

PREGNANT PAUSE – USING VACATION TIME TO GET (A HIT LIKE) “KNOCKED UP”

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Anecdotally, you might have heard about a woman who’d been trying to get pregnant for years, then, decided to take a break from the stress of trying to get pregnant. Maybe she went on vacation. At any rate, suddenly she got “knocked up.” Sometimes taking a break from writing can fertilize us with ideas.

For me, vacation time is the perfect time for unleashing my creativity. Perhaps it’s the focus on relaxation and recreation, perhaps it’s because I’m exposed to places, people and things I don’t see everyday – which sparks my curiosity and my imagination. There is just something about taking ‘a load off’ that allows my mind to create freely and gravitate to my inner genius. I believe that each and every one of us has an inner genius – an unbridled creativity that informs the dreary and often tedious work that precedes it. A spark that ignites one idea (or a barrel of ideas) that if good enough, gets you recognition, fortune, and more work. And I believe we all can tap into it if we just get out of our own way.

So, how do you, as a writer, use your vacation time to unleash your creative genius?

First, be open to the idea that the muse may strike anywhere at any time. Even if you are committed to taking a break from writing, you need to remember that first and foremost, you are a creator and as such, even when you are not actively creating, that deep wellspring within you might very well be perking and absorbing. You may even want to consider letting the muse have her way with you for ten minutes sometime during each day, this could lead to a more intimate relationship with your muse as well as get you ‘knocked up’ with a kernel of a great idea, or a new twist for your current project. One writer I know found the germ of a story idea from an in-flight magazine, tore it out, crafted the pitch on the plane and called his agent from the airport. The agent loved it, pitched it and sold it – while the writer was on vacation. Now that’s my kind of “working vacation.”

WRITER’S VACATION TOOLBOX

When away from home, chances are you won’t have all your writing and researching tools with you, but even the lightest packers out there can find room for the basics – a pad and pen. A small spiral notebook can even fit in your pocket. An audio recording device is also great, especially when stopping to jot down your thoughts isn’t convenient (i.e., a walking tour when you need to keep pace with the guide.) You can buy a microphone attachment for your i-pod so it can do double duty. In fact many gadgets that you will be bringing on vacation anyway can aid you in your writing. Many cell phones and even some digital cameras have the capacity to record voice messages. And of course still or video cameras allow you to capture visual images that capture your imagination or spawn ideas.

A more low-tech way to capture visuals that spark you, is to draw them. I always take my sketch pad with me on vacation. And invariably I find things to sketch and write about. It is not so much a journal of what happened, but more a collection of meaningful images, moments described or snatches of dialogue or creative musings. You don’t have to be an artist to sketch.

If your muse lives inside your motherboard, and you don’t leave home without your laptop, a good security tip is to buy a backpack that doubles as a computer bag, so that it does not say steal me.

I use an "Incase" canvas vertical sling that is an army green and looks like a book-bag. It is lined and lightweight and casual for that vacation feeling. It also has an inner and outer container for my other writing tools.

VACATION INSPIRATION

STRANGERS - Vacations are ironically full of stimulation. All of it is new. Every avenue, every shop, every cobblestone. So, on a walk – make sure you carry the light-weight tool-box we spoke about. Bring that small notepad or sketchpad that can fit into a pocket or a few 3 X 5 cards. And a pen, of course. Yeah, you can always ask those folks at the next table you have been accidentally-on-purpose listening to – “May I borrow your pen for a moment?” Write down what you remember from the conversation and return the pen. Smile and say thanks, of course. I sometimes find myself saying, “That was a cool line of dialogue, mind if I use that one?” They will usually say yes, but forget they ever said it.

INANIMATE OBJECTS - We go on vacations for a variety of reasons, but as writers we should always keep in the back of our minds that while we are wherever we are, it’s an opportunity to: gather... snatch.... collect... be curious... listen....hear, feel, taste, smell, see... anything that makes us smile or pulls our attention to it. For instance, when I was in Paris, my husband and I were walking past the Louvre, there was some building construction going on. And a piece of wood felt like it was calling me.

I sighed, walked past it, trying to ignore it. But, after a couple blocks, I turned to my husband and said, I have to go back and get this piece of wood. I know it sounds crazy, but I felt like I was supposed to rescue it from the trash pile. He obliged, amused, and what followed was an introduction to “WOOD,” who looks a little like a hedgehog with a punk hairdo. And wood became our muse incarnate.

We took WOOD with us on vacations, fishing in Costa Rica, WOOD went to the top of the Eiffel tower and WOOD joined us at the Imperial Palace. Now WOOD has his own stories to tell and

who knows where that will lead us. It could be an eccentric travel TV show or... an animated series, or book. But it was an idea and a character that was spawned on vacation. I have taken endless pictures of WOOD, one of my favorites is WOOD in the rain forest with a tarantula crawling on him – It was inter-species love at first sight.

You get the idea. Let your imagination rip, uncensored... Vacations are good for that.

LOVED ONES - Another story idea was inspired on a vacation to Yosemite with my family. The kids were outside playing truth or dare; I heard snatches of it while I relaxed inside the cabin; I wasn't exactly eavesdropping, but I could not help overhearing them. In my very relaxed, almost sleepy state, I just allowed it to waft over me, listening to the rhythms of their speech, words that were repeated and the differences between each one's way of speaking. It was totally mind-blowing and all I was doing was relaxing and listening, as if I was listening to the wind in the forest trees or the river. I was listening to the sound of the human heart being expressed by these teens. And while I had no intention of even thinking about writing on that particular vacation, I wound up finding my next screenplay idea.

DAY TRIPS - Just getting away for a day trip can infuse your writing with ideas and inspiration. It can even give you the handle on that tough character whose voice you have been unable to crack. Just like an actor talks about 'becoming the character,' you, too, will, through a relaxed state, breathe life into them and in some cases become them.

I recall a time when I was writing a story about a frog princess. She was a bit of a sourpuss and jealous of another frog. I just could not get inside of her to write her. I knew I could not write her dialogue unless I could really understand her. It was after a one-day excursion to Descanso Gardens in California spending time by a pond, that I was awakened in the middle of the night and suddenly, I felt like I had sprouted webbed feet and froggy skin; as I sat on the toilet thinking this is way too strange, I understood that all she wanted was to be loved. And despite being a princess she felt hopelessly alone. It was an insight I would not have gotten unless I had relaxed by the pond and cleared my mind to let

her talk to me. On vacation, we have the rare opportunity to clear our minds so our characters and our stories can breathe.

DRIVING – Sometimes on vacation you will find yourself just driving the roads. I often pull over and just listen to nature or the snatches and images of sound and pictures as they zoom past and make notes of my impressions. These notes led to a screenplay about two sisters who break down on the side of the road and must find their way back in time for a wedding, and I used much of the environment from my vacation... lots of freeways and traffic jams and incorporated my ideas about what I imagined to be going on in each car. Their dreams, hopes, conflicts, etc.

DINING OUT – Have you ever wondered why people are silent at the table next to you? You can use such moments to exercise your creativity to imagine what their lives are like. Why are they not talking? Is it a moment of happy, relaxed silence, is it enforced silence, is this the moment that – fill in the blank. These character explorations can extend to imagined improvisations with your characters... what would your characters do in such and such restaurant, what would they order, what obstacles would they encounter, what quirky details of life can be newly triggered from your vacation environment?

Whether you're taking a trip to Bora Bora or your neighborhood CVS, always be open to bringing your muse along for the ride.