Welcome to the University of Toronto!

There are some books I read once, and some books I consult regularly over a period of a few months and then leave behind because I seem to have milked them of everything they can teach me, but only a few books I go back to again and again. Annie Dillard’s book, The Writing Life, is one of those. It might be because she grew up in Pittsburgh (I did too), and she writes about that. It might be because water and trees and the sky and beaches are woven all through her work, whatever she’s writing about. You live in a city on a lake—go visit it! It might be because she is so reassuring about what writing is and does, and how hard it is. It is certainly because she is such a vivid, beautiful write—great rhythm. Funny. I have over the years sent many passages of her work to other people. I’ve underlined big chunks of the book. Might have to get a new copy soon, and start over. She is writing about writing, but writing about life too. Annie Dillard writes about why it’s hard to throw away what you write first. She writes about why unappealing work settings are better for writing than appealing ones. She writes about the schedules various writers use to get themselves to do their work, and why schedules matter. (I like the writer who gets up, reads for a bit, for a bit, takes a walk, writes for a bit, takes a walk into town, does an errand, walks back, eats dinner, and then goes to bed.) She writes about how you get yourself to sit down, and get going, on the first bit, and how to slog on through the tough bits. Today, I find myself reading these sentences over and over:

“One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now.”

And this:

“I do not so much write a book as sit up with it...During visiting hours, I enter its room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better. This tender relationship can change in a twinkling. If you skip a visit or two, a work in progress will turn on you....You must visit it every day and reassert your mastery over it. If you skip a day, you are, quite rightly, afraid to open the door to its room. You enter its room with bravura, holding a chair at the thing.....”

This (it sounds like the opposite advice, doesn’t it?):

“The written word is weak. Many people prefer life to it. Life gets you blood going, and it smells good.”

And finally, this.

“When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow....Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year. You make the path boldly, and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads....”

My daughter is also starting university this year (different university!) and I write to you, as I will write to her: Don’t hold back. Keep at it. Take it one step at a time. You don’t need to know, not yet, where your path will take you. Take lots of walks. Eat. Try one, or three, new things. Call when you’re sad or stressed. There were moments when I was sad too—I get it. Call when you’re happy. There are moments when you’ll be thrilled, exhilarated, tired, excited, independent. I remember that. Each fall still feels like a new start to me. You are so lucky to be in university. Don’t forget it. Don’t forget to call me.