

Cursive or Cursor, a writer's question

by Christina Baldwin

As I entered my local library I walked past a sign that read, "Quiet corner, slow reading in process." I had been seeing announcements about this on various Internet threads around town: a device free zone.

I peek in and see a mixed group of grey heads (vaguely my age), teen heads (one with blue hair), and a girl of about ten lost in story, twirling brunette hair, reading. Just reading. In the nick of techno-time the library is hosting a place to enjoy the whispery rustle of turning pages.

I turn left into the community room carrying my ever-present journal and fountain pen into a meeting with Kindles, iPads, and smart phones spread out on the table along with a few pads and pencils, bottled water, and cupcakes. Thirty years ago, I wrote a book about my relationship to journal writing. It was titled, *Life's Companion*— a most accurate description of how writing sidles up to the busy edges of my life and invites me into the slow zone.

Volume by volume, boxed at the back of my closet and under my desk, and filling the bottom row of my corner bookshelf, I accumulate uncountable pages of handwritten reflection, problem solving, inquiry, lament, and celebration. I have several pens I travel with, several more that reside on my desk (having once left \$250 worth of pens on an airplane, I don't take the fancy guys out of the house anymore). I love a spacious page, good paper, the subtle smell of ink.

What erodes this singular pleasure is the lure of the cursor—the demands of typing, typing, typing of business and busyness. I can't imagine how I would construct my workday, or manage correspondence, or communication, or text friends and family if I could not type. Typing has become a core skill. Little children, who are barely able to recite the alphabet, are learning to type it.

Typing seems to carry the day, but as someone who has been both writing *and* typing for over sixty years, I know they are not the same activity. Having decades of this shared practice I can compare how each feel, and what advantage each has, I *know* that handwriting and typing stimulate different parts of my brain. My journal is a handwritten document that has taught me to experience writing as a form of meditation, an access to intuition, a way to peel the onion of articulation until I know what right action is and can discern what wisdom and guidance is rising in my heart and mind.

When writing professionally, I often warm up by writing first by hand and then very carefully switching to the keyboard. Carefully, because the switch from pen to keyboard can rattle a line of thought right out of my mind. It's a delicate maneuver. I breathe into it. I move as though I have a hot cup of tea in hand—don't spill the inspiration. (And don't-don't look at e-mails, read the news, or start shopping!)

Over the years, discussion between cursive or cursor has rambled through hundreds of journal and memoir writing seminars: *write or type; type or write?* Does it matter?

From Christina's memoir seminar, now housed on www.christinabaldwin.com. Carry on the question and conversation in the circles of your life.

Whatever works for you, we finally agree, but I notice nobody changes his/her mind, and we are fierce and passionate in defending what each practice offers.

Finally, neurologists and psychologists have joined the writers' debate. Journalist Maria Konnikova, a student of Stephen Pinker's at Harvard, and a writer for several thoughtful publications, raised the question in the New York Times in June 2014, "Does handwriting matter?" She cites several interesting studies, that are no surprise to me—any more than reading from actual books is different than reading from a screen. Here are two quotes from her piece that seem to be the crux of the matter:

"New evidence suggests that the links between handwriting and broader educational development run deep. Children not only learn to read more quickly when they first learn to write by hand, but they also remain better able to generate ideas and retain information. In other words, it's not just what we write that matters — but how.

"When we write, a unique neural circuit is automatically activated," said [Stanislas Dehaene](#), a psychologist at the Collège de France in Paris. "There is a core recognition of the gesture in the written word, a sort of recognition by mental simulation in your brain." And it seems that this circuit is contributing in unique ways we didn't realize," he continued. "Learning is made easier."

"A [2012 study](#) led by [Karin James](#), a psychologist at [Indiana University](#), lent support to that view. Children who had not yet learned to read and write were presented with a letter or a shape on an index card and asked to reproduce it in one of three ways: trace the image on a page with a dotted outline, draw it on a blank white sheet, or type it on a computer. They were then placed in a brain scanner and shown the image again. The researchers found that the initial duplication process mattered a great deal. When children had drawn a letter freehand, they exhibited increased activity in three areas of the brain that are activated in adults when they read and write: the left fusiform gyrus, the inferior frontal gyrus and the posterior parietal cortex. By contrast, children who typed or traced the letter or shape showed no such effect. The activation was significantly weaker."

I don't know where the *fusiform gyrus* is in my brain, but I know it's been activated since I was six years old and that my life is a study in the power of the hand to the page, and the power of the fingertips to the keys. My point is to caution us—the larger us—in removing from human education and experience something so foundational as writing by hand just because it seems temporarily not necessary.

The ability to write and read is considered so powerful that still around the world there are pockets where children (especially girls) have to study in secret and at the risk of their lives. Shall we not protect this heritage? Shall we not bend lovingly over the shoulders of our children and grandchildren and help them hold the pen as well as help them find the letter on the Qwerty board?

Besides.... If the coming generations don't learn to write/read cursive...who is going to peruse all the millions and millions of journals, letters, and old fashioned first drafts for the bits of encoded genius streaming out of our activated *fusiform gyruses*?

From Christina's memoir seminar, now housed on www.christinabaldwin.com. Carry on the question and conversation in the circles of your life.