



First, Just Do It!

I write a lot. Some might say too much. I write Twitter updates, e-mails, electronic discussion messages, blog posts, journal articles, books, and this "glacial blog" where I post maybe twice a year. I think about writing a lot. Some might say too much. And I have something to say about it.

A colleague I greatly respect has said of writing "First, have something to say." At first this seems like complete wisdom, and for years it made total sense to me. But as I have thought more about it, I have become very uncomfortable with it. So I want to take this one post of my twice-a-year-blog to refute this statement since I think it potentially undermines potential writers at their most vulnerable point.

We all have something to say. Being human, and experiencing the world in our own unique ways, we can't help but have something to say. Having something to say is not the issue. Having the motivation to write is.

Think of the hit TV series Seinfeld. This show literally wrote about nothing. It even wrote about the fact that it was writing about nothing. And we loved it. It spoke to us in a way that so many pretentious TV shows didn't.

But by saying "First, having something to say" one immediately is forced to judge one's thoughts. "Do I have 'something to say'?" we might question. "Are my thoughts and experiences worthy?" we may think. And if those are the questions, I can tell you what the answers will be. I know, because I am the father of two teenagers, who are as filled with self-doubt as any of their breed. "I'm not worthy!" may as well be their personal battle cry. They don't need to be further undermined with

"First, have something to say." And many of us are frankly not that much more self-confident than teenagers.

The real issue is having the guts to do it. It's having the courage, or foolhardy nature, or hubris, or whatever, to lay yourself out there for potential ridicule. It's taking the step that you think you may regret but pretty much you will always thank yourself for taking. It's taking the time.

For example, at the moment that I'm writing this I am in the middle of a plane flight from San Francisco to London. I am over Greenland at this very moment. The plane is dark, with most people sleeping (as they should) and a few typing away on computers or watching movies. I was asleep myself until recently. But for some reason I had this idea to write about this, and I wanted to get it recorded before I lost it, as unfortunately happens with many of the ideas I have.

You might say that I had something to say. But again, having something to say wasn't the issue. The issue was whether I would stop trying to sleep, get my computer out of my backpack in the overhead bin, and put this down in print so I could share it with you. We ALL have something to say. We don't all have the motivation to share it. At other times I have written on a laptop perched on my knees while making sure my twin girls didn't drown in their bath, or in between getting home and making dinner, or late at night when I should be in bed. So much of writing is simply doing the job.

One of my daughters is very much into John Waters. He of "Hairspray" fame has a side to his artistry that most would say is...uh...challenging for many to appreciate. And I would hazard

a guess, that as famous as he is, and no doubt as rich as he is now, he mostly made his career out to having the guts to say what others didn't. There may have been many people who said to themselves, "Wouldn't it be cool if I made a movie about this?" But he was the one who actually did. And that made all the difference.

Since this post is about courage, the pictures I've selected to illustrate it are meant to depict courage. The header image is one I used for the very first post I ever made to this web site. Titled "Over the Edge", the first sentence was: "Running a rapid, there's the point at which you drop over the edge. It's when all things disappear except what is right in front of you, and your entire attention is focused on now. The fear has left, and you simply do it. It is a moment to be savored, but there is no time to savor it." Writing shares something with this, although not the immediacy. It shares the fear, though, and the sheer audacity to face your fears and do it anyway.

We are all born having something to say. What we are not born with is the courage, or the motivation, or the hubris to share it with others. What you really need to know is that no matter what you have to say there is someone out there who needs or wants to hear it. Just do it.

The wonderful thing is that the Internet makes this so much more possible than it was before. There once was a day when only a select few would get past the gatekeepers to see their writing distributed to others -- now it's as simple as taking a few minutes to set up a blog. Sure, there's no guarantee people will read and value your writing, but at least it is much easier to do it. And if you're good, you will likely be discovered, and valued, and potentially even make a career out of it. I know of people like this.

We're past Greenland by now, and halfway to Iceland. The plane is still dark as I get ready to put my laptop away. Is the world a better place because I took time out of my one chance to sleep tonight to write this? I haven't a clue, and I think probably not. But I'll likely never know, and for those of us who write, that must be enough.

For the few who will ever see this, I'm here to tell you that you have something to say, even if you think you don't. Just do it.

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has, over the years, been a major contributor to Ontario Library Association programs and to special projects such as the Ontario Digital Library, now known as Knowledge Ontario. In his day job, he is a Senior Program Officer at RLG Programs, part of the Programs and Research division of OCLC. He is best known for his leadership of the California Digital Library, and was instrumental in the development and deployment of the eScholarship Repository and the eScholarship Editions publishing services. He created and managed the Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE for the UC Berkeley Library, a digital library and support service for digital library developers. He is an experienced commercial whitewater river guide, and has led numerous trips down western rivers, including the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

This article is at his roytennant.com Web site.