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Active Recovery

A TIP I LEARNED FROM LEARNING TO RUN

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I've recently taken on a new challenge and have started running. This has meant I've had to learn a whole range of new skills and strategies. And because I've spent a dozen years turning everything I learn into something about writing via this blog... I'm going to keep up the habit.

A tip I learned from learning to run is "active recovery."

In fact, there is a whole thing in running called a... "recovery run!" This horrified me when I first found out about it. Any run felt like a huge effort, surely any kind of running was the opposite of recovering from running!

And it's true, you should be sleeping, and resting, and taking days off from running, to recover from running.

But it's also a good idea to sometimes run, slowly, easily, not for too long, to help you recover from running.

And there are other active things you can do, and that really help, to help you recover from running. Like going for a walk, or stretching, or doing yoga.

And this made me think about what active recovery strategies we might use to help us in our writing.

It can be tempting, after a long and exhausting day at the desk, to get up and head straight to the couch, or straight to bed. And sometimes we are so tired and sleepy, there really isn't any other choice. But I often find that I don't find that strategy quite as restful as I think it will be. I'm still achey and tired and my head is still buzzing from all the writing and thinking.

It often works better if I get up from my desk, and go to the gym or for a walk or to a pilates class. I move my body and work through my feelings and empty out my brain. And then I collapse on the couch, and I feel great. And later that night, I crawl into bed and sleep well.

Sometimes I use a strategy that looks a lot more like desk work, but is actually desk recovery. I write down my done list, or I reflect in my journal. Or I tidy away my files and pens and papers, using my hands to help me complete the day's work.

Or I use a ritual that looks a lot like more thinking work, but is actually thinking recovery. I do a mindfulness meditation, or listen carefully to a complex musical piece (I'm a trained musicologist, so music is always something I think about), or imagine the big picture for my research. (These links take you to podcast recordings from my most recent book so you can try it out for yourself)

If you have ever used editing, copy editing, tidying up your footnotes or formatting your citations as a bit of a mental rest (but not a full break), then you have already understood how to use writing to recover from writing.

A recovery run complements other forms of recovery, like eating enough and getting enough sleep, it doesn't replace them. And doing email or marking essays or coding data doesn't count as recovery—these are often high-stakes brain challenges in themselves. You can judge for yourself what works as active recovery: when you finish the task, do you feel drained and exhausted? not a recovery task; do you feel pleasantly tired and keen to get going again the next morning? a recovery task.

When we are doing something really complicated and long and challenging and tiring, like writing a PhD thesis, we need a whole range of recovery tools as well as working tools. This one surprised me, and then when I thought about it a bit more deeply, it seemed obvious.

I've been more intentional about scheduling in recovery tasks at the end of working days, and it's been really helpful for me. My back is grateful as is my brain. ●

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