

Patience Pending

By Terri Elders

In 2015, my short stories appeared in six anthologies, bringing the total to 110 books that have published my work. And in 2015, I finally travelled to Florence where I gazed upon Michelangelo's "David."

Michelangelo began to carve his 17-foot-tall masterpiece in the year 1500 at the age of 26. He took his time. He didn't hack away and bluster about not completing it in a month, or even a year. This challenge, bringing to life the hero he

envisioned in the marble, took him nearly three years. He demonstrated the value of patience in this work. His statue depicts David, the giant-killer, taking his time, slingshot at his side, waiting for the right moment.

"Genius is eternal patience," Michelangelo said.

As this year ends, I've resolved to adopt his words as my daily mantra. Some say patience is a virtue. It's more than that for writers. It's an absolute essential for us to continue to create. It's why we don't give up.

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Published monthly by
Publishing Syndicate LLC
Dahlynn McKowen
Ken McKowen

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As an adolescent, I gained inspiration from Jo March. She was my earliest role model. I can't count how many times I flipped through my well-thumbed copy of *Little Women* to reread the scene in Chapter 14, where Jo sends stories to a potential publisher.

"There," she proclaims, "I've done my best! If this won't suit, I shall have to wait till I can do better."

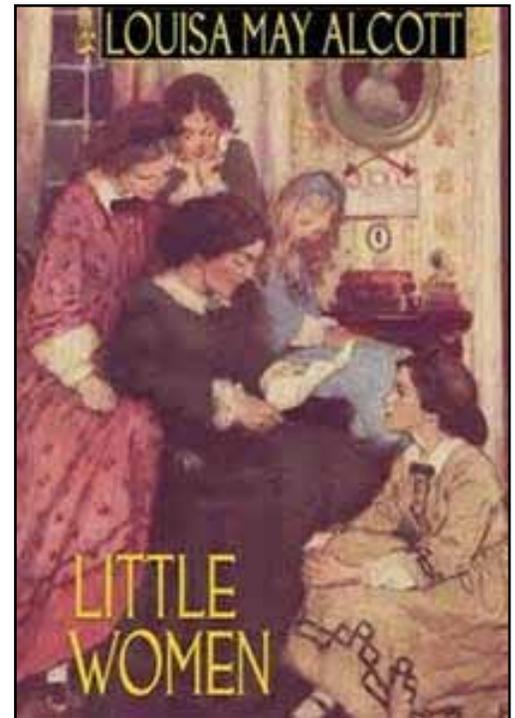
I determined then to pair her attitude with what I'd already discovered was my aptitude for writing. Even in junior high, I enjoyed seeing my work published, if only in the John Muir newspaper, *The Naturalist*. I particularly relished writing the column, "Silhouettes," profiles of teachers and student leaders. I'd take my time, fleshing my stories out, to make my subjects dazzle, like the characters Jo and her sisters admired in Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*. If a teacher or fellow students criticized my stories, Jo's words would echo in my mind: "If this won't suit, I shall have to wait till I can do better."

I never wait long. If I reread my own work days later with a critical eye, I'm almost always able to do better. So I've found that the secret to good writing, as Jo knew, lies in rewriting. Also like Jo, I'm convinced that writing involves having the patience to play, to play with ideas, to play until I can play better, by arranging . . . and then rearranging. I'm certain Michelangelo often stood before his marble block, playing out in his mind where next to point his chisel.

Unlike Jo, I've never written a play or even a novel. I've stuck to shorter pieces, essays, commentary, reviews, and true stories for anthologies. Nonetheless, writing remains my lifetime avocation, my source of joy, with a blank page always my playground.



An illustration from *The Pickwick Papers*, Charles Dickens's first novel, published in 1837. The illustration shows the novel's main character—Samuel Pickwick, Esquire—on the ice.



When friends inquire about "writer's block," I claim I've never really encountered it. Jo's spirit always remains with me...she never thought of writing as work, as something to suffer through, as something to be endured. Oh, no! For her it was always play.

Jo never doubted her ability. She never hesitated to retreat to her attic, assemble her words, and enjoy herself. She remains my inspiration. Her playful spirit never deserts me.

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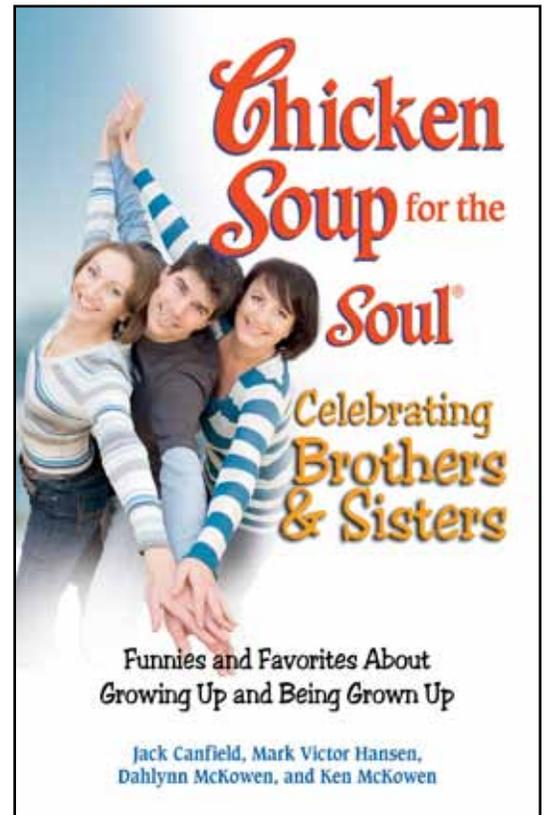
Oh, sure, there's times when I'm trying to write a story and the patterns fail to form, or the message remains elusive, or I begin to feel too frazzled to dazzle. When it doesn't feel like play, I put the piece away. I owe myself a break. I take that tip from Jo. I wait until I can do better. It's the best advice I ever came across. It's never a very long wait.

I didn't get to fill a bookcase with a 110 anthologies in a few weeks or a few months. It's taken me eight years since Dahlynn McKowen chose my story, "Easter Bloomers," for inclusion in my very first anthology, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Celebrating Brothers and Sisters*.

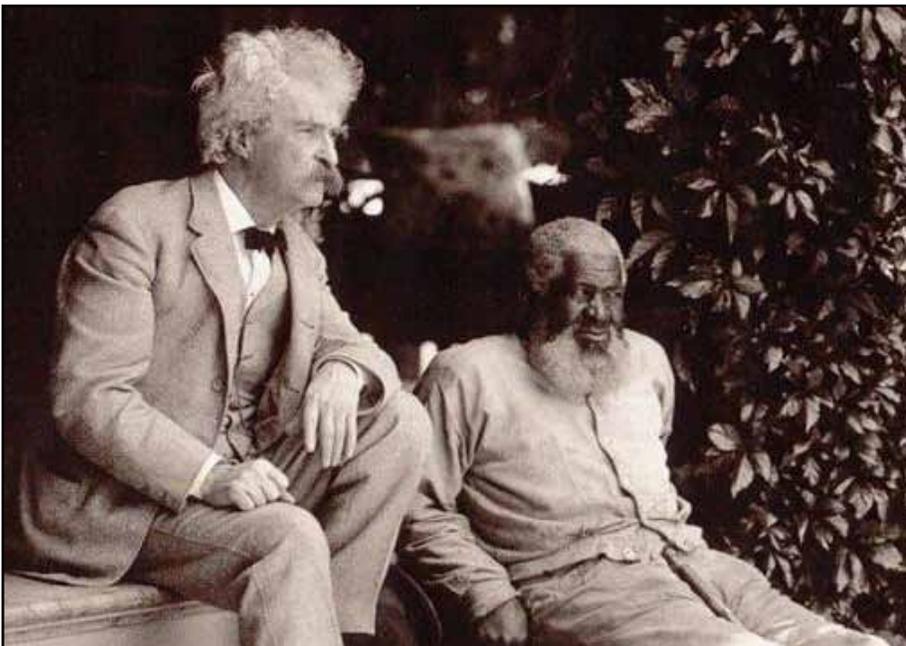
Here's where the real patience comes into play. Sometimes a piece I submit this week doesn't have a deadline for several months. Then it might be several months before an editor notifies me if I've been accepted. Several months might pass before publication. More time will elapse before my contributor's copy or a check might arrive.

I still haven't written a long piece of fiction, but I don't berate that lack...I think I'm beginning to see the figure in the marble. It's going to be forthcoming. I'm not discouraged about how much time I have left.

Samuel Clemens took the long view. He wanted his unexpurgated, unBowdlerized *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* to be published a century after his death in 1910. I waited over 50 years for that book myself since reading the earlier heavily-edited autobiography in the early 1950s. And guess what? Thanks to technology, five years ago I downloaded it onto my Kindle. I've savored it slowly, a few pages at a time, at long, long, long, long last.



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Per the Mark Twain House and Museum: "John T. Lewis sits with Mark Twain. Lewis was free-born (that is, not born in slavery) and was a tenant farmer on Twain's sister-in-law's farm in Elmira, N.Y., where the Clemenses spent summers when they lived in Hartford. [Lewis] is considered one of the possible models for Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*."

(www.marktwainhouse.org)

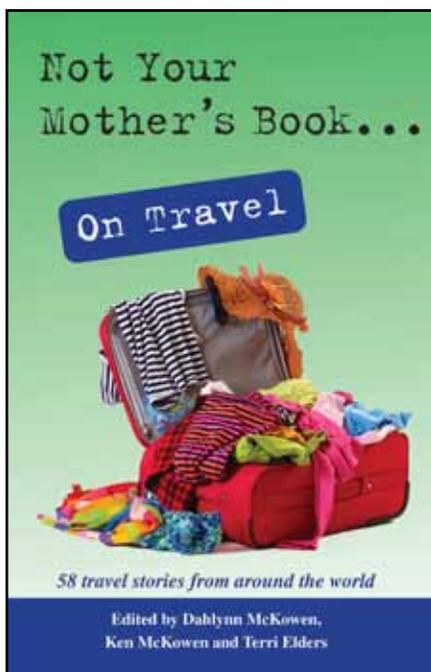
I remember, too, that my late daughter-in-law, Mari Lou Laso-Elders, had the patience to wait for 10 years before learning that her young adult novel, *The Morning Come*, would at last be published by Scholastic Press in the spring of 2017. Mari Lou didn't let that long period wear her down. Instead, she rewrote passages, resubmitted, and in the meantime, wrote the draft of another young adult novel, plus several children's picture books. Like Jo March, she waited until she could do better. And then she did.

May patience pend for you in 2016! It's genius. Ask Michelangelo.



A Trio of Gentle Reminders from Terri

1. I can avoid comparisons. Everyone is different. So F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby* at 29. Who says I can't create something substantial at 78? Laura Ingalls Wilder (*Little House on the Prairie*) and Frank McCourt, (*Angela's Ashes*), began to publish in their mid-60s.
2. I can reframe. I can adopt a different point of view. If my story does not get accepted, that doesn't mean I'm not a good writer. It might not fit the format of the publication. I can spruce it up and send it out again. I polish and resubmit my "orphans" until they eventually find loving homes. Nearly all of them have.
3. I can share skills. Mari Lou Laso-Elders once asked if I'd be willing to teach my techniques to her writing class. She allowed that I might want to keep trade secrets to myself. Nonsense! And so I did. I learn through networking with other writers.



Wow Contributor Terri Elders

Having recently escaped the harsh winters of Colville—a small town located close to the Canadian border in eastern Washington state—**Terri Elders** has returned to her former home region of Southern California. She has been a featured columnist for *The Wow Principles* many times and never fails to introduce the newsletter's readers to a fresh take on the craft of writing. Terri, who is now enjoying a much warmer tropical climate and the kinship of many SoCal writers, is the co-creator of *Not Your Mother's Book... On Travel*. She blogs at <http://atouchoftarragon.blogspot.com>.

