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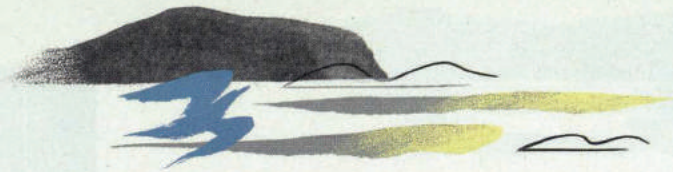
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THE LONG THAW

How a Concussion Revolutionized My Writing Life • BY NANCY M. WILLIAMS

DURING the winter of 2014 I plodded through my daily walk along a local county road, a short jaunt from home that should have required one minute but instead took ten. I had the pace of an ailing octogenarian, and as I picked my way through icy patches on the sidewalk, a narrow pathway through banks of hardened snow, my brain screeched in protest. I feared that I would never write again.

Back at home, my brain throbbed as I trudged up the stairs to my bedroom. I collapsed on my bed and napped, which felt like falling down, down into unconsciousness. When I awoke, my brain clanking and groaning, I shuddered at the memory of a dilapidated yellow taxi.

My neurologist had banned visits from my New Jersey suburb to Manhattan, partly because of the physical strain of travel, but also perhaps because Manhattan was where the accident happened. No reading, no computer, no texting, he instructed. "With a concussion, you need time for your brain to heal," he said. On a stress test evaluating cognitive processing and memory, for which the expected score is 70 percent, I had scored a dismal 23 percent—in the subcategory of

memory, a frightening 5 percent.

I struggled to remember basic words like *tiger*, *sugar*, and *baseball*, often leaving my sentences unfinished. "Are you going to heat up the stew on the sofa?" I asked my husband. He burst out laughing. "I mean, stove!" I twisted my lips in frustration. What if my brain didn't heal? Would this new me be able to accomplish all the writing I had hoped to do? The essays I had published thus far started to feel like an unattainable standard for the future.

My writing career was relatively new. A decade out of college, I was a marketing director with a professional staff and a spacious office with two philodendrons, which my secretary watered every week. But when I arrived at work in the morning, the revolving door of my glass office building sucked the energy from my limbs.

In a self-assessment workshop, which I took to figure out which direction I should take in my career, I realized I wanted to be a writer. This outcome felt both like a path to freedom and a diagnosis of a disease. How would I earn an income? But I forged ahead and took an extended sabbatical, plunging headlong into writing. At my writing desk I worked to untangle my past into sentences, mark discrete moments of my present on the page, and contemplate my future—in order to make sense of my life and to live it more fully. I started submitting my work. Some of my essays were published.

A pattern emerged in which I alternated stints in business with sabbaticals spent writing. On a spreadsheet, I tracked the number of hours I wrote every day. I did not want to squander

any precious pieces of time that could be spent on writing. For exercise, I grabbed a quick half hour on the StairMaster at the gym. Yet often I felt depleted from my quadruple roles as mother, wife, businesswoman, and writer. "You have to write now," a vexed voice barked inside my head.

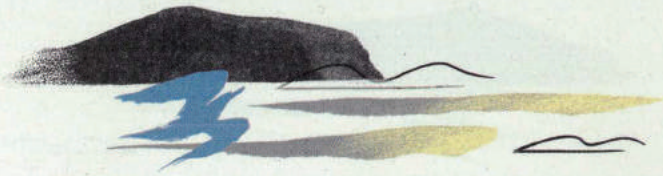
Toward the end of my second sabbatical, on a cold day in late January, with clumps of ice on the sidewalks in Manhattan, I hailed a taxi. The first yellow cab that stopped was old, the tires naked without hubcaps, the leather backseat sagging, the seatbelt frayed. But who knew how long it would take for another to arrive? I got in.

The taxi driver turned left on Lexington Avenue. Cars and trucks moved slowly through the icy streets while I read a magazine on my iPad. Halfway through an article I was slammed backward, my right shoulder banging against the seat. A few moments later, out of the rear window I saw my cabbie standing in the street, gesturing angrily at the driver of a large sedan, who apparently had just rear-ended us.

"And do you remember pitching forward?" my neurologist asked me during my first exam. I stared at him mutely, something crucial about that moment before I had been flung backward stirring in my ramshackle memory. "You must have hit your head and don't remember," he told me gently. I nodded. The seatbelt had not held me in place.

Throughout that February, I had the sleep patterns of a newborn, slumbering twelve hours a night, with two daily naps. I did little chores around the house, emptying the dishwasher,

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one plate at a time. The highlight of the day occurred when my son and daughter arrived home from middle school. I snuggled with them on the couch. But then I would panic, terrified that I would never regain my former life. I became moody with my family. “You have no idea what I’m going through,” I snapped at them.

My salvation was my daily walk. Every day I trooped a bit farther, first to the house on the corner, its wrought-iron fence knee-deep in snow, then down Gordonhurst, icicles hanging from the trees, and finally, in early March, all the way to the entrance of Brookdale Park, where two hemlocks stood sentinel in pools of ice. The air was misty, the atmosphere hushed, the only other visible figure a man with a jowly dog. Further down the path, I drew in my breath: Before me stretched a white field of untouched snow.

How was it that I had lived in this town for two decades but had rarely visited this park? In a month or two, brittle scabs of ice would disappear from the path. I hoped that by then my brain would heal. Before the accident I had spent every second I could steal inside, hunched over my computer, in an effort to make up for lost time. From now on, I decided, I wanted to walk through this park as often as I could. I wanted a new writing life full of this calm and wonder.

In concert with my upbeat mood, my neurologist outlined a program for gradually returning to work. He prescribed thirty minutes of writing in my journal each day, followed by another thirty minutes at the computer. Every few days I was to add another fifteen minutes, all the while taking frequent breaks and stopping immediately at the slightest twinge of a headache.

Writing at my computer felt like a threefold Herculean task: my brain

creating sentences, my fingers tapping words on the keyboard, my eyes tracking the progression of sentences on the glaring screen. Brain, fingers, eyes, effort. Although I tried to be on patrol for a headache, one day the desire to write consumed me. I arose from my desk feeling dizzy and drained. That night, when I lay down to sleep, a headache crept into my bed, clamped its large paws on top of my cowering brain, and pressed down.

I arose the next morning groggy and tired, but determined to find a

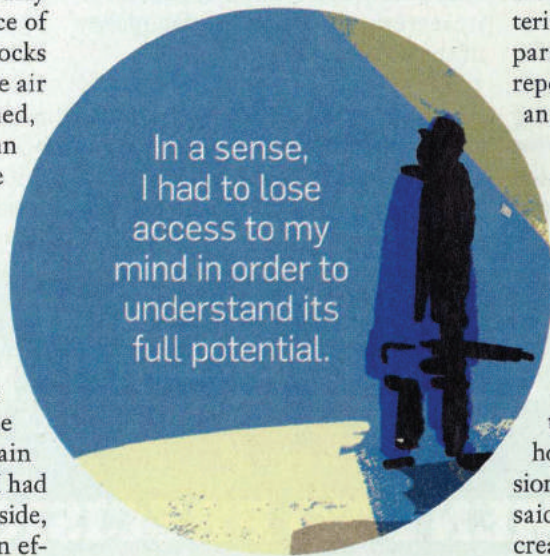
meditative—I could only do alone.

I went for a walk in the park, strolling beneath fifty-foot pinwheel oaks, hiking up the little rise just past the rose garden, and descending past the archery field to a line of London plane trees along the avenue. The trees, with their exposed patches of cream-colored bark and crisscross of veins, seemed both stoic and vulnerable. If I were at my computer I would write that sentence, I thought, turning the words over in my mind. A week later, when the park’s fruit trees burst into bloom, pink tissue-paper blossoms littering the ground, I wrote a descriptive paragraph in my mind as I walked. I repeated the first sentence, using it as an anchor for the ones that followed.

By May, although I could barely endure two hours a day on the computer, I could walk two laps around the park, for a total of three miles, an accomplishment that my neurologist applauded. “Exercise is leading your recovery,” he said. Based on another car accident I had suffered in my twenties and a fall during childhood, he theorized that this concussion was possibly my third. Often, he said, the severity of a concussion increases with each incident.

With my neurologist’s encouragement, I soon began jogging for part of my park loop. One day, when little beads of sweat dampened my forehead, an essay I had struggled with during my first writing sabbatical tapped me on the shoulder and fell in line beside me, revealing its hidden meanings, which previously had eluded me, or which I had chosen to ignore. I took out my phone and dictated a few thoughts—more than thoughts, really, linchpin sentences that I realized formed the essay’s missing core.

Another time, as I rounded the corner toward the long line of plane trees, an idea for a new essay popped into my



way to keep writing. I installed speech-recognition software on my computer and an application called Flux, which reduces a monitor’s output of eye-taxing blue light. I hired a high school student, a redhead named Henry bound for Cornell, to type for me while I dictated. He helped me write light pieces for my blog.

“Hmm,” Henry said, his tone rising in approval at a sentence he liked. Later, he ventured an “Oh” at a phrase he felt was muddled. But I couldn’t accomplish anything more than a short post while I sat next to Henry. A true act of writing—intimate, communing,



mind. While I studied the line of elegant trunks, entire sentences formed in my mind. I examined those sentences, considering their construction and order, then left them, each one a grand tree, and moved on to the next section. When I got home, I dictated the essay into my computer. The process felt grueling, my brain straining, but with several breaks I persevered, until I had written a draft of this very essay.

Had I always possessed this ability to write inside my mind? Before the accident I had done all of my writing on the computer, at some point abandoning pen and paper even for first drafts, savoring the sensation of my fingers prancing on the keys, words galloping across the screen. I will never know for sure, but I suspect that I had possessed the ability to write inside the regions

of my mind all along.

The park became the place where I created my first drafts. On a day in late May, the temperature chilly without a coat, I grasped my arms with opposite hands, partly for warmth, partly out of exuberance, while sentences popped into my mind. "And then I'll say this," I said to myself, "and I should end the paragraph here, with this thought, which will move the essay forward." I couldn't wait to get home to write the essay down. Six months later I managed to publish that piece, and today I often reread it, secretly thrilled with the quality of the writing.

MY BRAIN did not fully heal until the one-year anniversary of my fateful ride in that dilapidated yellow

taxi. By then I had returned to the business world, having accepted a position as a vice president in a health-care services company. Since then, perhaps predictably, my schedule has become quite frenzied. But once a week I still manage to walk the park loop, where sometimes, my thoughts ambling in time with my gait, I work on my writing.

I forfeited months of my life due to my concussion, but gained a new way of writing—one I will carry with me for the rest of my days. In a sense, I had to lose access to my mind in order to understand its full potential. What I discovered when I regained that access was a brand-new pathway to ideas, process, and flow. Now I possess this place of wonder, an open expanse of untapped possibility, a field of untouched snow. ∞

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