

By Alexandra Ridgway

Writing for the moment

desperately needed to write. Eighty percent of the way through my Ph.D., with revisions to make and two more chapters to complete, I felt mounting pressure to get words on paper. When I was a child, the words would have come easily. I wrote inspired and quickly, churning out poem after poem for our local newspaper. But the rigid essay structures of high school and university extinguished my love of writing. I would sit at my computer late into the night, forcing the words out at turtle speed. Writing remained slow and laborious during graduate school—until I became a mum to twins.

Before my twins were born, I had envisioned tinkering away at my thesis while the babies slept blissfully in their bassinets. My university offered maternity leave, but I had chosen not to take it. I was nearly done with my doctorate and did not want to wait. I figured things would only get trickier as the twins got older.

But from the day my twins were born, I felt I had no time to do anything besides care for them, let alone write. My vision of bassinet naps was an illusion; the babies slept on my chest, in the pram, or not at all. One morning, I timed how long my son would sleep alone. The result: 6 minutes. How on earth could I complete my Ph.D. in such small snippets of time? With every day that went by without progress, I increasingly felt destined to become ABD: all-but-dissertation.

After my fingers came nowhere close to a keyboard for 6 weeks, I decided enough was enough; I would just have to use the rare minutes I had. I set up my work space, with my thesis cued up and ready to go. As soon as my babies drifted off, I flew to my computer, a sentence already formed in my mind, determined to see whether I could land those words on the page before the babies realized I was gone.

I managed to write a full sentence and a half before I heard whimpers from the other room. Part of me wished I had been able to stay at the computer longer, but I was nonetheless exhilarated by my incremental progress. Maybe this really could be the way forward.

In the weeks that followed, I continued what I dubbed “microwriting.” Sometimes a baby would wake even before I made it to the computer. Those days filled me with fears that I would never finish my thesis and that I was fooling myself to think I could both care for my children and pur-



“As I learned to savor my limited slivers of writing time, my childhood love for it returned.”

6 minutes became 60, I was astonished at what I could do. And when I found myself falling back into my old plodding ways, I put the timer on for 6 minutes as a reminder of how valuable this time was. Bit by bit, I typed my way to submitting my thesis when the babies were about 3 months old.

By no means am I recommending that others forgo parental leave or try to race to the finish line as I did. But microwriting, which began as a necessity, has become core to my writing practice. The twins are now 3 years old and although I have more opportunities for extended focus, interruptions are still commonplace. But I’ve learned there is never a perfect time to write. I have to carve out moments when I can, no matter how small they may be, and cherish each opportunity to get words on paper. The time to write is now. ■

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