

“Swallow the Lion”: Thoughts about Writing

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In my roles as mentor, co-editor for the AAC Book Series, and member of the Annual Review Committee for my department, I observe many colleagues who struggle to write regularly and efficiently.

Last Wednesday, I was "invited" to a meeting of senior faculty at my university. The door was closed and the senior campus administrators talked, listened, and argued with this group of about 40--historians, virologists, engineers, geneticists, political scientists, business management experts, artists, psychologists, entomologists, and one SLP--about current and future university plans and policies.

We had a brief lunch before the "group sharing" started. During lunch, the folks at my table started talking about their current projects---the historian had recently completed a series of books on the explorers, Louis and Clark, the political scientist had finished a book on the International Red Cross and was starting another on international torture, the business professor was working on the 12th edition of a business management textbook, the virologist was trying to keep her writing ahead of the post-docs, doc students, and staff in a virology lab while trying deal with media calls about SWINE FLU, and the entomologist was deciding whether or not to write a "popular" book about his 42 years of insect research that would focus on climate change as reflected in the migration of insect species to new locations. I mentioned editing the AAC series, the revision of the 4th edition of the AAC textbook, and the usual work on research articles.

While our interest areas were so very different, there was one common theme expressed by all at the table that day, everyone reserved writing time every day, along with teaching, student mentoring, research, administration, public policy or media responsibilities. None were binge writers, most wrote for a couple of hours daily during the academic year and more in the summer, until they reached the end of a major project. If they binged, they did so to finish citations, figures, tables, responses to copy editors and so on. Most had little actual writing support other than co-authors and

editors associated with their publishers. Several of them had worked with larger staffs earlier in their careers—before digital library resources, electronic spelling/grammar checking, and electronic referencing became available. All were quite involved in presentations that related to their writing--some in the U.S. and some internationally. I, clearly, did less traveling than the others. In fact, one was leaving for China in the next couple of weeks to teach a week long course to business management professors who teach at Chinese universities. Another was leaving for a month to South and Central America with his graduate students to study insect migration.

I enjoyed my time with these folks, all very positive about acquiring and transferring knowledge, all enjoyed interacting with curious students, and all were deeply involved in ongoing scholarship. They were not always so happy with the decisions of the university administration, but that is a topic for another day. Overall, there was not much snarkiness in this group.

I am writing these thoughts about a week later. This morning at 9:30 AM, I have finishing my writing for today and have a few minutes before a student appointment. Upon reflection, I realize that each of those people around my table at the luncheon probably did exactly the same thing this morning----write—wherever they happened to be. They are all full professors, so the “external lions” of tenure, promotion, reputation, or even the annual review committees are no longer chasing them. Rather, they are writing because they have “swallowed the lion”. The motivation is internal –not external, and, they seem genuinely pleased that their scholarly careers have remained vital and important to them.