

Novelists, Inc.

FOUNDED IN 1989

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President's Voice

Plus Ça Change...

I recently went on a treasure hunt to recover old conference files as part of an ongoing effort to get important papers archived on the website and, thereby, reduce the amount of reinventing the wheel that each Board must do. In the process of perusing yellowed papers that were absolutely fascinating to this old history major (Former, I mean! Not old! Not me!) I ran across some issues from 1990, the first year of *NINK*'s existence.

The conclusion? In some cases, the old French saying, "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" The more things change, the more they stay the same. For instance, a member's complaint about the conference, particularly noteworthy in light of recent Ninlink questions about why we have outside speakers when we have such expertise in our ranks: "Why not deep-six the workshops and the keynote/banquet speeches from members. I've listened to my last overlong, boring, self-serving 'and then I wrote' speech." A suggestion that we should be in NYC at least every other year. A note that having a spring conference would require a Board to produce a conference with only a few months on the job. (Tell me about it!)

And then there's "Used Bookstores—Friends or Foes?" or a debate on the value of self-promotion, "Do We Want to Be Known for Our Bookmarks—or Our Books?" Barb Keiler leading the charge on advocacy (God bless BK, our perpetual champion and standard-bearer in tough situations) over censorship concerns, urging Ninc to join an organization called the Coalition of Writers' Organizations, headed by Larry McMurty. A campaign to change the image of romance in order to broaden the readership.

Oh, yes—how about "Harlequin/Silhouette Proposes New Contract for Authors"—and the attendant outcry. And check this out: "Are Booksellers Telling Us What to Write?" about buyers for large chains encouraging submission to them of manuscripts as well as covers, in order to decide which books to push.

Here's a fun look at Market News, an item from Michael Seidman, (then editorial director at Zebra!) talking about inaugurating a program balancing "on the fine line between erotica and soft porn" (think *The Story of O*, it says) about 50,000 words, and that they're particularly interested in Victorian backgrounds as well as authors who can write three or four books a year—but he's quick to note that these should not be thought of as series books. And get this: a Harlequin Intrigue reviewed in *PW*! Plus cover blurbs for Intrigue (the line aimed, it says, at the straight mystery market) by writers such as Tony Hillerman. Harlequin Paranormals to launch, and Meteor Kismets just underway—with 1,000 free copies to each author.

Carrie Feron of Bantam Loveswept going to Berkley. Beth de Guzman at Silhouette. Walker & Co. interested in traditional Westerns. Carolyn Nichols launching Bantam Fanfare, debuting with Iris Johansen's *Wind Dancer*, Sandra Brown's *Texas! Lucky*, and *Wives Waiting* by Christina Harland, a relationship story of three women—British, American, and French—who lose their husbands in Vietnam. (Five years later, when I started writing, anything about Vietnam was *verboten*.) Nancy Yost leaving Avon to become an agent; Damaris Rowland at Dell (where they were then interested in gothics.) Advice, reported by Ruth Glick from Bouchercon 1990, that "authors looking for an entrée into the mystery field might try to establish a

detective with an unusual specialty." And complaints by men in the mystery field that women writers were taking over.

A note on a *PW* article citing AAP that more than 300,000 books a year, at a value of \$9 million, are lost in the mail. Compounding that problem were auctions held at bulk mail centers where wholesalers and retailers outbid everyone, then returned the unsold copies to the publishers for credit! We knew returns were a problem, but...wow. That's brass *cojones*.

But here's an article that really highlights how some things have changed a lot: Marj Krueger, following an earlier article by Judy Myers about CompuServe, writing about electronic networking, sharing her experiences on Delphi (Holy cow, Batman! Anyone remember Delphi!?) It's truly a trip back in time.

A definition, if you can imagine, of email (called E-mail.) Because people didn't know. Talking about typing in a string of usernames, discussing how Delphi is more friendly than CompuServe (remember those incomprehensible number strings?) Forums. SIGs (Special Interest Groups): How do you get there? This is pre-Windows, folks, and definitely pre-mouse, so you type MAIN MENU, then GRO (for group), SCI (for science fiction), then FOR (for forum), then hit RETURN.

What a trip! And discussion of the costs of long distance rates to connect, but you could keep it affordable by not joining the "electronic conference" we now call chats and only going online on the

weekends, at lower long distance rates. Oh, and how CompuServe is the giant (AOL was only a twinkle in its daddy's eye) and Genie is newer and trying to grow. CP/M and MS-DOS machines...Atari, too. Wow. But hackers were already a concern, though the assurance was given that someone getting into your hard disk (not drive) and either stealing from it or wiping it were about the same as getting hit by a meteorite. No mention of spam.

Sigh...the Good Ol' Days...

— Jean Brashear

Wish you could get your own glimpse into these past issues?

Ninc is looking for a volunteer to coordinate this archiving project, which would include researching the most cost-effective way to accomplish it and making recommendations to the Board, as well as possibly overseeing the project itself. Jean already has collected information on some options, so the necessary research probably won't be onerous. This project, helping to preserve Ninc's history, will be one of the most valuable contributions anyone will ever make to this organization we all cherish, but there's also a lot of fun in store. These past *NINKs* really are fun—and fascinating—reading! If you're interested, please contact Jean at bejean@cox-internet.com.

JB

We Bounce Back

Continued from p. 1 ▶▶▶ before she suddenly left the house and left you with an unsigned document and a hollow feeling inside your gut? And darn it—your gut was right. The new editor just doesn't go for the storyline. I know some of us have walked this path—and then went on to write more books. Writing is what we do. We don't walk away.

What moment in our business could be more memorable than receiving "the call"? How many rejection slips had you collected by then? How many manuscripts had you tucked under your bed? I had five. And then the phone rang, and our worlds changed. From unpublished to published. Even now, I get goose bumps. We all remember the moment although what we actually said on the phone is up for grabs. Hopefully, we were coherent. But because I've been there, I know that the event and its afterglow was one of unfettered joy.

Except that, for me, the afterglow was cut short. Soon after receiving "the call" three years ago, I received another. The biopsy was positive. I had breast cancer.

Why, oh, why, can we never taste the better without the bitter? I'd worked so hard and so long to establish this writing career, I couldn't allow anything, not even the Big C, to stop me from moving forward. When my husband cheered through his tears, I knew I was on the right track.

In the beginning, I told no one in the industry about my condition. Certainly not my editor, even though I adored her and still do. Not anyone in my RWA Chapter because news has a way of spreading.

By unlucky coincidence, one of the Harlequin editors was in town for a conference a few days after the doctor's call. I had committed to having dinner with her and another writer on Friday evening.

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We Bounce Back

▶ ▶ ▶ I remember sitting at the table making God-knows-what conversation. I remember where we ate because of the white glove French service—so different from the service in my usual haunts. But mostly, I remember thinking about the pro’s and con’s between a mastectomy and a lumpectomy. I had the rest of the weekend to decide. Until I sat in the restaurant chatting and smiling, I never knew I could act. Never would have known I had the stamina and *chutzpah* to pull off that dinner like a Broadway star. Motivation coupled with stubbornness.

Surgery. First book release. In the same month. Soon followed by chemotherapy and radiation. Wonderful doctors, but writing saved my sanity. When your mind is engaged, you don’t think about yourself. When you can keep to your routines, your life remains “normal.” Creating a story—characters, plot, and the myriad details needed to build a world—was better than a support group for me.

Teaching my full-time adult GED class provided more therapy. My students’ academic needs made me forget my own problems. Algebra leaves no room for extraneous thoughts!

Do you remember the RWA National conference in New Orleans? The heat? The humidity? I had taken my last chemotherapy treatment three weeks earlier. I sweltered in my wig, but no one knew except my roommate and three others from the West Houston Chapter. By that time, I needed some emotional support, even if it was just a simple, “How’re you doing, Linda?” What I got was a lot of compliments on how great my hair looked!

I attended the conference because I had an appointment to pitch a four-book project not only to my editor but to the senior as well. I’m a writer, and writers write—preferably with a contract! My editors liked the concept. I got the contract a year later, after the Denver conference. See how being stubborn can pay off!

After the New Orleans conference, I relaxed the secrecy and started to tell others about my breast cancer. And that’s when I learned something else—the true lesson of this experience. I learned about love in its fullest sense. Friends and strangers bestowed their love and blessings on me without end. Bouncing back became almost easy.

Picture the following scene: My students—homeless, poor, in recovery, racially mixed, and badly in need of writing instruction—held an impromptu prayer meeting led by an intrepid woman who surprised me into silence, which is pretty hard to do. She gave me no warning, but closed the classroom door, announced her agenda, and started beseeching the Lord on my behalf.

Preaching, beseeching, and invoking. She preached to her classroom congregation. She beseeched God. She invoked Jesus. She prayed aloud and she prayed loudly. She paced, she pointed, and the classroom became her church. Her words flowed without hesitation. (Why couldn’t she do that in an essay?) And the others were on their feet in an instant, invoking their own “Amen’s.”

Now, I’m a nice ordinary Jewish girl from New York who merely happens to be living in Houston, Texas. To say I felt overwhelmed by this outpouring would be an understatement. Talk about a fish out of water! What did I know about being the object of a heartfelt African American prayer service? I knew nothing about the prayers, but I felt the warmth and love in that room on that day, and I’ve never forgotten it. That was the real story here. My own McGuffin.

Needless to say, all my graduates received autographed copies of my books. They were so proud of those signed books, so proud of their teacher. I hope they were prouder of themselves.

I will always be a writer. So will you. And like you, I will write until I have no more stories to tell. I suspect, however, that we’d all have to live several lifetimes for that moment to come. In the meantime, I intend to live this lifetime with my fingers on the keyboard. After all, we’re a stubborn bunch, and we make a habit of reacting with our chins up. It’s in our nature. And if he had thought about it, I think Sir Isaac would have agreed.

Linda Barrett salutes Cheryl Anne Porter whose situation served as the impetus for Linda to tell this story and she wishes her well. Linda’s four-book project became her Pilgrim Cove miniseries for Harlequin Superromance. The second book, No Ordinary Summer, will be released this August.

Bits 'n' Pieces

Hints of the New TBR

New York Times Book Review is considering reducing reviews from 1400+ words to 700 or 800 words. New editor Sam Tanenhaus emphasized that the section could broaden its audience without forfeiting its prestige. While literary novels and important nonfiction would continue to be mainstays, discussions are underway on mass-market fiction coverage. “Do we want everyone in the country to read it? Yes. But we’re still a part of the *NY Times*.” Tanenhaus was speaking at *PW*’s annual summit at the Grand Hyatt in midtown Manhattan.

Bits Compiled by Sally Hawkes

Writing Dangerously

continued from page 1



"Depending on the nature of the job, the most frequently affected parts of the office worker's body are the torso, including the lower back, shoulders, neck, arms, and wrists... These injuries result when a given part of the body is subject to prolonged strain while performing a task."

Do we sit in one position for a prolonged time? Yup. Are we putting ourselves at risk?

Here's a simple exercise. Sit down in a steno chair with your feet flat on the floor and the top of your knees at the same height as your hipbone. The bottoms of your thighs will be somewhat parallel to the floor. Sit up fairly straight, although a slight slouch is okay as long as your backbone is at its natural s-shape. Let your arms drop from your shoulders to the side, bend your elbows so your forearms are in the typing position, parallel to the floor. Your wrists should follow along the line of your forearms, not bent upward or downward. Keep your head up and look forward. Freeze. Have someone measure from:

- The bottom of your thighs to the floor.
- The bottom of your elbows to the floor.
- Your lower back to the back of your knees.
- Your eyes to the floor.



It may take some fiddling with a yardstick, tape measure, and a level.

The bottom of your thighs to the floor will be your proper seat height for typing. The bottom of the elbows to the floor will be the height of the keyboard tray. The lower back to the back of your knees is the seat depth. Your eye height should measure to

the top, or an inch below the top, of your monitor's screen.

My elbow to the floor is 26". My husband, who is 7" taller than I am, has an elbow-to-floor measurement of 25". My eye height is 45", my husband's 46.5". His knee-to-floor is much longer than mine. So, you see, a desk set up for him wouldn't fit me. We don't come with standardized bodies.

The Chair

A good quality chair is the best investment you can make in office furniture. It must adjust so it's the right height for your body, have a full enough seat to fit your thigh length and butt width, and have a curved edge to save you from varicose veins. If it has armrests, be sure they fit comfortably under your desk. Most importantly, the chair must have good lower back support.

"If you sit for several hours in a chair that offers none at all," Judy-laine Fine says in her book, *Coping with Backpain*, "your back muscles will have to support themselves and this can lead to muscle strain. It is, in fact, harder for your back muscles to remain in stationary, unsupported position than it is for them to be alternately expanded and contracted during rigorous exercise."

What if you already have a really comfortable chair, but you can't lower the seat so your feet are flat on the floor? You can, of course, use a footrest. If you're the type of person who turns back and forth from reading on one surface to typing, you may have to have two foot rests. By the way, writers need two desk heights, or chair heights, one for keyboarding and a higher one for reading or hard copy editing.

Years ago the backless chairs were the rage, but I've heard they're really hard on the knees. We've had a lot of discussion on Ninclink about

Aeron chairs. They do sound ideal because you can adjust them in so many ways. Next time you're going to buy a new chair, please sit in it first. In fact, test out lots and lots of chairs. Fiddle with the adjustments and check that they don't slip. Make sure the chair fits *you*.

The Keyboard

If you use a slide-out keyboard tray, it should be fairly simple for you to raise or lower it so you are typing with your forearms parallel with the floor and your wrists in a neutral position.

Years ago they advocated using little legs to raise the back of the keyboard. That's a recipe for carpal tunnel damage. In fact, some of my sources say it's better to raise the front slightly. The object is to keep your wrists from tilting upward or downward. You should have a smoothed edged wrist support band in front of the keyboard that matches its height, too. But never lean on it when you're typing. It's just for those rest periods when you're thinking up the next brilliant piece of prose.

There are a dozen different non-traditional keyboard shapes available: split, tented, negative sloped, scooped keys. I expect they'd take some getting used to, especially for those of us who have been typing the old fashioned way for years and years.

A notebook computer's keyboard is too small for comfortable extended typing. Attach a full-sized one to the computer and save yourself from wrist damage.

The Monitor

And talking about notebook or laptop computers, please don't rely on their monitors for any length of time. Your head weighs approximately fifteen pounds. If you tilt it forward to look down on the screen, you aren't supporting the weight with your entire neck, so



Writing Dangerously



there's strain on a small, vulnerable section. That can give you headaches, muscles spasms, and no end of agony.

The top of your monitor's image should be level to, or slightly below, your eyes when you are sitting upright and looking forward, and it should tilt slightly back at the top. Never position your monitor to one side.

The experts tell us to rest our eyes occasionally by periodically focusing on something at a different distance. I've never been able to train myself to do this. I have, however, taken pains to see that there isn't any glare on my screen. The older we are, the more light and the larger font that we need in order to read from a monitor. Sorry, people; it's a fact of aging. Your word processing program will allow you to adjust the font size on your screen, and your monitor should have a brightness control. It's also recommended that you put your monitor at least 24 inches away. Apparently longer distances relax the eyes.

If you suffer from eyestrain or headaches, you might check the height, font size, brightness, and glare on your monitor. Does it flicker? Or read like you're looking through a layer of shifting fog? It's worn out. Replace it with the biggest monitor you can afford, one that will tilt and swivel and has an anti-glare surface. Flat screens are expensive, but they free up a lot of desk surface and you can push them further away.

Eyestrain can also come from too much reflection on objects around the monitor. That's probably why most desktops are a dark color. Be careful that your task lighting doesn't cause glare on anything that's within your sightline.

The Desk

Since the top of your monitor should be at eyelevel or slightly below, it stands to reason that the size of the monitor determines the height of the desk surface. I know...I know...most of us feel grateful to have any computer desk. We didn't consider our monitor size when we picked it out either. If your desk height is too low for your monitor height, prop it up on something. If your desk height is too high, well, you're in a pickle.

I once worked in an office where my knees butted up against a storage box under the desk when I typed. Did I complain? Nah. I just pushed my chair back enough to give my knees room, then leaned forward from the hips to reach the keyboard. I hobbled around with a bad back for months.

The Mouse

Want to know why I decided to write this piece? My mouse tray broke off and I started to use my mouse on a stool about six inches above the keyboard. It took me a few months to realize why my wrist ached. Heck, I spent more on wrist braces than I would have spent by buying a new keyboard/mouse tray. It goes back to that I'm-not-worthy mentality I mentioned earlier.

Now, I know that the mouse should be the same height as the keyboard and as near to the keys as possible. You can buy keyboards that don't have ten-key pads, and you can buy little caps that go over the ten-key pads to put your mouse on, too. If you have a corded mouse, take the time to make sure you're not forever fighting with it. I'm a big believer in the cordless ones; they're no longer expensive. There's a huge selection of mouse (mice?) sizes and shapes now too. If your wrist has to tilt either up or down when you use yours, replace it.

Geeze, Lynn, you're kind of pushy,

ain't ya? Telling us we've got to replace this thing and that thing. We're not made of money, ya know.

Physical injuries are expensive, too, not to mention painful. A back brace can cost as much as a good quality chair. And then there are the doctor's bills, and meds, and time off work, and stress on your family life, and...When you're in pain, do you do your best writing? Ah, no.

Let's deep-six this old notion that we live the coddled life and don't deserve to invest in good office furniture. We do deserve it. In fact, we owe it to ourselves to take whatever steps we can to avoid hurting ourselves. It's cheaper in the long run. And we are worth it.

Author's Note: In preparing for this article, I read dozens of ergonomic and occupational safety reports and books. I've sieved out the items most pertinent to our work lives and ignored the rest, such as electrical safety or noise pollution.

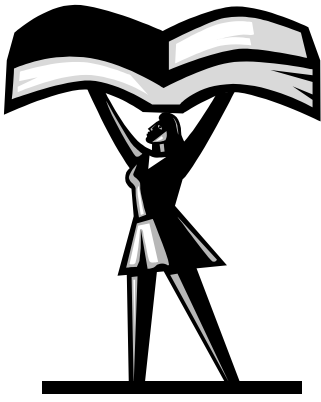
Lynn M. Turner is a novelist and screenwriter from rural Nova Scotia. She is currently indulging in her passion for writing historical fiction. You can visit Lynn at www.lynnturner.com.

Bits'n'Pieces

February Bookstore Sales Jump to 9.8%

Last year's sales were miscalculated on the gain in sales in February 2003. Instead of a rise of only 2.1%, bookstore sales in February 2004 were actually up 9.8%. The gain is being attributed to very weak sales last year.

SH



Revitalizing the Writer...

A final recap of individual sessions from this year's Ninc retreat. ED

Elena Avila: Restoring the Writer's Soul

BY JUDY MYERS

1. Food/Breath/Sleep/Water
2. Mind/Body/Emotion/Spirit
3. Children/Significant Other/Community/Self

Take a minute to look at each of the lists above. They're currently listed in random order, but I want you to re-sort them now, in order of how much energy you think you should devote to each of them, from most to least.

All done? Did you jot them down so you'll remember? Okay, read on.

One of the most unusual and compelling speakers at the Ninc Retreat in Santa Fe was Elena Avila, R.N., M.S.N., and *curandera*. "What," you may well ask, "is a *curandera*?" A *curandera* is a "medicine woman," the wise crone of folktales, the sagacious female we all intend to be when we finally grow up. In Elena's case, she is an effective blend of formal Western education and primal Aztec insights, and she held an audience of Ninc members spellbound for two hours as she regaled us with stories and taught us about the Aztec theory of how an individual's energies should be invested.

For each of the quartets I listed at the beginning of this article, she recommended the following Aztec paradigm for the division of our energies:

- 52% for the most important
- 26% for the second-most important
- 13% for the third-most important
- 9% for the fourth-most important

With that in mind, let's see how your

answers tally with Elena Avila's.

The proper order for the first group of four is, in many ways, the most self-evident. Of the four items listed, the one we require most urgently (and which, therefore, deserves the greatest investment of our energy to secure) is breath. Water comes in second, followed by sleep, and then, finally, food.

As to the second group, Elena's general observation to the Ninc group was, "People give their minds *way* too much energy!" A wave of nervous laughter rippled through the room. As writers, we spend vast amounts of time living in our heads, and it was thought-provoking—and more than a little threatening—to watch as she drew a grid that recommended, instead, the following division of our energies:

- 52% Body
- 26% Emotions
- 13% Mind
- 9% Spirit

For the optimists among us, that condones devoting a total of 39% of our energies to the Emotion/Mind blend that I feel best defines what we do as writers. (Heck, if you throw in Spirit, we're up to 48%.) But even then, the "majority shareholder" is still the Body, with a whopping 52%. For someone like me (who is often guilty of thinking that my body is just the box the present comes in), this was a revolutionary world-view to consider.

Elena Avila is a strong believer in the importance of "story" in people's lives, but she is an even stronger proponent of balance between the worlds of body, emotions, mind, and spirit. "We are both sensate and intellectual,

and it is up to us to reconcile that duality." It's advice that she has put to the test in her own life, forging a career that allows her to find a workable balance between her traditional Western training as a psychiatric nurse and her Aztec teachings as a *curandera*.

For the final group, Elena recommends:

- 52% Self
- 26% Significant Other
- 13% Children
- 9% Community

As controversial (or even heretical) as this may seem to us at first glance, I offer you the following two insights. First, "energy invested in" is not necessarily the same as "time devoted to." And secondly, have you ever taken a commercial air flight? If so, do you remember the little speech that flight attendant gives to her captive audience? She explains that if the cabin loses pressure and the oxygen masks are needed, individuals traveling with small children should secure their *own* masks first, and then assist the child. This isn't because the children don't matter. It's because you can't save anyone if you haven't taken proper care of yourself.

Read that again: *You can't save anyone if you haven't taken proper care of yourself.* Sometimes, when we accuse ourselves of being the most selfish, we are actually better preparing ourselves to do our proper creative work and still have enough "self" left over to nurture the important people in our lives.

Elena Avila concluded her talk by acknowledging that ritual nurtures our souls and spirits. "Express your wishes," she urged. ▶▶▶



▶ ▶ ▶ Revitalizing

“Then surrender and let go of expectations. Our soul speaks to us through the creative arts.”

Judy Myers thanks the Ninc Retreat attendees who allowed themselves to be used as a test audience for her latest project—a CD of humorous songs about the woes of menopause!

The Soul Retrieval Experience: Two First Person Accounts

Judy Myers:

Armed with a lengthy condor feather and a small vial of rosemary oil, Elena demonstrated some of her skills by performing soul retrievals for several of our members. Near the end of her two-hour presentation, she also invited us to voice our personal concerns. Several people posed questions and received answers. I had come with no intention of being more than a silent observer, but I suddenly found an irresistible question forming in my mind, one that startled me with its force and emotion. Reluctantly, I raised my hand a few inches and found myself the sudden focus of her dark-eyed gaze.

“What is your question?” she asked.

I swallowed hard and found my voice. “How do I cope with feeling responsible for solving everybody’s problems?”

I expected her to offer a brief, practical reply, as she had done for the other questioners. Instead, she considered what I’d asked and then said, “I need to feel your energy. Come up here.”

It was too late to back out. I threaded my way to the center aisle and walked to the front of the room. Elena stroked a line of rosemary oil down the bridge of my nose and instructed me to close my eyes and stand relaxed, breathing deeply. While I did so, I could hear the *swish* of her condor feather as it sliced through the air around me.

The group chanted my name, and then—as if from a distance—I heard her say, “She has an unusually large energy field. Who would like to feel it?”

I concentrated on my breathing, eyes closed, but I could hear soft voices as several people joined her, and then her voice as she instructed one of them in how to hold the condor feather and how to use it to trace the boundaries of my energy. Then, a long minute later, I heard one of the people say, “Oh! I see what you mean.” (That someone turned out to be my friend, Kathy Chwedyk. When I asked her, afterward,

what she’d felt, she explained that the feather she held had belled outward suddenly when it reached the level of my chest, as if the outline of my body had suddenly become that of a pregnant woman.)

Elena explained to me that I was pushing too much of my energy out into the world, and that I needed to learn better ways to protect and conserve it. It’s a lesson I’m still struggling to put into effective action, but my interaction with Elena Avila was a fascinating and enlightening wake-up call.

Zita Christian:

Some years bring more rain than sunshine. For me, this year had been one big downpour, with the death of a friend, the death of four family members including my dad, and my husband’s heart attack. I had been running on empty, but it had nothing to do with physical energy. Through the year, I can’t say that I ever felt my soul was running away—until I heard about Elena Avila’s workshop on soul retrieval. I sat in the front row, eager for something, though I didn’t know what.

I don’t recall that she asked for volunteers. I just remember her walking straight to me. She asked my name and told me to close my eyes. The rest I remember vividly. Following her instructions, everyone else in the room (25 or 35 women—I didn’t count) called my name. All at once. Over and over again. Some spoke loudly, with authority. “Zita.” Some whispered as though sharing a secret. “Zita.” Some called with the tempting voice of a siren, some with the haunting voice of the past. “Zita.” The effect was magical. From behind me, I felt the sound turn ten shades of yellow and stretch into long rays like the sun reaching out for me. At the same time, I felt a powerful wind around my head and chest. Far stronger than a breeze, this wind pulled me forward and snatched my breath like a giant bird capturing prey. Then suddenly, the wind stopped. The sun melted across my back. I heard a faint echo of my name and I opened my eyes. I felt not so much in control, as in possession. But of what? Elena called it my soul. Who am I to argue? I just know I left that workshop feeling empowered in a way I’ve never felt before.



Give Your Muscles a Break

BY MARTHE ARENDS

By the very nature of our job, we writers spend a lot of time with our butts in the chair, hands on the keyboard, eyes on the monitor. The problem with those working conditions is not wholly with the posture we take when writing, but the fact that we sit for hours on end without getting up. The human body simply doesn't do well when the most activity it gets is fingers moving over a keyboard and occasional reaches for the mouse. Everyone who has ever survived a crunch deadline knows that when your body gets tired and cranky, it's difficult for your mind to remain focused and creative.

Savvy writers know that the key to a healthy body and mind (at least as far as writing is concerned) is to keep the body comfortable while fighting the fatigue that comes with lengthy time spent in front of the computer. Obviously, the best way to combat fatigue and to eliminate potential repetitive strain injuries (RSI) is to get up and walk away from the computer, but when deadlines loom, common sense and good intentions tend to go out the window. So what's a poor, overworked author to do?

Ergonomic devices help, but they aren't the sole answer. For long hauls in front of the computer, one solution is software. Yes, software. There are several programs available at a low cost that will remind you to take short breaks, guiding you through a number of stretches you can do in your

chair or while standing. Programs such as *Stretch Break* by Para Technologies will interrupt you as frequently as you desire—the default period is every thirty minutes—with a number of stretches designed to unkink those tired, strained muscles and give your body a break from the drudgery of writing. Most programs allow you to pick the stretches you want to include in your breaks as well as the number of repetitions for each stretch. Animations demonstrating the proper stretching techniques guide you through the movements. The stretches themselves, which are low impact in nature, include shoulder rolls, leg extensions, eye rolls, back stretches, hand and wrist stretches, distance focusing for your eyes, and more. Each stretch lasts for about fifteen to twenty seconds,

so the total stretch break takes about a minute or two, depending on how many stretches you include. Since the software keeps track of how much you're working via keyboard and mouse activity, you don't have to try and remember when to take a break, or worse yet, take one after

you start to hurt.

Break software isn't a replacement for good posture, ergonomic devices such as natural keyboards, supportive chairs, foot rests, etc., but it can go a long way toward helping you keep from being overly fatigued, or flirting with RSI. Most of the break programs come with free trials, so you can try them out to see which one works best for you. If you are prone to spending long periods of time in front of the computer, or find the time you do spend leaves you with tight shoulders and tired muscles, you may want to give one of the break programs a try.

Marthe Arends (w/a Katie MacAlister and Katie Maxwell) has sold 24 books in two and a half years and spends most of her days chained to the computer to meet her deadlines. She has admitted to having a slight crush on the animated man who does the chicken wing stretch.

Stretch Break

<http://www.paratec.com/>

WorkPace Personal

<http://www.workpace.com/>

PRODUCTS_WPPER:675937

Stretch Now

<http://www.stretchnow.com.au/products/>

rsi_guard_what.htm

StretchWare

<http://www.stretchware.com/>

Power Pause

<http://www.possibility.com/PowerPause/>

It's Your Move

<http://www.softsmart.com/Pages/Software.html>

Office Athlete

<http://ergotrading.com/officeathlete/index.htm>

Don't want to invest in software? A free stretch pamphlet is online in PDF format at http://www.shelterpub.com_fitness_stretching_in_the_office/online_stretches.html



...and They Lived Happily Ever After

BY LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS

This is my twelfth—or possibly thirteenth, I seem to have lost count—and final column for *NINK*. It's also probably the least coherent one to date, as I'm trying to explain—to both my readers and myself, and mixed with some miscellaneous other things—why I'm not continuing.

And the truth is, I don't entirely know.

When I agreed to write this feature I thought it would be easy—after all, the first time I wrote a regular column it lasted over a hundred installments and was weekly for much of that run, and it *was* easy. So I promised to stay with *NINK* for at least a year, and I privately expected to stay much longer, so it was with some surprise that I realized, a few months back, that I was already running out of ideas.

One reason for that is pretty obvious, at least to me. Usually when I write articles about writing, I can easily fill pages with all the millions of things most people don't know about the art, craft, and business of writing fiction—but the audience here is different. You guys are professional writers yourselves—you already *know* all that stuff! So what could I write about that you *didn't* already know, or that you wouldn't mind reading about anyway?

Well, I did manage to fill out my promised dozen, so you know most of what I came up with. There were also a few ideas I decided *not* to use.

One of the first was about the nature of genres and categories—and actually, I did write most of that one, then looked at it and said, “Naaah.” It's boring. I don't know just where I'd originally thought I was going, but I wound up writing page after page of stuff about the old pulp magazines of the 1930s, and all the genres that used to exist in them that have died out (such as zeppelin stories or jungle action), and then from there I began theorizing about how dozens of weird old genres died out because there weren't enough publishing slots for them, but now that the World Wide Web has provided a new outlet they may come back—except so far the Web

has somehow wound up full of fanfic and specialized pornography instead...

I never figured out what point I was trying to make, so I didn't finish it.

There were a couple of attempts to explain the column title in terms of what people expect to find in SF, fantasy, and horror stories, and the habit people have of using simplistic stereotypes to pigeonhole things, but those kept turning pompous and preachy, so I dropped the idea.

(In case it isn't obvious, rayguns represent science fiction, elves represent fantasy, and the walking dead represent horror—the three genres I work in. It's not really new; back in the 1980s, I wrote a column elsewhere called “Rayguns, Elves, and Skin-Tight Suits,” where the skin-tight suits were for comic-book superheroes. At the time I didn't write horror; now I do, and I doubt most *Ninc* members care much about comic books, so I updated the title.)

I began one column about why people think writing is a romantic occupation when it's more likely to involve sitting at home alone in a grungy bathrobe, typing, than doing anything exciting, but I abandoned that after a couple of pages, because everything I was saying is stuff you all know already. I didn't have any profound new insights.

And early on—well, my first column started off, “When I was a kid...” and I really didn't want to look like a boring old guy telling everyone how much better things were in my day, so any time I found myself starting another column with that phrase I stopped, threw it out, and started over. You've missed out on lots of tedious nostalgia for the late fifties and early sixties—I hope you appreciate the sacrifice I made, not using any of that! (These darn kids today don't know how good they have it...)

And then there were all the standard topics I use when I need to write an article for someone quickly—where do I get my ideas? How do I organize my writing time? How did I get started writing? What advice can I offer a beginning writer? None of those would be any use to you guys—you aren't *beginning* writers at all, and you already know how to come up with a story and how to get it written—so I couldn't use them. I couldn't write about science fiction or fantasy as if you were fans,

because most of you aren't. I couldn't write about collecting comic books; it just isn't relevant.

And I couldn't really write about my trials and tribulations with difficult editors or incompetent agents or recalcitrant stories, or the everyday difficulties of the writing life, because Laura Resnick already did all those better than I ever could when she was writing "The Comely Curmudgeon."

You guys are a tough crowd, you know that?

But there may be more to it than that. I just haven't been feeling very creative lately; my current novel is months behind schedule. No, there hasn't been any great trauma in my life, I haven't suffered any recent losses. I rather suspect that the medication I've been on since September may be involved—I'm taking it for a pituitary problem, but it can have neurological side-effects. I don't know that that's the cause, but it might be.

Creativity can be a delicate thing, can't it?

Probably most of us have had bouts of writer's block at one time or another; I certainly have. For almost thirty years, when writer's block hit, my preferred treatment was to sit in front of the TV with a table full of junk food, reading favorite old novels with the stupidest sitcoms I can find on—"Love Boat" reruns are ideal, but they're not on much nowadays. I get thoroughly relaxed, remind myself how enjoyable a good book can be, then get a bit of a sugar rush while looking at the TV and thinking, "Millions of people watched *that* junk—I can do better than that!" It works for me.

Or it used to, anyway. I've tried it a couple of times lately, and I'm still months behind on that novel and can't think of more columns worth writing. So if this is writer's block—and it doesn't really feel like it—it's a bad one.

Maybe when I get off the medication in a couple of months it'll all come back, and writing will be easy and fun again—or maybe it won't; maybe I've really just run out of steam. Maybe it's age getting to me. Maybe it is just stage-fright from writing for my peers. I don't know.

But I do know that I'm having a hard time writing these columns. Some of you have been very supportive in e-mail and elsewhere, and I appreciate that, but I'm just not satisfied with how these last few have turned out, and how much work they've been to produce.

So I'm packing it in, calling it quits. Oh, I may still write for *NINK* on occasion, if the editors will have me, but I'm not going to try to come up with 1,500 words, give or take, every month. If getting off the medication *does* bring it all back, then maybe once I'm caught up on novel-writing I'll reconsider.

But for now, I'm out of here. I'd like to thank you all for the kind responses I've gotten, and wish you all million-dollar advances and lucrative movie deals.

May we all, like our protagonists, live happily ever after.

— Lawrence

NINK wishes to express its appreciation to Lawrence for providing such an interesting perspective in his columns these many months. We'll miss his unique voice and wish him his own happily ever after. And indeed, this editor, at least, will gladly accept any other article he wishes to write. — Lorraine

Bits'n'Pieces

In-Store Self-Publishing continues

Bookends is partnering with InstaBook to provide self-publishing in a trade paperback format. Similar to the Borders experiment in Philadelphia, the NJ independent bookseller is also providing formatting, editing, publishing consulting, copyright, and ISBN registration with cover design starting at \$150 for 10 books.

Bookends will also sell POD versions of classics from the InstaBook Digital Bookstore network, "relatively inexpensively," with the option of customizing the cover. http://www.booksbybookends.com/list_of_classics.html

\$10 for the latest bestseller?

A new monthly fee book club seems to be designed along the lines of Netflix. Zooba.com will allow members to pay \$9.95 a month for a selection. The members build a reading list, and the top book will be shipped each month. Additional titles will be \$9.95 each, but with no shipping or handling fees. The monthly fee will be charged even if no book is on the reading list, but the members have no minimum number of purchases.

Barnes & Noble in the used book market?

An 800 used poetry book display appeared recently at the B&N at Astor Place, NYC with a sign "Used Poetry Books at Insane Prices." The mix of paperbacks and hardbacks were prominently placed near the front door, most ranging in price from \$4 to \$10. So far the only Manhattan location that buys used books (purchasing and reselling textbooks) from customers is the main store at Fifth Ave and 18th St. due to the location's college book trade. The corporation is experimenting with the used books trade at this time.

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Conquering Commitment-itis

DEAR ANNETTE:

I suffer from hand-in-the-air syndrome. Every time someone says, "We need a volunteer to..." my hand shoots up. I am presently juggling several different volunteer-type positions, and while I really enjoy doing them all, I'm beginning to worry that I'm getting obsessed with thinking I need to take on every job that comes along. Other than sitting on my hand, which hampers my ability to complete a manuscript, how can I stop this practice—or at least slow it down—before it become madness?

Signed: Stop me! Stop me now!

DEAR STOP:

I have read several times over the past few years that in volunteer-based organizations ten percent of the people do ninety percent of the work. I can't vouch for the accuracy of that research, but it sure fits with my reality.

It looks like it might fit with yours, too.

You sound like a doer, and doers, well, we DO...and people ask. If I wanted to get something important done, I'd ask someone I already know is a doer. That's often how we end up in a cycle of over-commitment. We like to help, and we're good at it. Other people pick up on that quickly, so we get asked more often. Which means that doers—who already feel like they should do more, help more, participate more—are under more pressure.

So how to stop the cycle?

The first step, I think, is to figure out realistically what you can afford to offer. Not what other people need. Not what your guilty conscience tells you to do. What you can and want to do, given your work and family commitments.

Time management gurus suggest that no one can maintain more than three priorities. If you have a job you care about, that's a priority. If you have a family, that's a priority. Which leaves one more. Maybe it's staying in shape, maybe it's volunteering at your church—but that's it.

Okay, you already know how many hours, etc. you have available and you're still over-committing. What now?

Some reasons to consider:

1. Things need doing and someone has to step up. You know that you can and will make the time. But I have to point out: so could somebody else. Each of us can only do what we can...and we get to judge that, not the other five people volunteering to drive the high school band to that competition three hundred miles away.

2. You're a writer. Your schedule's more flexible than other people's. You could run to Office Depot and take care of picking up all that stuff for the Fall Festival. Yeah, you probably do have a more flexible schedule than many of the other volunteers, but what's the price of managing a bunch of details that in and of themselves don't take much time but they take up a whole lot of mental space?

3. It just won't get done. That's true. And maybe that's okay, too. Maybe running a Spring Faire every year is just too much to ask of the organization itself, but if you keep propping it up until you drop, no one will ever figure that out.

4. This one gets a little deeper: Maintaining a complicated life is a great way to avoid changing it. We all feel that we can't cut back on anything. But as long as our work is so vital that we can't slow down, we don't have to look at our own lives: a marriage that isn't working, a career that isn't satisfying, children with whom we're out of touch, friendships we've outgrown. There's nothing more "dangerous" than having a little time on your hands.

Not all of the above reasons fit for everybody, of course, but I think it can be worthwhile to try figuring out which ones fit for you. Knowledge is power. Knowing why you have a tendency to over-volunteer helps in reminding yourself not to do it when the situation arises.

Solutions:

Clearly, you're going to have to learn how to say, "No," without sitting on your hands. It gets easier over time, I promise. The following are a few ideas for ways to get out of the hand-in-the-air habit.

1. Take a deep breath before you raise your hand.

Promise yourself you won't commit on the spot. If you have to say something, say that you need to check your schedule at home first. It's a lot easier to say you can't take the project on after all than to have to call back and back out.

2. Before you commit, review your focus and goals.

You only have so much time and energy to devote to any one cause. Is this project really the one you want to

spend that energy and time on? What will you have to give up if you take on this project?

3. Give yourself permission to say, "No."

Block time out in your calendar, whether it be time for yourself, family time, writing time, etc. You may not end up having family time from exactly 5 to 9 p.m. next Thursday, but it serves as a tangible reminder.

This helps me tremendously. It's often *way* too easy to make other people's priorities our own. Several years ago I started blocking out my writing time in my Daytimer. That way, when desperate clients just *had* to have a Friday morning appointment, I could truthfully say my day was full.

Now that I'm all the way at the end of this column, it occurs to me that this last bit of advice is what has helped me the most. By making an attempt to quantify my priorities in terms of time, I've had a much easier time keeping my hand down. I've made myself very aware that if I agree to X, I'm giving up time for Y.

Yes, it's caused me to drop out of several very worthwhile organizations that I simply can't make the time to be a part of. There are times I miss them, sure. But I don't miss feeling scattered and run down.

Annette Carney, Ph.D is a Marriage and Family Therapist with 15 years' experience. You can "Ask Annette" in strict confidence, at one of these contacts: email: annettecarney@sbcglobal.net, fax: 775-746-4560; phone: 775-323-0445.

Bits'n'Pieces

**Mark your
Tradeshow
calendar**

BookExpoAmerica Chicago
<http://www.bookexpoamerica.com/App/homepage.cfm?moduleid=42&appname=288>

BookExpoCanada Toronto
<http://www.reedexpo.ca/bookexpo/>

American Library Association Orlando
<http://www.ala.org/ala/eventsandconferencesb/annual/an2004/home.htm> ALA

Quote of the month

"It really gets me when the critics say I haven't done enough for the economy. Look what I've done for the book publishing industry." – President George Bush at the White House Correspondents Association dinner

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No-Mail	NINCLINK-nomail@yahoogroups.com
Moderators: If You Have Questions, Email:	
Brenda Hiatt-Barber	BrendaHB@aol.com
Lorraine Heath	lorraine-heath@comcast.net

INTRODUCING.....

The following authors have applied for membership in Ninc and are now presented by the Membership Committee to the members. If no legitimate objections are lodged with the Membership Committee within 15 days of this NINK issue, these authors shall be accepted as members of Ninc:

New Applicants:

- Rogenna Brewer, Centennial CO
- Eileen Charbonneau, Cold Spring NY
- Penny Halsall (*Penny Jordan, Annie Grove*),
Nantwich, Cheshire UK
- Victoria Hinshaw, Milwaukee WI
- Shirley Jump, Fort Wayne IN
- Rickey R. Mallory (*Mallory Kane*), Brandon MS
- Deirdre Martin, Ithaca NY
- Karen A. Moser (*Karen Kendall*), West Hartford CT
- Folasade Odubiyi (*Dara Girard*), Silver Spring MD
- Joanne Rock, Peru NY

New Members:

- Reon Laudat, Oak Park MI

Ninc has room to grow...recommend membership to *your* colleagues. Prospective members may apply online at www.ninc.com.



The Care and Feeding of the Girls in the Basement . . .

BY BARBARA SAMUEL

Cigar Boxes

Recently, my brother brought me a cigar box. It's a very, very fine one, made of wood and varnished with a golden, oak-like finish that somehow matches the name of the cigars: Royal Butera Vintage, made in the Dominican Republic. This box held ten Cornetta No. 1's, and it has a gold latch to keep it closed. Inside, it smells heavenly—the tang of good leaf tobacco and wood.

My brother handed it to me with obvious relish, knowing I'd exclaim in delight, which I did, even when a friend said, "What do you want that for?"

"Stuff," I said with a shrug.

My brother chuckled, exchanged a glance with me. Our secret. He knew I'd think it was cool, and I did. I do. It hasn't got anything in it yet—it's just sitting on my desk, waiting for something special to be laid inside and kept safe. Maybe I'll start keeping some special photos in it. Or postcards from faraway places. Maybe it will become a shrine, though I think it would be hard to deface this particular box.

He likes them, too, cigar boxes. We probably love them because of the children's book, *The Littlest Angel*, which is about a boy who has died and becomes a small angel and really misses his special box of earthly things left beneath his bed. It holds two stones, a bird's egg, a dog's collar, and a butterfly with golden wings. Ordinary things of the earth. Eventually, the box becomes the Star of Bethlehem, but we won't go into that here—truth is, my brother and I both treasured boxes of things because of the story.

I have other collections, several of them. There is a

glass jar full of feathers—two blue jay feathers, an eagle feather I found by the Arkansas River, an owl feather, a giant green and blue parrot feather from South America. There is even a golden Rita feather, because once I told Krissie Ohlrogge that if I ever found one (which were, in those days, notorious for breaking off) I would take it as a sign that I was going to win one someday, because feathers were one of my special talisman things. A few days later, I opened my mail and found a Rita feather from Krissie. (One of the top ten presents of all time, I have to say. It's also been quite lucky!)

I also have a small cedar chest, the kind sold in tourist shops all over the U.S. Mine is stamped with Manitou Springs, and I keep it because I spent so much time there as a child. The name itself conjures up good things. Opening the box releases a scent like summer evenings, when I stood in giddy terror on the arcade built over the creek, peering between the boards to the water below. The box holds a half-burned cluster of sage, tied with deerskin, which comes from a long-ago gathering; some ordinary crystals I found with my boys one day in a city field; an envelope with two baby teeth inside; a handful of seashells; and a matchbook that says, "ED'S KITCHEN, Breakfast Served All Day, Ed Putman, Tel. 676-2411, Temecula, Calif." It was my grandfather's restaurant, located right on the highway in southern California in the late sixties. My mother and grandmother waited tables there.

These are sacred objects, the feathers and the matches and the teeth. They're very important to the

work of the girls in the basement, for one very simple reason: each object is a concrete connection to a memory. Memory combined with observation and intuition are the cornerstones of good writing. The more connected and aware we are of this simple idea, the more grounded, concrete, and intriguingly unique the work becomes. This is as true of writing a continuity story for Harlequin as it is for writing an epic fantasy—original detail comes from original observation.

As children, we keep our sacred baubles in boxes because there isn't much room. As adults, we probably have little corners filled with them. A hutch in the dining room filled with little things collected in your travels, or a jewelry box lined with sacred turquoises worn by your aunt and a necklace from the Old Country, or a tackle box with rare flies and special rocks and a lure from your grandfather. A lot of us have recipe cards stained and marked and brown with time and cooking, written in the script of a mother, grandmother, sister, father.

What are your sacred objects? Where do you keep them? How long has it been since you held some of them in your hands? Notice over the next few weeks or months when you—deliberately or accidentally—pick up an object you love. What memories are attached? What concrete things echo when you hold it or look at it? Stirring up those memories can be a powerful agent for the work.

There are other ways to do it, of course—just sitting with a journal once a day and writing, “I remember...” can be a great tool and excellent writing exercise (and not a bad way to get the juices flowing on days when you're feeling sluggish or lazy).

Another aspect to objects is the imperative from the girls when one of them wants to *have* something. I've never figured out who is in charge of collecting Sacred and Interesting Objects, but I suspect she isn't more than about seven. She seems to prefer the gaudy, the mismatched, odd trinkets and tidbits. She will leave the gray pearls in favor of a blue seashell unless someone tells her something good about the pearls (like they once belonged to the mistress of a pirate) because the seashell is prettier. She's a scavenger with the eye of a magpie. Her favorite words are “ooh!” and “cool!”

I'm currently sitting at my little kitchen table, looking outside to the backyard. It's early evening, just after one of those magical rains that pour through the sunshine. There are droplets of rain still on the glass between me and the newly watered, thus exuberant, emerald of the grass, and the effect is like something out of a Lorca poem, all green and silver and gold.

The table holding my notebook is technically something that should go outdoors. It's a little café-style thing, with two chairs, and the top is covered with Mexican mosaic tiles in primary colors—blue and yellow

and red. It was the first thing I bought after I was divorced, the first thing I bought for my own pleasure, and I love its inappropriate appropriateness. It sits in a narrow place in front of the long old window in my kitchen so I can enjoy the view, as I am now.

What I can see is a rose bush and a statue and a wrought iron swing covered with a serape. There is a tub that will eventually hold tomatoes against a peeling red-brick wall, and white garage doors, also peeling. The serape is white and green and purple. I bought it at the state fair some years ago, even though I was on a strict budget during those weeks and couldn't really afford it—but I fell in love with the unusual colors, with the pattern of llamas, and it made me think of Peru and those lovely flutes (and lovely flute-players), and I splurged anyway.

Like the table, it's one of my favorite things. It goes with me camping and covers me up on cool spring nights when I can't bear to go inside just yet. It covers the wrought iron swing just now because it's too uncomfortable to sit on the metal with shorts, and because I like to be able to look at it a lot.

The statue, sitting beneath the exuberant, ancient pink rose, is also one of my favorite things. It's a Virgen de Guadalupe statue I found—after much searching—in a dusty corner of a garden shop. She was wildly expensive and too heavy for me to carry by myself, and she was only plain plaster, but I managed to get her home and into the backyard, where I painted her in low-rider colors of metallic lime and pink and copper. In the evening sunlight, she practically glows. Not everyone loves her as much as I do—my father shakes his head every time he comes over. One of my sons wishes the roses would obscure her, not realizing the pink roses are exactly why she's sitting *there*.

The statue of Guadalupe was certainly something the seven-year-old wanted. Now. I resisted. I knew everyone was going to think it was odd, that in my Mexican town they would be wondering if I was trying to pretend to be something I'm not, that even my friends who are used to me doing odd things now and then would find this a little bit odd, that my family would be uncomfortable with a Catholic statue, that my Southern Baptist grandmother would find it scandalous and would begin to worry over my soul.

But nothing would do. I had to find this statue. It was very difficult to get her home, and even people who went along with the goddess aspects of a Guadalupe statue were puzzled by my low-rider choice of colors. I wasn't entirely aware that the girls wanted her, but I'm familiar enough by now with these directives that I went along with it even if it embarrassed me. Happily, once I had her situated beneath the roses, she pleased me as much as the girls.

And there she sat for several seasons, ▶ ▶ ▶



working on my subconscious, until the girls sent up a story line with Guadalupe and roses and even a rain of pink rose petals in a strange and beautiful image.

The whole book, images, themes, everything about it, seemed to link back in one way or another to that statue in my backyard.

As the summer leaks into our worlds, softens the edges of life, let memories seep in from wherever they will. Look around to see where you keep your sacred things and spend some time now and then looking at them, holding them. What do they whisper? What do they want to share? Do you have entire rooms devoted to things you love, or only a shoe box? Have you surrounded yourself with things that make your heart dance? If not, why?

Maybe you don't have a box of sacred things just now. If you don't, you might just want to keep your eyes open for one. Cigar boxes really are quite good—you might stop by the local cigar shop and see if they'll save some for you. Tourist shops are also excellent. Maybe, if you have an idle half hour on a beach or on a ship or in your backyard, you might want to try the "I remember..." exercise. Just start writing and see what comes up.

About that cigar box—it already now has two layers of memory attached to it: that my brother remembered how I loved good cigar boxes and brought it to me, and that it provided fodder for this column. And I think I might put inside it pictures of places I want to go—a dream for a new day.

Barbara Samuel writes for Ballantine. Her current book is The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue.

Bits'n'Pieces

Have Spammers Started Sending Subliminal Messages?

BY JODIE LARSEN

If you're one of the millions who've received mysterious blank emails from persons unknown, you aren't being subjected to the hottest new advertising technique. Instead, the apparently blank emails usually come from one of two sources. The first is relatively harmless—when some high-tech filters detect a potential virus, they wipe the email clean and send it on, thus resulting in what appears to be a blank email. The second is much more obnoxious. Spammers troll the Internet with programs that generate email names, looking for active addresses. While their message may appear to be blank, it could actually contain computer code with pixels of white HTML that are impossible for the recipient to visually detect. When the email is opened, the code automatically confirms to the sender that a valid email address has been located. The spammer adds the address to its "active email" list and, within a short period of time, they begin flooding their latest victim with e-junk. The moral of the story: Delete all suspicious messages unopened.

Jodie Larsen's latest mystery is The Darkest Night.

NINK

a publication of Novelists, Inc.

An Organization for Writers of Popular Fiction

P.O. Box 1166

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