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(SOMEWHAT) DAILY NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF LITERARY NONFICTION

Hangover and Abandonment, Post MFA

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(<https://brevity.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/mcgovern-author-picture.jpg>)

By Meg McGovern

“You may feel a hangover. Abandonment,” Carol Ann Davis, Director of Fairfield University’s MFA Program, warned me and the forty exhausted students gathered together on Zoom for the closing remarks of our ten-day Residency, “but don’t forget the beautiful community we have built together.”

The hangover is not from alcohol, but rather the foggy feeling of being immersed in workshops, reading articles, essays, poems, attending seminars, completing several common reads, and holding discussions all day and into the night with other writers. The abandonment is the feeling students get when suddenly they must go back to their real lives and figure out how to manage writing, jobs, and family at the same time. When you are in a Residency, everything else is on hold.

I wrapped up my MFA a few weeks ago with a virtual celebration. The Hallelujah Cohort, as my graduating group called ourselves, dressed up in cap and gowns in front of our computers. Our emotions were mixed. We were high on the satisfaction of accomplishment that comes with completing four semesters which included craft papers, a third semester project, a 140-page Thesis, a graduate reading, and a graduate presentation, not to mention the pages and pages of reading, writing, revising, and editing work. At the same time, there was a sense of departure, abandonment, from the MFA community and the writing life established over the past few years.

No longer would we get regular emails from the director about deadlines.

No longer would we have semester assignments forcing us to sit at our desks for hours.

No longer would we choose a mentor and then meet every few weeks to discuss progress.

No longer would we spend ten days on an island or virtually immersed in writing.

It is now up to us to create our own writing lives and stay connected to our MFA community, to keep the momentum going and the friendships alive.

The day after graduation, I attended my last workshop then headed to the virtual closing. I had an unexpected wave of emotion, and tears welled up in my eyes as I left the Zoom gathering. *What should I do now?*

I had a million things to do; go over the comments on my writing from the Publishing & Editing workshop, read the few articles I hadn't gotten to, read the pile of books I purchased during Residency that had already arrived, submit essays to literary journals, and write new essays brewing in my head. I needed to catch up on lesson plans for teaching my 6th graders the next day, do the laundry, pay bills, take down the holiday decorations—all the stuff I had neglected during Residency. Instead, I decided to lie down on the couch with my pup, Gia, at my feet. The brain fatigue—the hangover—hit, but thoughts churned through my head like butter and brought me back to a workshop about “Writing Life and Success.” I pondered on my own writing life. *What should my writing life look like now? What are my successes?*

Writing Life

Several professors from the MFA program spoke about their own writing life. One said she has kept track of her daily writing hours for thirty years. Another said, he doesn't keep track, he just writes. In his memoir *On Writing, A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King says to writers, “You need a room, you need a door, and you need the determination to shut the door. You need a concrete goal as well. The longer you keep to these basics, the easier the act of writing will become.” King suggests writing 1,000 words per day and staying in that room until your goal is complete.

I don't keep track of my hours writing, and I don't have a room with a desk and a door. I write whenever I can, wherever I can, usually on weekends and in the evenings after work, a swim or workout, and dinner. My writing space is in the living room. I put on my headphones, listen to music for studying, and write. Many of my ideas come when I swim, on my walks, in the middle of the night, and on weekends when I am not teaching. When ideas come, I jot them down anywhere I can. Every writer needs to establish a definition for their own “writing life.”

Success

What I have learned is that success also has different definitions. Some write for money; others write to be heard. When my nonfiction book, *We're Good: The Power of Faith, Hope & Determination* (<https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1683509137/brevitynonfic-20>), about Chris O'Brien, an eighteen-year-old who became a quadriplegic after a diving accident, was published in October 2018, sales were great. Amazon listed it as #1 in Spinal Cord Injuries. Chris and I launched the book together with a 200-person event at a brewery, we spoke at high schools in our area, and we were interviewed on Connecticut's Channel 8 News. After the initial launch, the momentum slowed, but success did not come just from sales. For me, success came from the impact on readers. While writing the book, I interviewed people who knew Chris and had been influenced by his positive mindset. A young man, a paraplegic, who Chris had met at Shephard Rehabilitation Center in Atlanta, told me he didn't have determination like Chris despite being more physically capable. Accepting a new identity, from athlete to paraplegic, was unsurmountable. He died just as the book was being published and left a grieving family; his mother, father, and a sister who then reached out to me.

My words had helped them heal from their loss.

Their words were my success.

Meg McGovern teaches middle school Language Arts and is the author of *We're Good: The Power of Faith, Hope & Determination* (<https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1683509137/brevitynonfic-20>) (<https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1683509137/brevitynonfic-20>) *The Power of Faith, Hope & Determination* (<https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1683509137/brevitynonfic-20>). Meg is an Assistant Editor for *Brevity* (<http://www.brevitymag.com>) and has also written for their blog. Meg holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing from Fairfield University in Connecticut.

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