

Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* wasn't made for times like these

But it has helped me to survive them.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue



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I've always known I wanted to be a writer, that I *am* a writer. This is a vocation without a path, a calling that, like so many, doesn't come with more specific instructions. Like a lot of other writers, I am also a full-time something else, and the writing I do manage to accomplish often comes as the result of a delicate negotiation between all the things I have to do to keep myself alive and many of the things I enjoy doing that require significantly less brainpower than setting pen to paper.

Enter Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*. I first encountered *The Writing Life* as an undergraduate, not as an assignment for class but as something I read (in a pirated e-book version full of typos and weird line breaks) while riding the subway to my internship at a publishing house somewhere in Midtown Manhattan, where I read all the manuscripts I should have been writing but wasn't ready to.

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Inasmuch as the sheer beauty of her prose lit me up inside, there was also a profound unease that came along with reading Dillard. She’s an expert at poking an inquisitive finger into some of the charming little delusions I’ve set up for myself, the things that protect me from destabilizing my life.

This was especially true when I made her my subway companion at age 21. She writes of the writing life as monastic and hard and isolated; I was hoping for love and connection and some ease, after finally having escaped from the tyranny of being in high school, my days organized around AP classes and the ringing of a bell. No, Dillard seemed to say, if you want this thing as badly as you say you do, your life needs to be organized around it. “A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time.”

I wasn’t ready to see writing as it really is: as work, and as labor, the way you spend the hours of your literal life. I went to a lot of readings in New York and saw writers on stages, in red lipstick and good outfits, answering interesting questions I wanted to be asked. This was the part of the writing life that was visible to me, and it was the part that was easy to covet: unpacking boxes of matte-coated hardcovers with my name on the front.

Dillard’s vision looked more like a fluorescent-lit room in the corner of an undergraduate library, the muted hum of words standing in stark contrast to the vividness of lived experience. “If you ask a twenty-one-year-old poet whose poetry he likes, he might say, unblushing, ‘Nobody’s.’ In his youth, he has not yet understood that poets like poetry, and novelists like novels; he himself likes only the role, the thought of himself in a hat.”

It took me a long time to figure it out. The weird, messy end of undergraduate study, my first years out of college when I got bedbugs and met my husband and worked in publishing, hoping it would help me be someone—these were years that were not wasted but also were not years when I wrote much of anything. It took the relative freedom of graduate school, where my days were no longer organized around workdays and commutes, where my jobs were to read and write and to shelve books at the library, that Dillard’s words began to make sense. The rest of the book was able to unfold itself for me, and I really started to write.

Dillard's advice—to mine the vein, to perfect before allowing what follows to unfurl, to work at it regularly—all becomes clearer once you're ensconced in a practice. Her advice also embraces the practical: a 20-foot conference table on which you're able to spread out your manuscript and pace (in my case, 15 feet of hallway wall in my apartment, bedecked in sticky notes), a box full of index cards, a dim and ugly room so "imagination can meet memory in the dark."

As I moved back into a professional life after graduate school, I was able to keep hold of the schedule, was able to honor the claim writing asserted on my time. I moved to a city where I didn't know many people and relished the solitude.

Then the pandemic started.

For me as for everyone I know, the past year has meant swinging wildly from anxiety to loneliness to grief to occasional islands of feeling alright. Monkishness, when unchosen, when surrounded by death and sadness and no way out, is oppressive and terrifying. Most days I miss my parents, my siblings, and my friends who live far away so badly I can taste it.

But in comes Annie Dillard again, like a strict teacher. Her book was not made for times like these, but it can serve through them. She reminds me that, as a writer, this is a more extreme example of the life I've chosen; that as much as my worst days require gentleness, a schedule will help me keep hold of them; that it's important to keep following the line as I go.

And this is why:

At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your heart, your back, your brain, and then—and only then—it is handed to you. From the corner of your eye you see motion. Something is moving through the air and headed your way.

Moments of grace, in my life, in this awful year, have been few and far between, but an awful lot of them have come when I've cracked the code, when I've written my way through myself. Putting myself in the way of more of these moments is a selfish desire but a sustaining one.

Simone Weil writes of prayer as an experimental certainty, a kind of “if you build it, they will come”—with *they*, in this case, being God. And once God, or grace, arrives, it would be stupid not to bend your life around to meet it.

This, as Annie Dillard knows, is how a calling becomes a life. You must love sentences and the world, and you must renounce both, alongside your ego and your preciousness about yourself and your ideas. But at the end of it all, there’s something worth pouring yourself into, a way to give away all you’ve been given, a way to explore the plenitude and abundance of grace in your life and in the world. She says it wonderfully: “One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. . . . Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.”

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