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AROUND HOME

Apologizing to Virginia Woolf

by Nancy Shohet West

I feel like I owe Virginia Woolf an apology.

In college, when I read her groundbreaking essay “A Room of One’s Own,” I was just taking the very first baby steps into the vague idea of a potential career in writing, but it all made sense to me: the idea that to write, a woman needs a room of her own.

Twenty years later, I have that room of my own. But I don’t use it anymore.

My home office is technically our spare bedroom, but it’s set up as both study and guest room, with a glass-topped desk that my husband picked out for me as a birthday present and a comfortable adjustable desk chair. When we first moved to this house, I was amazed at what a luxury it was to have my very own home office.

And when my freelance writing career became more-or-less full-time after I left the corporate sector two and a half years ago, I basked in the novelty of having my very own second-floor room to write in. “It’s just as Virginia Woolf said,” I told myself. “I now have what every woman who wishes to write needs: a room of one’s own.”

So I can’t quite explain why over the past few months I’ve migrated elsewhere. Since the kids went back to school last fall, I’ve been working mostly at the kitchen table. The kitchen table – where women with no extra space in their homes at all set up shop when they need to do paperwork! It’s as if I’m breezing past the laundry room to scrub our clothes against a rock in the stream.

But somehow my office started to feel a little bit too . . . well, austere. It was a place for working, in a formal and compartmentalized way. Basing myself in the kitchen, I can refill my coffee as often as I want to. I can heat up lunch while I’m doing a phone interview. I can keep an eye on the dog if she wants to doze on the sun-warmed planks of the porch. When my 12-year-old arrives home from school in the midafternoon, he joins me. Previously, his arrival home from school meant the end of my work day; once I left my office space, it seemed there was no going back. But now I settle him in with something to eat, he pulls out his homework and we work companionably together for an hour or so.

Now, it seems as if I’m getting more enjoyment out of my surroundings than I did back when I cloistered myself in the upstairs office. Most days, I write in the kitchen, looking out over the yard and the woods beyond, but some days I set up shop in the sunroom and watch the southern exposure of light spreading over the fields that surround our house. Other times I pack up my materials and head up to the public library: I know it makes little sense, but sometimes I concentrate best when surrounded by other people.

Meanwhile, my office sits mostly empty other than serving as accommodations for the occasional overnight guest. I feel bad about the magnificent molded-steel-and-glass desk, and I think often about Virginia Woolf’s claim.

But then I remind myself that her “room of one’s own” can be taken on both a literal and metaphorical level. She meant that women who write need a space in which to do it, but also they need privacy, solitude and time to think. With two children who are in school all day and a husband whose office is 15 miles from home, I have all the privacy and solitude I could possibly want. My “room” is made up of all the elements of my weekdays – the quiet empty house, the lack of appointments and other scheduled events during the workday, the dishwasher and clothes dryer and other myriad automated devices that keep the house running so easily – not just the four walls of my office.

So it’s good to have a room of one’s own, and it’s good not to need one. With heat and sunlight filling the kitchen, coffee close at hand, and the dog happy to be able to lie outdoors in the yard, I’m content with my new workspace. And I feel certain that Virginia Woolf would understand why. Δ



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