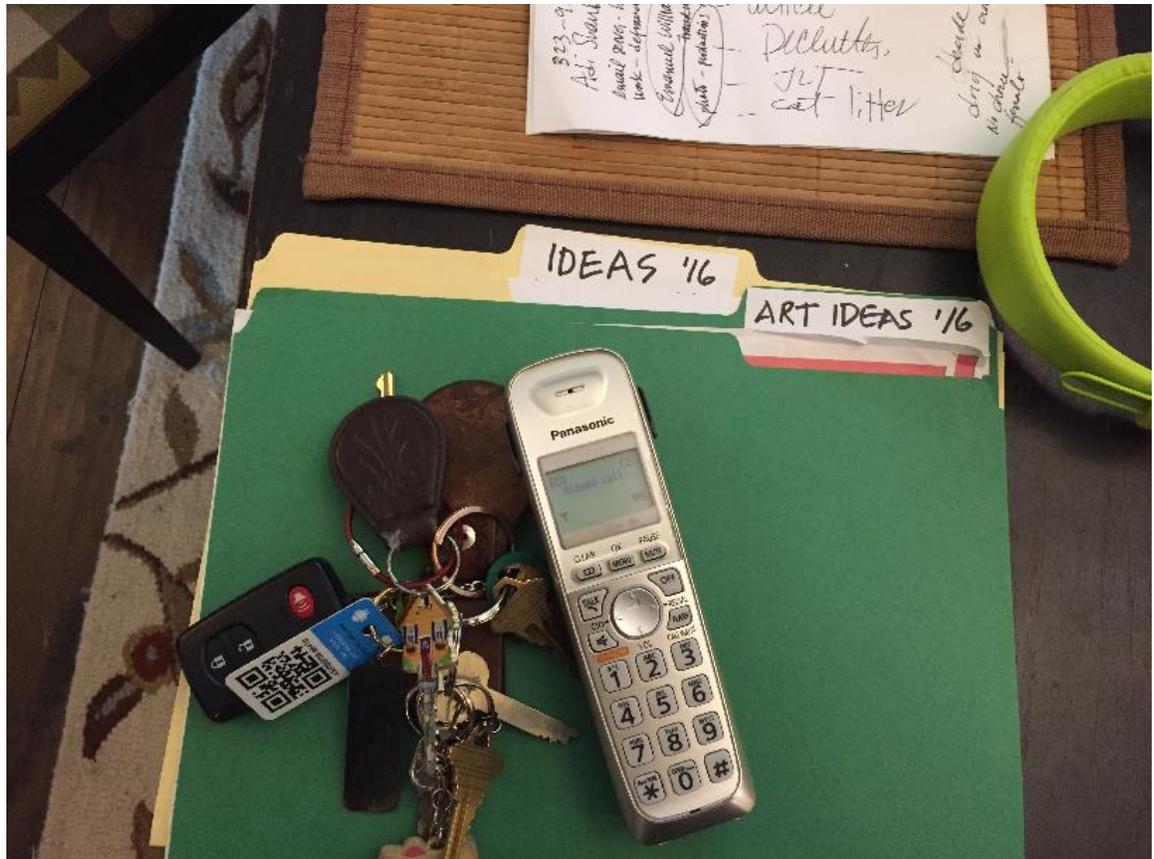


SPRING FOR WRITERS: RECYCLE, REUSE, REBIRTH...

By Devo Cutler-Rubenstein



More than any other season, spring stings our heart awake. Whether it's folktales of seasonal courtship, or a rising up of a deep sense of longing at spring's promise of renewal, there is a dual engine pushing us, "out with the old, and in with the new," or as Margaret Atwood so profoundly said, "In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt."

Spring's inherent sense of upheaval and subsequent renewal reminds us of our potential as humans and as creators. Taking time to declutter our physical or mental creative space makes sense. But, sometimes, spring arrives and we're just

not feeling it. For whatever reason, our creative hearts may seem stifled, walled off, overwhelmed, congested, or just plain ole uninspired.

Of course, everyone has moments of feeling lost about what seeds to plant in their writer's soil. Sometimes, when we get ready to plant our new garden, there can be confusion about what our focus should be. What specific seeds for stories do we plant, nurture and sow?

As every writer knows, ideas are a dime a dozen, (as are clichés), and it's our execution (what we do after we get ideas) that will really lead to a satisfying completion. What can spring promise us as creators? How does spring play into our decision-making?

We may marvel at the innate intelligence of nature. A beautiful rose can inspire a chain of thoughts leading to a story or a poem. Just ask Gertrude Stein, Robert Burns or Shakespeare. But, sometimes there are too many roses; too many ideas that leave us wondering what our nature is as a creators. What we are here to do; if there is one story that would be the most fulfilling to write. What is right to write *now*?

Spring is tricky that way. Looking at which of our seeds of thought did not mature over the last few years, or were stalled due to illness, lack of interest, or distractions with work or family, can be exhausting. What helped me was a two-step process. The following two steps may require a bit of emotional and physical heavy lifting. Trust me, it'll be worth it...

Why is it so hard to let go of our writing clutter? Perhaps we tend to hold on to old ideas, like broken dishes we promised we would fix one day. As the

unfinished stories mount up, they can be like the insatiable plant from *“Little Shop of Horrors*, – “Feed me, Seymour.”

I know about this feeling, as I had been in a stall for more than three months. There a lot of writing projects with my name on them, at various stages of development, repair, and disrepair. They call out to me from their homes in crevices in my file cabinet, scrawled on note cards, doodled on scraps of paper or hidden in piles of spiral notebooks. My heart aches to make a choice – but ruefully, truthfully, I just can’t decide which one.

Over the last months, the only writing I did was endless lists: “To-Do” lists; “To-~~Done~~” lists; notes on old stories; notes on new ones. Friends and family weighed in with suggestions: “What about your ‘fear of that bunny rabbit’ story? I always thought that one was so *cute!*”

But when I quieted my nervousness, I began to notice that I kept circling back to three or four possibilities; these projects seemed to have the most “soul juice” for me, at this juncture. They seemed the most alive.

STEP ONE: IMAGE COLLECTING

So, right now, if you want, write down the question, “Which creative project do I need to focus on now?” Focus on the question, then close your eyes and welcome whatever images, smells, or sounds that come to mind. Initially, you may be thinking about your immediate environment, but sit with it.

You may be surprised. But, don’t analyze what you’re seeing, as yet. For some of you, it may be an emotion that presents itself, or even specific key words.

Research from the University of Surrey in the U.K. found that once visual distractions are removed, your brain focuses more efficiently. ¹

Once you have three persistent images, verbal clues, or visceral emotions, open your eyes. Take another minute, and write them down. Like William Faulkner said, if there is a story there, it will come out.

STEP TWO: IDENTIFYING CLUTTER & ELIMINATING UNSIGHTLY GUILT

Now you've identified three big ideas—your best seeds, your future cash crop. Where will they be planted? Is the garden plot or untamed field ready?

Maybe, you're ready to proceed. But maybe, like me, when thinking about the future, you're feeling choked or stifled. Perhaps, even guilty for having wasted so much time. I had identified my top two or three ideas, but what about all the rest? What about all the other idea-laden books and papers? These ideas felt to me almost as if they were my children, and they had been neglected, or worse – were off in some corner starving.

I had to begin to think of my office as a kind of “idea garden”—chock full of fertilized seeds, some of which wouldn't take root, at least not today. I had to come to an important revelation: I can't write every story I think I want to do. And, once you accept that freeing conclusion, what's next...?

What I did was get out some plastic storage units and paper bags for recycling, and I went at the piles of paper, scrawled notions and half-started projects. And, I started to organize *with a purpose*. I didn't commit to anything just

yet, but I put aside those concepts and projects that probably would not be on my agenda any time soon.

For me, even books that I knew I wanted to read last year, but was not going to get to this year, if ever—all of it went the way of file folders, banker boxes, or donation boxes.

It took me a couple weeks, in the middle of everything else life threw at me, including convincing my lovely husband to eat the occasional meal on top of a pile of file folders. (Note to self: Next spring do not use the dining room table as central organizing location).

Today, as I started clearing and consolidating the final piles of my future creative promise, I began to see a pattern. I noticed the types of subject piles that were larger, and which story concepts seemed more developed. I was easily able to identify the three current projects I could realistically tackle.

Spring is a time for us to feel the sun in our work... to make room for the seeds that are now ready to bloom.

So, this spring, consider a trashcan, a timer, and few storage boxes as writer's tools, helping to clear away from your creative space everything that doesn't inspire you or liberate your creative energy. Trick your busy mind into calming and focusing itself with the promise that the ideas you want to write *now*... are waiting for you, ready to blossom.

¹ Walgreen's April 6, 2016 issue, "Feel Good Every Day,"