

Perseverance

by Kristi Stephens Walker

When I was a teenager, I participated in a bible study that used a technique call saturation, wherein I memorized the scripture associated with the study. At least part of it worked, because I will never forget James 1. 2-4:

Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance, and perseverance must do its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

I don't really remember what happened after that, which is why I'm talking to you about perseverance and not discipline.

I've been thinking about where I have persevered, particularly as it relates to my passions, which is always spiritual work. Without a doubt, parenting requires constant perseverance, along with my passion. And certainly staying committed to my marriage for 22.5 years has required perseverance. I am wildly passionate about unmedicated childbirth and breastfeeding; and about my friendships with other women—the very bedrock of who I am becoming.

But writing is what I'm here to talk about.

Recently, I finished writing my first novel. It is titled, *The Water Birth*. That strange brew of passion and perseverance has at once been gratifying and bewildering. Even now, I'm wondering why I am not down in the church office emailing copies of my manuscript to agents and independent publishers. With any luck, I'll be on the New York Times Book Review by noon.

There is nothing more daunting to a writer than a blank computer screen. We drive to Starbucks, and turn on the computer, then, because we hate and fear nothing more than that blank screen, we get all our little obsessive rituals out of the way: for me, I check Facebook, text my mom, take a BuzzFeed quiz on which

Friends character I am most like—Chandler, if you’re wondering, re-read my previous 150 pages, allowing my perfectionism to take me down an editing rabbit hole all the pros warn against, check my Facebook status and wonder why my junior high best friend hasn’t “liked” it yet because it was so funny, read an article or two on Huff post, get my writing playlist ready on Spotify, put my earbuds in, and finally...finally...face the blank page. I remember then the advice Hemingway had for novelists—write drunk, edit sober—but it’s 9:00 in the morning and that won’t work for me, so I just start writing.

I write. I write words on the page, sometimes same words the over and over. Sometimes all the fears and thoughts and distractions that keep the story inside me from getting out and onto the page. Many times, the words are prayer, supplication to some higher power—God? Okay, sure, God. But One that works for my good, One who knows the sacredness of the story I have to tell.

I keep writing, and then words start to come. First, in fits and starts, then waves, and from them come ideas and outcomes of characters that write themselves, so that in the end, even I am sometimes surprised at what happens.

During the Passion series, one of the questions posed to us is: What keeps you up at night? What keeps me up at night is a big, bulging, living, swollen terrarium of ideas. It’s one of those giant ones, and in it are ideas and characters and messages and events. There are historical wounds and exciting adventures and inspiring people and heartbreaking realities. Around it are things I need to do and want to do and “should” do and will do. But deep inside is a story waiting to be told—many stories—whose telling is mine to do.

So I practice. I call myself a writer, a novelist, an author, and I act as if. I have business cards made that say “writer” and know it’s as much about who I am as what I do. And I find support. At first, letting someone read any part of my book was like letting a stranger hold my newborn baby: I want to show people this gorgeous thing I made, but what if they don’t hold her right or think she’s gorgeous or understand her at all? What if they break her? What if they break me?

So I sign up for conferences where other writers, authors, novelists hang out and I start sharing with them, and holding their word babies and next thing I know, I have a tribe I never knew I needed. I float my most intimate ideas to my dream team which is comprised of my most trusted people: my professional editor, my cheerleader, my truth-teller, my astute reader, my soul sisters, and my spiritual mentor, Mama Suz, whose wisdom is a most amazing thing.

I have resources that help me, such as *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published* and a notebook from the Erma Bombeck Writer's Workshop that is teeming with notes and ideas. And, Lord God knows I have *The Prince of Tides*, and I treasure it. Pat Conroy has had such a profound impact on my reading and writing that he makes a cameo in my novel. On the title page of my tattered copy of *The Prince Of Tides*, he wishes me good luck with *The Water Birth*.

One of the best ways I persevere as a writer is by being a faithful, passionate reader. I read about my craft and study the work of people whose words move me. I get involved in the narratives of the characters I love. I climb on the raft with Huck and Jim and make my way down that mighty river. I jump to attention when Reverend Sykes says to Scout, as Atticus leaves the court room, "Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passing." I grieve when we lose Charlotte—that good friend and great writer—and my lament when we lose Hedwig is unprecedented. I rejoice when Rachel gives birth to Joseph under cover of the red tent, and have most recently reveled in the exciting and well-constructed letters between writer Juliet and her friends in a Guernsey literary society just after the German occupation.

At the end of the day, what keeps me writing is to take a deep breath and say a prayer, asking God to help me be the writer God created me to be. And I write.

I just sit down, and I write.