The Agony of Writing

I HATE to write. I have to force myself every day to sit down and begin. This is the first thing that I always tell students, who have absorbed the peculiar modern notion that if you are practiced at something you must find it effortless and pleasurable. Sometimes they ask how I continue, and I reply, glibly, "Because of contractual obligation." But I only manage because I live a humdrum life, in which the drama takes place mainly on the page.

The day begins with a period of mindless and repetitive activity. My one-hour power walk is nominally cardio, but it's actually composition—scenes, characters, even dialogue. (There must be people in my neighborhood park who think I'm a lunatic since occasionally I move my lips while composing on the fly.) One of the reasons I so fear the over-scheduling of today's children is that most creative thought happens when you are staring into the middle distance, doing nothing at all.

"Inspiration comes during work, not before it," Madeleine L'Engle once wrote, and for that to happen you must sit down in a chair. I don't believe in writer's block. It's not that sometimes you can't write, it's that you can't write well. Experience has told me that writing poorly sometimes leads to something better. Not writing at all leads only to reruns of "Law and Order." Which I love, but still.

When I am writing a novel, I have a totem that helps me to fall back into its world, like the old Hamilton wrist watch with the se-