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BOOK REVIEWS

Anne Lamott

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life

Shakira D. Pleasant, reviewer

Overcoming Writing Challenges

Counsel for Aspiring, Novice, and Experienced Legal Professionals

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life

Anne Lamott (Anchor 1995), 272 pages

Shakira D. Pleasant, reviewer*

“How do you eat an elephant?” “One bite at a time.” Reading the book, *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott,¹ this saying immediately springs to mind. Both teach that a seemingly daunting task broken down into parts makes the process more manageable. Yet the book is not just about overcoming overwhelming feelings and prioritizing them one at a time. Lamott’s narration about her childhood in Marin City, California, infuses the book with warmth as she shares her wisdom about life and writing. Her book is not merely about eating the elephant one bite at a time; it is about tackling life and writing, bird by bird.

The “bird by bird” trope refers to a family story about her brother, who sat overwhelmed at the family dining room table trying to complete a long-term school project on birds. He had procrastinated on the project until a few days before it was due. Clearly immobilized, Lamott’s brother received writing advice from their father, himself a successful author: “[J]ust take it bird by bird.”² How to overcome writing challenges is the gift of the book. There are six main parts—(a) The Introduction; (b) Writing; (c) The Writing Frame of Mind; (d) Help Along the Way; (e) Publication—and Other Reasons to Write; and (f) The Last Class. Each part provides insight into the writing process through anecdotes.

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¹ ANNE LAMOTT, *BIRD BY BIRD: SOME INSTRUCTIONS ON WRITING AND LIFE* (1995).

² *Id.* at 19.

I. Write Your Routine

In the introduction, Lamott talks about her father—a literary figure who published several novels. She vividly recalls his daily routine. “Every morning, no matter how late he had been up, my father rose at 5:30, went to his study, wrote for a couple of hours, made us all breakfast, read the paper with my mother, and then went back to work for the rest of the morning.”³ Having a routine is a relatable concept. Consistency promotes productivity. And in the context of writing, productivity begets the writing process. According to Lamott,

Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing that you had to force yourself to do [through developing your routine]—the actual act of writing—turns out to be the best part. It’s like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward.⁴

II. Writing Isn’t Simple, But Not Trying Makes It Harder

Lamott addresses a common experience of most writers: the paralyzing effects of facing a blank page. This is especially terrifying for those plagued by perfectionism and a fear of failure when faced with a new subject. It is during this time that writers must choose how they will respond. As I have embarked on my academic journey, I have recognized how starting a new project and facing my perfectionism have made me fearful at times. I have chosen to act, rather than succumb to paralysis, and Lamott has armed me with tools to do just that.

In *Bird by Bird*, Lamott advises her readers to just start writing—even if the first efforts are not very good. She matter-of-factly states that *all good writers* write not-so-good first drafts, and this act helps the writer create “good second drafts and terrific third drafts.”⁵ Anecdotally, she describes this process from the perspective of when she was a food critic.⁶ Food critics face strict, tight deadlines; she would always panic before her review was due.⁷ Inevitably, she would try to write a lead, then a couple of more sentences, and then she would erase everything and start again.⁸ Rather than becoming paralyzed by insecurity, she would approach the

3 *Id.* at xii.

4 *Id.* at xxvi; see also xxi–ii (Lamott describes her own writing routine while she was a clerk–typist working at an engineering-and-construction firm in San Francisco, California. One hour or more each night, Lamott devoted

time to her craft, so one day she could, like her father, author a published work.)

5 *Id.* at 21.

6 *Id.* at 23–24.

task again and again by writing up descriptions of the food one dish at a time, or bird by bird.⁹

Lamott also describes her bout with procrastination as a cartoonish battle of good versus evil, angel versus imp. Like a muscle-bound oppressor, she portrays perfectionism as the enemy of the people, and all things inventive, playful, or full of life.¹⁰ Within this mythical battle that sets the stage in this chapter, Lamott gives a ray of hope—another nugget of wisdom. “What people somehow (inadvertently, I’m sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here—and, by extension, what we’re supposed to be writing.”¹¹ Essentially, we should have an awareness of our procrastinating ways, but learn to be compassionate toward ourselves just as we would with a friend whom we are trying to encourage. And by encouraging, Lamott means just start writing: even if the resulting first drafts are ultimately bad and in need of rewrite, it is better to get started and work with what you have on the page.

III. You’re Human, But You Can Become Your Best Self by Letting Others Help You

Lamott later discusses the conventional wisdom of letting others read your work. But how often do we follow that wisdom and look for opportunities to have our drafts read? Lamott describes how allowing others to read your unfinished work is a wise thing to do.¹² “There are a number of ways to tell your story right, and someone else may be able to tell you whether or not you’ve found one of those ways.”¹³ The benefits of having someone read your drafts include helping you improve your work product and catching errors before submitting the final product to an individual whom you want or need to impress.

On the other hand, having someone read your draft is intrusive and may expose vulnerabilities. It requires the writer to be open to criticism of one’s work, and criticism is not always easy to accept.¹⁴ However, just as law students benefit from having legal writing professors read their written work, professors can also benefit from having a trusted colleague or friend read in-progress scholarship. Similarly, judges and practitioners

7 *Id.* at 23.

8 *Id.* at 23–24.

9 *Id.* at 24.

10 *Id.* at 28.

11 *Id.* at 32.

12 *Id.* at 164. Lamott always shows her work to one or two people before sending it to her editor or agent. *Id.* In the midst of receiving criticism, Lamott appreciates people in her life who will be honest and help her do the very best work of which she is capable. *Id.* at 166.

13 *Id.* at 163.

can perfect their opinions, briefs, or non-litigation documents by sharing them with a colleague before it is published or filed. In the world of writing, checks and balances work to the advantage of the writer.

IV. Receiving Accolades Are Merely Icing on Your Literary Cake—The Love and Care Put into Preparing the Cake Is What Really Matters

Another chapter addresses “your why.” Why do you write? In the context of students, some write to obtain good grades. Other students write because they want to become better at the craft of writing. Then, there are the students who write because it is a requirement of their school, and ultimately, of the profession. These latter two reasons could also ring true for members of the legal academy and the legal profession.

As Lamott describes her “why,” she admits that she was finally published as an author when her focus shifted from looking to receive praise, to preparing a gift for her loved ones. Her first published book was a gift to her father—stories about his life-ending journey with brain cancer.¹⁵ Fortunately, he was able to read and appreciate her stories while he was still living.¹⁶ In one excerpt she states, “I showed [my pages] to my father, who thought it was great that all this pain and fear and loss were being transformed into a story of love and survival.”¹⁷

Is the notion of receiving accolades (e.g., through publication, being cited by a respectable source or person, etc.) the reason for writing, or is the reason something greater than self? Through stories about life and loss, one of the true gems that Lamott shares in this book is about finding your voice. “[T]he truth of *your* experience can *only* come through in your own voice.”¹⁸ Lamott’s personal story about her father’s bout with cancer was an experience she and her family lived through, and it was also from this story that she earned her first publication. Above all, I believe Lamott’s wisdom tells us that we all have something unique to share with the world. Focusing on the impact that we want to make, rather than whether we will be noticed for it, may result in being blessed with both.

Twenty years after its initial publication, *Bird by Bird*’s timeless wisdom is both an inspiration to writers and accessible to diverse audiences. In the great words of Lamott, “becoming a writer is about becoming conscious.” Here’s to all of our *enlightened* consciousness!

14 *Id.* at 166.

15 *Id.* at 185.

16 *Id.* at 186.

17 *Id.*

18 *Id.* at 199 (emphasis added).