

## **This Matter of Mood**

**Bruce Elkin**

It's thanksgiving morning. I'm alone. It's a good time to write. No interruptions. No calls. The house is quiet. I have no plans. Nothing to do all day but settle in and work. I get notes, thesaurus, style book and back-up disk arranged on my desk, then sit down. I'm excited, eager to start. I punch a key to wake up my aging Mac laptop.

As the hard drive whirs itself awake, a raspy voice inside me whines, "I don't *feeeel* like writing. I'm *not* in the *mood*." In my mind, a petulant five year old—arms crossed, head cocked—stomps his foot, daring me. "It's a *holiday*," he moans. "It's *sunny* out."

I've learned that you can't win an argument with a five year old. If you do, you feel like an insensitive, uncaring bully. If you don't, a five year old directs your destiny. I sigh, push back my chair, and stare out the window. *It is sunny. Maybe the last nice day before the long, wet winter sets in.*

Shaking my head, I retreat to the kitchen to brew tea. When it's done, I grab a handful of chocolate chip cookies, then settle in front of the television set. Talk show guests chatter on at each other, but I can't concentrate. Ray Bradbury's advice to new writers nags at me. "If you want be a writer," he said, "first write a million words."

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I switch the TV off then head back to my desk. But instead of pulsing with meaning, my words spread across the screen in a sticky, alphabetic mush.

“*See!*” sneers my pint-sized critic. “You can’t write today. Let’s go play!”

My leg muscles twitch with the need to be up and moving. A million ants are scurrying about under my skin. I shove myself up from my desk, thinking *Maybe I should read something inspiring. Or go for a walk in the woods.*

Instead, I pace the hall muttering, “I gotta get motivated, I gotta get motivated.”

This is the point at which I used to give in.

The triumphant five year old and I would grab a windbreaker and walk to town. After a latté and cinnamon twist on the deck of Barb’s Buns, I’d try to shame myself into writing by reading a piece from *Best American Essays*. Or I’d cajole myself to practice Richard Rhodes’ Knickerbocker Rule.

“Apply ass to chair,” Conrad Knickerbocker, his supervisor at Hallmark Cards had admonished him. That’s it, I’d tell myself. Just *do* it. Rhodes won a Pulitzer, didn’t he?

The five year old just scoffed at these manipulative, motivational attempts to trick him into doing what he didn’t feel like doing. Leaning back against the deck’s railing, I’d say, “How about we just sit here and make notes about people and what they say?”

He’d turn his head and stare up at me, wary. Just when I thought he might go for it, he’d shake his head and snort, “No way, *that’s work!*”

Before I realized that momentum will get you through times of no motivation better than motivation will get you through times of no momentum, the five year old and I would fritter away many more days than we filled with writing.

Then I discovered the twenty minute test.

I came by this momentum-building technique from two diverse sources.

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The first was a quote from Joyce Carol Oates, who said, in an interview in *The Paris Review*, “One must be pitiless about this matter of ‘mood.’ In a sense the writing will create the mood. If art is, as I believe it to be, a genuinely transcendental function—a means by which we rise out of limited, parochial states of mind—then it should not matter very much what states of mind or emotion we are in. Generally I have found this to be true: I have forced myself to begin writing when I’ve been utterly exhausted, when I’ve felt my soul as thin as a playing card, when nothing has seemed worth enduring for another five minutes... and somehow the activity of writing changes everything.”

Oates’s response put into words, and into a writing context, a discovery I’d intuited while trying to become a weekend road racer. As an aspiring runner facing daily training runs, I’d regularly struggled with this matter of mood. Two or three times a week, I’d come home from work frustrated and bone weary. I’d whine to my wife, “I’m *too* tired to run tonight. I’m gonna put my feet up and have a Scotch.”

A frown would work its way on to her face. She’d rub her hands together—we had history around this issue—and she’d say, “Go for your run, honey. You’ll feel better.”

She was right. But the prospect of pounding hard pavement in the late afternoon of a cold, damp, autumn day seemed overwhelming. “There’s *no* way!” I’d moan. “I couldn’t run *two* miles tonight, let alone *five*.”

If pushed, I could trump any pro-running argument that she (or my conscience) might put forward by playing my Ace of Health. With a carefully crafted crack in my voice, I’d snivel, “I think I’m coming down with something; I better stay in and rest.” Then, trying not to grin, I’d add, “And perhaps take a *wee* dram or two for medicinal purposes.”

One night, having played my ace and braved my wife’s disdain, I’d just taken the Glenfiddich bottle down from the kitchen cupboard when I heard a calm, wise-sounding, inner voice ask, “Why not check it out?”

“What?” I replied. “Check out what? How?”

“See if you really *are* too tired,” the voice suggested. “Maybe your blood sugar’s just low. Try an experiment. Run for twenty minutes, see what happens.”

“Twenty minutes?” I said. “An experiment?”

“Yes,” said the voice, “That should bring your blood sugar level up. If it does, your muscles will loosen and you’ll feel energetic. If you don’t, perhaps there *is* something wrong. If so, quit, walk home, and enjoy your drink without guilt.”

I fingered the cap on the bottle. *What could it hurt? It was just twenty minutes.* I left the Scotch out on the counter then went downstairs to change. I stretched my stiff muscles, then slipped into my rain suit, and stepped outside.

Damp autumn air chilled me quickly. I plodded stiff-legged down the street then turned into the park and began a slow, lumbering jog. My muscles protested. Each step jarred my head. *This is a mistake,* I muttered.

I crunched along a cinder path. There were no other runners. Every thirty seconds or so, I checked my watch. *Twenty minutes,* I promised myself. *No more.* I scanned my body for signs of illness or injury but found none. Disappointed, I chugged along hoping for a symptom that would justify quitting. I could almost taste the warmth of the Scotch.

But, after a slow, warm-up circle of the park, I forgot about my watch and relaxed into a smooth, flowing rhythm. As I strode out onto the bluff overlooking downtown, I felt a surge of energy. Momentum built with every step. Frustration dropped away. Tension melted like butter in a hot sun. As my muscles loosened, I stretched out my stride and picked up my pace.

I ran down the hill to the river and along the path that wound along its bank. I floated past the orange ribbon I’d tied to a tree, my three mile marker. I jogged easily for another two miles, to the foot bridge, then crossed the river and headed back on the other side. I sprinted through the Douglas Fir forest, sucking in its pungent, energizing scent. I pushed hard up the steeps, coasted on the flats, then let my legs stretch out as I glided down the

long gentle slope back to the river. Ten exhilarating miles later, I jogged back up my own street feeling like I'd just won the Boston Marathon.

Now I use the twenty minute test whenever my petulant five year old doesn't *feel* like doing anything difficult that I know will move me closer to a result I care about. Like drafting a new piece or writing query letters to editors. I give myself to the task for twenty minutes and watch to see if my mood shifts. Nine times out of ten I keep going. Oates was right. The activity *does* change everything.

What makes the twenty minute test different than other motivational techniques?

It's not manipulative. It's not an attempt to force yourself to write. It's not a trick you play on your five year old. It is an experiment that honours your desire to write *and* the feeling that you are not in the mood. It provides useful information about the source of that mood. On those rare occasions when, in spite of twenty minutes of activity, lethargy still refuses to release its bear hug on you, quit. Go for a walk. Read a book. Watch TV. You won't quit often, just when you need to. So indulge yourself without guilt, confident that the next time around the test *will* get you moving toward a productive writing session.

And the best thing about doing it as an experiment is that the five year old buys it.

"Yeah, sure," he says, "if it's *just* twenty minutes."

Motivation can get you going. It can get you in the mood to write. But it's rarely enough to keep you going, especially when your mood shifts. Momentum is a more consistent force. It generates, as the Oxford dictionary suggests, "continuity derived from an initial effort."

When you can't produce that continuity through willpower, guilt, or fattening treats, you might try a twenty minute writing experiment. It doesn't matter if you move in the "right" direction. Write about anything. The power of momentum lies in the fact that it is

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easier to change direction once you're moving than when you are stopped, going nowhere. Just remember to promise yourself that you *will* quit if your mood doesn't shift. And honour the promise.

Motivation *is* important to writers, but it's momentum that separates the wannabe's from the professionals. When I taught skiing, I asked the Level Four, Senior Examiners, the *creme de la creme* of the ski world, what the secret of their awesome skill level was.

"Miles," they'd say. "Put in your miles."

Ray Bradbury would like that answer. In the same vein, one of my writing teachers told me, "Take care of the quantity and the quality will take care of itself."

Momentum builds when you write, not just when you write well. In addition to developing skill in craft, technique, and imagination, making writing a regular, daily practice will help you develop what Flannery O'Connor called "the habit of art." Cultivating the habit of art will do more to help you survive and triumph over the difficulties and anxieties, the confusions and uncertainties of the writing life than all the motivational tricks ever tried. "We are what we repeatedly do," wrote Aristotle. "Excellence, then is not an act, but a habit."

So what about Thanksgiving morning?

Once I remembered the twenty minute test, I got moving, kept at it, and in less than an hour I'd written the first, rough draft of this piece. The momentum it produced fueled a full day of writing. It netted me another tear sheet for my collection, a nice little cheque, and, most important, it moved me a couple of thousand closer to my first million words.