



I Call It the Miracle

The page is empty, my head is full and I don't have a clue what to say. This is the step I dread most when I'm working on an assignment. Each time, I manage to make my way forward. How I do it, though, I'm not sure.

I'm a journalist who has written hundreds of articles about the arts. Throughout my career, I've asked numerous artists and designers what it takes to transform their ideas into finished projects. Some describe routines, some acknowledge concentrated work, some credit the muse. And isn't it a bit of them all?

I call it the miracle: the letting go and letting in, the opening of my fullest being beyond my conscious processes. It's shaky and scary, and there are no guarantees. It is a mysterious gift from

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myself to myself, never requested, delivered when I need it most. Whatever its name, whatever the discipline, this stage of the creative process is a universal experience that leads from questions to answers, from not knowing how to finding a way.

I live in the suburbs of New York, where my husband and I moved when our daughters were young. Now I've made my office in what used to be one of the girls' bedrooms, my desk by a window facing a glorious Japanese maple. I cherish the stillness and the space for my mind to move.

I enjoy each step of what I do, from unearthing story topics to digging into assignments and seeing the published results. I visit exhibitions, sometimes more than once. I read and reread catalogs, study images, and shower artists and curators with questions until all the particulars are clear. I pore over related websites and delve into tangents I never expected to find. I get excited, inspired—and then comes the point when it's time to stop learning and to start creating.

And there it is: a daunting abyss, on one side all my fascinating new knowledge, on the other a story that is clear, accurate and engaging. I run through the facts I have gathered, but I cannot rally them. I think and I think, but I cannot funnel them from a swirl of ideas into the right first words.

I get frustrated, tired. I head outside and walk, my brain shuffling details, getting nowhere. I go to the gym, where I swim lap after lap, replaying quotes and concepts, sewing together useless sentences from tangles of words. In bed at night, I write in my mind, even in my dreams, but nothing congeals.

Then the panic: a sick feeling. How will I ever write my article? This time, finally, I will fail.

I'm reminded of an interview I did with Giovanni Pagnotta, an industrial designer of whimsical, modernistic carbon-fiber home furnishings. We were talking about the fear that overtakes him with each new project, despite his prior successes. "I've always been able to extract something creative from my mind," he told me, "but you always wonder: what if I run out?"

For me there's nothing to do but sit at my computer and place my fingers on the keys. I have to start

somewhere. I write the clumsiest opening sentence—I don't think too hard; I tell myself it's not the real beginning, just a tap on the ice to crack through. I rewrite it, add another line. Sometimes it's right before an appointment, so I spew it out and run. When I come back, I'm surprised: it's not so bad.

This is when something different starts to happen, and the miracle emerges. Elizabeth Gilbert explored this phenomenon in the TED talk she presented in 2009, after the blockbuster reception of her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*. She harked back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who "believed that creativity was this divine attendant spirit that came to human beings from some distant and unknowable source." The Greeks called it a "daemon"; the Romans called it a "genius" that would, she said, "invisibly assist the artist with their work and ... shape the outcome of that work." She cited the poet Ruth Stone, who depicted a poem as "barreling down at her over the landscape." She had to run to get a pencil and paper and then reach out and seize it. Gilbert described the "utter maddening capriciousness of the creative process. A process which, as anybody who has ever tried to make something ... knows, does not always behave rationally. And, in fact, can sometimes feel downright paranormal."

I know this: it takes a long time. Unlike Stone, I have to stay put for it to happen. And as I do, I begin to see things. They are revealed

as if out of nowhere: this is the artwork that encapsulates the show's premise; this is the quote that nails the curator's intention. Perfect transitions leap out at me, and I grab them, type them, secure them in place. I glimpse a vague sense of structure: here is where I can say this, and—yes!—now I can say that.

I identify the end of my story even as my opening is unfinished. I write flowery descriptions I know I'll have to trim. Cars hiss by outside; hours disappear. I go downstairs, make a salad and bring it up to my desk. Soon there are blocks of words on the page, the same paragraph in eleven different versions, notes in capital letters. Occasionally, jolted by an insight, I stand up. I walk downstairs again, grab a handful of raisins, pop them into my mouth, return to my desk. My focus sharpens. I check notes, rethink phrases, polish lines. The information finds its form. Words flow through my fingers onto the screen.

Eventually there is a moment when all the chunks meet up and all the ideas are accounted for. It catches me unaware—I haven't been

fixated on finishing. True, the article is too long and there are parts that don't work, but for that instant I am utterly happy. I feel a deep sense of relief. I close my computer and walk away, free.

Later I'll revise the work, then revise it again. I'll double-check my facts and reconsider my statements. I'll read the piece aloud to hear how it sounds and tweak it some more until I know I've told the story I set out to tell.

The range of emotions that accompany the development and completion of any project is common across creative fields and familiar from one endeavor to the next. "There are key feelings that are always there," Pagnotta told me. "It's like, ok, I didn't run out of it yet. It's a great feeling when you look at what you did and you go, 'Wow, it worked. I really like it.'"

When I'm deep in my panic, my husband says, "Don't worry, you'll figure it out." So far, every time, I have. But not without the miracle. [ca](#)

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