesses (and, if possible, get feedback from others who you trust to be honest). You may be good enough to do this now, in which case be brave and don't let fear hold you back. If you truly believe you aren't ready to tackle this project, then put it on the back burner until you're a bit further along in your writing career.

Now, let's step back and think in general terms again, about all kinds of fears. Stop and think for a moment about the fact that we human beings are animals. What do animals do when they're confronted with something scary? The fight or they flee. Both are built-in methods of self-preservation. But the flight reaction, which typically leads to avoidance, isn't productive in helping us move ahead and meet our goals. The fight reaction can express itself more productively – e.g., in the methods set out above and below, which are all ways of wrestling the monster of fear into submission.

Here are some other suggestions for facing your fears:

- Tame the monster with semantics. Reframe it by changing the word "fear" to "challenge." Then it's something that's easier to overcome, and overcoming it will be empowering. (And notice how reframing demonstrates the power of words!)
- Acknowledge the fear by speaking it out loud to someone who will listen and not attempt to offer solutions, simply hear you and believe in you despite your fear. You might also want to add a positive affirmation at the end (e.g., I'm afraid to write that scene because I know it's going to be very emotional, but I'm going to get through it and feel empowered afterward).

- Don't think of the whole huge problem/fear, forge ahead one step at a time. You might take a look at Anne Lamott's book, *Bird by Bird*.
- Think about the people who look to you as a role model, be it your kids or other writers. What kind of example are you setting if you give in to your fears? If you can't be brave for you, be brave for them.

Always remember, emotions carry messages, and there are things to be learned from them. Don't let the fear monsters overwhelm you. Instead, figure out their deeper message and decide on the most effective way of responding to it. And may you all have the courage of Penelope, to stand up to your monsters and force them to retreat!

How about you? What fears do you have, as a writer or a non-writer? What techniques have you worked out to cope with them?

If you're suffering from writer's block, take a look at my article on **Overcoming Writer's Block**.

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