



The Writing / Life Balance

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AS I WRITE, IT'S MID-JANUARY 2021, and we're in the middle of lockdown three. And with the COVID-19 crisis ongoing, many people are finding themselves a year into working from home.

Many of them may have said at some point, *I'd love to work from home*. But having suddenly been forced into doing so, they might now be realising what writers have known for a long time: when you're surrounded by your work it can be difficult to switch off. That separation is not only healthy, but essential.

One of my greatest personal difficulties is not knowing what to do in my free time. During the week, my life revolves around work. This is just like everybody else, I guess, but because I'm a *writer*, I've accepted – and it could be said embraced – the fact that my work *is* my life. My work defines me. Gives me context. Validates all the sacrifices those around me have made over the years to accommodate my ambitions. Without writing I am...well what am I?

Recently I've become much more aware not only of the importance of switching off, but also the benefits of doing so; that the unconscious mind can really make a difference. I'm just emerging from the longest break I've taken from writing since I started in the early nineties. While partly enforced by a house move, this was also due to some level of burn out, and lack of success — not entirely unrelated factors I imagine.



Over the past thirty years or more I've pretty much consistently jumped from one project to the next without pause. I once even took a laptop on a family holiday and got up early to write. What kind of holiday is that? Not only was I still working, it could be argued that I wasn't entirely with the people I love for the rest of the time.

My work ethic, and my desire to succeed, have influenced everything. But like any complex machine the mind needs to be well maintained. Any athlete will tell you it's during the recovery time that muscles rebuild, that it's during those periods that the training really pays off. I'm no athlete, but I now recognise the importance of taking my own recovery periods. That it's okay, essential, in fact, to stop thinking about words now and then. To give myself permission to take a break. That it's okay to binge on *The Queen's Gambit*, browse YouTube or just look out of the window.

With COVID-19, millions of people are now finding themselves juggling work and homeschooling kids with laptops on dining room tables. And with that, the need to achieve a good work/life balance, and the importance of this to good mental health, is becoming increasingly apparent. So whether or not you're feeling stressed when this eventually goes out, whether the COVID-19 crisis has eased or you're wrestling with a creative project, give yourself permission to take a break now and then.