THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

PEOPLE

‘The Writing Life’

SEPTEMBER 21, 2015

David M. Whalen *, provost and a professor of English at Hillsdale College.*

I have been reading *The Writing Life,* by Annie Dillard. Though the short book does not concern higher education directly, it illuminates by analogy the life of serious learning.

Ms. Dillard explores the perils of writing, of setting out into pure potentiality, venturing everything for a deeply uncertain result. Without melodrama, she recounts the agony of the craft, and its necessity. Of course, this is just what our students so often experience in their own writing, though rarely at her level, and often with melodrama aplenty.

But it is not only in academic writing that students step into an unknown depth. Whether "traditional students" or not, undergraduates and graduate students hazard their material futures and even their interior lives on a learning experience that cannot promise much in the way of predictable results. For the determinedly prosaic, this is disturbing. For the ambitious (and for a writer), it is a source of liberty and, one hopes, insight.

Ms. Dillard renders inescapable the fact that serious writing matters. "Why does death so catch us by surprise," she says, "and why love? We still and always want waking." So, too, does higher learning inevitably matter because we "still and always want waking."

Copyright © 2015 The Chronicle of Higher Education