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Bridget's Musings on Starting Something New

Some people love the openness and space that results from being in between projects. Others find it to be a terrifying no-man's land. Regardless of where on this spectrum you sit, at some point you will be poised to start something new. You may have some inkling of what that "next big thing" might be, or you may have absolutely no idea. Either way, starting off can be intimidating, and the plethora of myths circulating about how you "should" start a writing project only serve to make the process even scarier.

With that in mind, I'm going to offer some thoughts about starting something new by first addressing four big myths that I think need to be debunked. Then, I'll list a few ways writers I often explore what's tugging on them.

MYTH #1: Start at the beginning

But what IS the beginning?

And do stories have a beginning and an end, or are they circular? Or helical?

Is time linear? *Does time even exist?*

These are BIG questions, and very real ones—in life, if not also in your book. Until we get them answered, I don't advocate investing precious time into figuring out what the beginning of your book will be in the early stages of the game. Just write. Start wherever you feel like starting! I recommend beginning with what you are pulled to write about. There's a reason you're thinking about that idea or plot line or memory or tidbit of research you read; it wants to come through onto paper. Help it do that, and don't worry yet about why or where it might fit.

I like to use the analogy of building a building. Regardless of whether your building is one story or twenty, has windows or doesn't, and is modern or old school, you'll need materials (let's call them "bricks") to construct it. Before you build the building, you need a lot of bricks. So why not start with making bricks? If you're writing a memoir or a novel, these bricks are scenes. If you're writing nonfiction, they're bite-sized subtopics. While you're writing these, you should absolutely let yourself dream about what the final building might look like. If you get ideas that you really like, by all means write them down or begin working with them. But also keep

making bricks. I wouldn't start assembling the bricks until you've got at least half of them down on paper.

MYTH #2: Figure out your ending before you begin

I read that John Irving does this—that he has his final sentence before he starts, tacks it above his desk, and gets going. I adore John Irving, and there's no question he's a genius. But he's also the only person I have ever heard of that begins a book this way. If his tactic works for you, terrific! The rest of us will need a different strategy.

Many of the authors I know and work with have no idea whatsoever where their book is going when they begin. They have some vague ideas they want to play with on the page, and they just start with those, following them where they lead. Somewhere down the line, the destination becomes clearer. It goes without saying that at some point, we all have to figure out endings for our books. But this is not that time. Put the viewfinder away, Luke. Let go. Use the force.

MYTH #3: Create an outline, flow chart, or mind map before you start writing

As you might guess from my use of Obi Wan Kenobi's advice above, I'm not a fan of this (unless it flows naturally!). It's too, well...dry. Too organized, too stiff, too bordered. The beginning of any project offers a rare opportunity to hang out in a wide open space. This is the time when you get to entertain possibilities, create connections, and let the wilderness in. Imposing structure at this point might drive new and intriguing ideas away.

By all means, brainstorm if that helps you. Fill sheets of paper with words or colors or images or mind maps. But don't force yourself into a scaffolding just yet. You'll likely need to do this down the line, so enjoy the freedom now.

MYTH #4: Write what's hardest first

The effect of this is that you'll never write anything! Or you will, but you'll hate the process—NOT what you need at this stage of the game. Or any stage, really.

If you're just starting out, the only thing that matters is gaining traction. You want to get psyched and curious, and you want to build momentum. The way you're going to do that is by writing what's easiest first—and what's easiest is, once again, what you're drawn to write about. Yep, that's more or less the same thing I said in #1. Hopefully you're getting the picture...

So, how DO you get started?

Here are a bunch of possibilities for figuring out what you might want to write about:

- Make a list of 10-20 significant split-second memories from your life. Not big, important events, but little snapshots from random times that stay with you.
- Make a list of 10 things you know a lot about.
- Make a list of 10 things you care deeply about.
- Identify 3-5 “sticky” situations in your life, past or present, that gnaw at you.
- Identify 3-5 conversations or interactions that you wish you could relive to navigate differently.
- Think of the top 3-5 stories or anecdotes you tell at parties or to new people you meet.
- List the 3-5 topics you would dive right now if someone paid you to do a week of self-guided research and you were relieved of all other responsibilities.
- Brainstorm 5-10 alternative identities you would like to take on if someone could wave a magic wand over you and grant you a brand new start.
- Make a list of 5-10 places you love and know a lot about (these can be small, like your grandmother’s old house or big, like French-speaking Switzerland).

And then there are always writing prompts. Thousands of them can be found online with a simple Google search, and there are even websites that offer send a new one to your email inbox every morning. If these get you going, fabulous! If not, don’t force yourself to use them. Remember, everyone’s process is different. The “right” way to get started is whatever gets you excited to write. Full stop.

When your chattering mind stops your writing flow and asks, “What exactly IS this?” just tell it that you don’t know yet—and that this is perfectly normal. Trust in the process. The juicy stuff will emerge if you give it an outlet.

*If you have any questions about any of this or want to run your ideas by me,
I’m always happy to help with this process!
Just reach out...*