

Summertime, Summertime

One of my greatest failures as a writer is my inability to stay inside. Even when it's bitterly cold outside, I want to be out there, not in here. When it's sunny and bright, when there's enough daylight to fish, to cycle, to walk in the woods nearly twenty-four hours a day, I find it almost impossible to stay in. It's sunny and inviting outside right now as I write this, and so I am torn.

Out there lie an infinite number of attractions, Frank-specific attractions calling out to me to be taken in and appreciated. A vintage MG-TD with right hand drive. A moose cow and new calves. A pretty good screwdriver or bungee cord lying on the shoulder of the road, crying out for me to take it home.

Between the distractions and the concentration it takes to cast a fly into the right location, or to ride my bike carefully among the sometimes hostile Fairbanks drivers, whatever idea I might have abandoned on my computer when I left home seems to melt away.

Except when it doesn't. Sometimes the idea can be so intensely demanding that I cannot get away from it. And I have tried to get away from it because I am stuck. I don't know what to do next. My idea follows me out onto the river, and I find my fly stuck in a tree. That's actually OK. I can tie a new fly, and that's a small price if what I get in return is a fresh approach to my writing question.

In this way I can sometimes bring home a couple of very serviceable paragraphs or scenes for a story. I keep working the words until they fall into useful passages. Once I do start writing them down, I find more ways to enrich them.

I forgot to say I rarely leave the house without a pencil or pen and paper. I keep a write-in-rain notebook and mechanical pencil in my fishing vest. I keep a pocket notepad and pen inside a ziplock in a pocket of my cycling jersey. A person never knows when the need to get something down on paper will strike.

In the car fix-it place, waiting for my truck, I found myself without my little notebook. Fortunately, I had a copy of The Three Penny Review which offers lots of white space on certain pages.

But wait. What I've just described is the exception, not the rule. Here's my brain (and yours, too, reader) when I'm on a fairly complicated task like casting a dry fly into a tight spot across the river without much space for my backcast: It's all executive function as the neurologist like to call it.

In our waking lives, our brains are running a lot of executive functions all the time: watching out for cars when cycling, trying to remember that fifth item I was supposed to get at the grocery store, talking to people, shifting gears on my bike, fixing flats (it's been a bad summer for me in this regard). All these tasks require I

be present in the moment. And except for all the times I've described above, I want to think mostly, I am in that moment. Mostly, I'm present, say, when you are talking to me.

Somewhere, though, maybe in the back corner of my brain, the story or essay I'm working on is still perking along. When I hear neurologist talk about mapping our brains, I think, what odd corners would light up if they put probes on my head? Where is that space where the next scene, the next paragraph, or simply the right word is hiding?

I used to think my fresh thoughts came from all the stimuli from the outside world I was taking in as I rode along on my bike. Here would come a 1964 El Camino (I've always wanted one, haven't you?), and the sight of it would trigger a rush of thoughts and associations and by and by one of them would get me back to the question I'd left idling on my computer. But lately, I think this is not the case. Instead, these ideas, these intuitions, come as a result of that writer part of my brain simply being left alone for a while.

Apparently, neurologists agree. It could even be that's what our dreams are about. When all the obligations of the brain are relaxed, it's free to go out and play.

It could also be that I've constructed a whole rationalization for goofing off, for my self-indulgent behavior. Because there is this fact: Finally, writing is what happens in a room, usually a quiet room, as free from distractions as can be managed. Ideas might seem to come out of nowhere, but to get them down on paper, to shape them, to revise them into something that can be shared with an audience is a lonely, indoor activity. On beautiful days like this, I wish it could be otherwise. But it is not.