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'burg Blogs : 2012 : 09 : 18 : The Importance of Silence and Picture Frames

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The Importance of Silence and Picture Frames

Posted [September 18, 2012](#) at 4:55 pm by [Wendy Biddlecombe '12](#)



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I arrived at the retreat center in Tampa last Monday with two bags full of books, and two goals: work on my thesis, and meditate.

The pit of my stomach ached all weekend in anticipation as I rounded up articles printed out two months ago but still unread. I was a bit behind on my thesis—the only academic obligation I have this semester. I had to get serious and disciplined—like yesterday.

Before I unpacked my books, notebooks and binders, the urgent panic had melted away. And, for four mornings, afternoons and evenings, I slept in, reheated meals prepared by the center's chef and floated between hours of writing and periods of reflection—of doing nothing down by the river. I spotted a gator most mornings, and one evening saw McDonald's golden arches in the distance light up with nightfall (I thought the were always on?). I didn't speak more than a *good*

morning other than the daily check-in to make sure my boyfriend, our cat and apartment were still intact.

And it worked. By Friday morning, I had a somewhat-complete first draft of my literature review, the first step in a long paper that will be due in less than two months (eek!).

In Anne LaMott's *Bird by Bird*—an excellent book on life as a writer—the author explains how “big challenges fall into one-inch frames”—a good reminder if one is overwhelmed:

“I go back to trying to breathe, slowly and calmly, and finally notice the one-inch picture frame that I put on my desk to remind me of short assignments. It reminds me that all I have to do is to write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame. That is all I have to bite off for the time being. All I am going to do right now, for example, is write that one paragraph that sets the story ...

I know I'm not the only one who has trouble getting started. And if you're like me, and can't even think about sitting down to write until the dishes are done and every paper is cleared from the desk, I advise you get away as well. Spending four days in seclusion is a bit extreme, and even little changes can yield excellent results. Turn off your wireless and find a quiet corner of the library. Break up your daily routine and sit in a new coffee shop to work. Or unplug completely and take a walk by the bay or the Gulf. Bring a notebook and see what you notice. And, if all else fails, write enough to fill a one-inch frame. The next inch will come easier.

About the blogger



I'm a journalist and editor by day, and spend my nights and weekends practicing Bikram yoga, editing the news section of *The Crow's Nest* and growing vegetables in my backyard. I'm a Buffalo, New York, native, and I've lived in New York City, India and France. I hold a bachelor of arts degree in writing (journalism) from The New School in New York City. I'm currently finishing up my master's thesis, and will graduate from USFSP in December 2012. I have mixed feelings about leaving.