

7. Mental aerobics

Sportsmen and women will all tell you that when they are exercising, there comes a moment when a new level of consciousness kicks in. A moment when that voice inside their head stops telling them to give up, that they cannot go on a moment longer, or worse still, that they never should have started in the first place. When that moment comes the body and mind unite and they develop a rhythm, not too fast, not too slow. Their breathing settles, and there is no doubt in their mind that they will reach that finish line, or see the clock hit the top of the hour, or that they will keep pumping till the music stops.

With writing it's the same process. As was mentioned in previous articles, the hardest part about writing is learning to override those voices in your head that tell you to stop. The voices of ridicule that make you feel like an impostor. The voices of criticism that belittle your efforts, laugh at your plots and characters, and in short suggest, not too gently that you 'get real' and leave the writing to those with talent.

What's needed here is mental aerobics. And that's where a journal comes in handy. Keeping a journal will help you still those voices. It will bring you to that moment of unity, when hand and mind and inspiration harmonise.

The moment before harmony is attained, you will, just like an athlete, have a moment of excruciating anguish, and that is the moment of truth. By journalising, you bring to the surface your insecurities, mistaken beliefs and prejudices about yourself, that you internalised and that have become your (de)motivators. Write them down; read them over and over again until they lose their power over you. Then write some new ones, ones that are in tune with your desire to write. These are all you need, for it is my belief that if you have a desire to write, then you will also find the talent to do it. Take your desire seriously – it is there for a reason. And remember, if you listen to the (de) motivators, then you will become one of those people who say 'if only' in the future and hang your head in disappointment. If you get beyond the voice of the (de) motivator and write that novel, or short story, or poem, then you will carry a sense of achievement with you for the rest of your life. You will be that marathon runner whose feet have crossed the finish line.

The only regrets in this life are for things NOT done.

Feel free to compare yourself to famous people, those you see fulfilling their dreams and daring to stand in the limelight. Catch a serious dose of hero worship and wallow in it. Take your favourite person (who doesn't have to be a writer) and decide just what characteristics in them it is you admire so much. Then realise that you have those characteristics too. What you see in the other person, is often a reflection of what you have but have not yet owned or internalised. Remember that you have been filled with all those other 'unproductive' ideas and there has been no room for self-admiration. So, with the journal you have cleared the decks, so to speak. You have literally had a spring clean, and now you can start building some new ideas.

My favourite people are usually pop stars, and I have been laughed at or ridiculed for having the audacity or the stupidity to mention my own name in the same sentence as theirs (more of the voices that will paralyse when left to fester). My heroes were Sting, James Hetfield (of Metallica fame) and Freddie Mercury. And when I investigated my admiration, the common denominator was their courage. All three were prepared to break the mould in their chosen field and in their upbringing. Sting, initially associated with the Punk movement, dared to be intelligent. James Hetfield, a thrash metal guitarist and singer, displayed a tender, emotional side to his character, and wrote 'meaningful' lyrics. Freddie Mercury, of Persian descent, and brought up in a strict, religious environment, had the courage to be flamboyant, gay and utterly 'over the top'. I wanted some of their audacity, their tenacity, and their courage.

But more than this, by identifying with these heroes, and by humanising them, my own ambitions to become a novelist did not seem so ridiculous any more. We are all born naked, and have to learn to make our way in the world. ALL of us, without exception eat and sleep and laugh and cry.

So, my becoming a novelist is no more ridiculous than Sting becoming a performer. All I need is the

same determination. All I must do is switch off those voices in my head.