

Once Upon an Office Space
January 2020

Originally, I thought it quite unnecessary. I was teaching four different classes and holding office hours. I carried my books, papers, and lunch on my back, like a turtle. I would park outside one of my classrooms, in the midst of chattering students, and sling off the backpack. Bunching it just right, it became a knobby, unwieldy desk top. When eventually I was asked if I would like an office of my own, of course I jumped at the offer. I was even told I could choose the room. I snapped up the corner room, with two windows, each shaded by tall pine trees.

Virginia Woolf insisted we women have a room of our own. To write, to feel the space around us, space that was all ours. In the first weeks, I often entered my office and immediately thought *my own*. Indeed it was. A dear friend in the department loaned me the over-long curtains she had once had in her office, and I bought a second set to complement. With another staff member's help, I found homes for the mostly dilapidated furniture and scavenged for some more pleasant pieces. In addition to my desk, two chairs, and an antiquated filing cabinet, too heavy to move, the room boasted two tall bookshelves, which I promptly filled with not only books but also sea shells and small pictures. I created a small shelf of bricks and a board. There I placed my radio, which fed the room with NPR and the Denver classical music station. A couple of times, I closed my door and burned a cone of incense. The scent stayed, if only faint. Just outside my office, in a square anteroom, I set up a table and chairs for my students as well as the German teacher's students. She and I supplied a basket with mints and candies. My students, with borrowed books from my shelves, nestled into a chair or spread out on the rug and shrugged off the day's demands.

I too shrugged off the baggage of the day. In a cold morning, I closed the door, removed my walking boots and donned professional shoes. If the snow was wet, I gathered a wad of paper towels from the hall bathroom and, in my own privacy, dried my hair and then snuggled into my desk chair, curled a throw around me, and imagined hot chocolate and a scone. Sometimes, there was hot coffee, purchased at the nearby coffee shop. Sometimes, to spark my energy—required to enliven 9:00 am enrollees in a composition class—I danced to Liszt, piped north through Rocky Mountain radio waves.

Because of meetings and my teaching schedules, I usually did not return to my office until the late afternoon. In the morning, the sun shone strongly through my east window, and I prepared a cup of tea. The wan afternoon sun sent its rays through the south window at a low angle, casting the shadow of an old wrought iron fixture that surrounded a frosted glass globe against one of my inner walls. The light fixture was no longer in use, but the shadow's oblique lines suggested an old crone spreading her arms as if to cast a spell. I rather liked her and rued eventual spring's higher afternoon sun. Dusk setting, I realized the cold tea in my cup.

In the late afternoons, the aloneness of my office appealed to me. Nearly every hour of my work week was spent teaching or meeting with my students. Class time and office hours moved me through the days as if I were rapids in a river. I thrived on the busyness, but I needed silence and stillness to slow down and rejuvenate. That is what my afternoons were for. Some of my colleagues darted from their offices at the close of office hours, work completed, but I stayed on

as the halls emptied. I sat, staring out the window or at the titles—good friends—on my bookcase shelves. I breathed slowly, listened to the silence, felt the stillness. This space was mine, no one else's. The halls, the building seemed to retreat, taking with them jolting interruptions. Had there been a knock at the door, had the phone rung, I could make a choice to not answer although often I did and softly informed the intruder that I would soon be leaving and could, eventually at home after a twenty-minute walk, answer an email.

For those long afternoon moments, I was in charge; I had no responsibilities but to lock my door when I finally left. I believe this ability to move and breathe and think in an atmosphere safe from intrusion, be it gentle or harsh, was what Virginia Woolf meant by the room of one's own. One needn't feel the pull to be creative, or active. One needn't even collect ideas, or put pen to paper, as we may believe Woolf wanted us to do. One need only notice the sway of shadows of the trees in the wind.

Ironically, though, it was in this time of mine-ness that I quietly reached for a book or leafed through a publication only to feel my mind jolt just a bit. I then reached for a pen to jot the seeds of a lesson plan that would carry my students that much further. Or—I swung my chair toward my computer and started an email to a son who lives across the ocean, who delights in knowing what I think of in the empty building on a Friday afternoon, when I seize and open a book to the words of a favorite essayist, or when from my south window, I watch a tall young man, similar in poise and posture to my own son, wave delightedly at a group of friends as he cuts across the campus grass.