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Time

Unworkable Home Office

Judith Matloff 04.07.09, 4:00 PM ET

I have the perfect home office. It's perched over the fruit trees in our Harlem backyard. It's quiet as a library, except for the tweeting birds. The light reminds me of Paris. My husband lovingly fashioned the red oak desk to my exact specifications.

But I can't work in my perfect home office. There are far too many distractions. Neighbors barge in. My mother calls. E-mails tempt. So easily am I sidetracked that my cellphone must remain off; I know better than to buy a BlackBerry. And nevermind the cubicle at the university where I teach journalism. There are the same diversions as at home, plus the fact that I'm plunk in the middle of an entire cadre of other writers just as eager to procrastinate.

No, if I want to get any serious writing done I need a public space. Give me a room full of loud strangers any day. I don't mind background noise, as long as people don't talk to *me*. Being surrounded by unknown company is comforting yet hermetic, and, truth be told, it shames me into being productive. After all, you can't just sit in a library doing nothing. That's probably why I was so prolific as a war correspondent, despite the pounding mortars. Strangely enough, I could concentrate. Friends couldn't text me, and I had to ration the costly satellite phone.

Coffee shops are OK, too. I had a good writing stretch when I returned to New York City from working abroad, sampling the various neighborhood cafes. But then I began to exhaust them by becoming too friendly with the baristas. I was so fascinated by the accounts of their sex lives and music careers that I neglected my own work.

Besides, I was spending too much money. A recent budget chat with my husband, John, revealed that I was lavishing \$95 a month on lattes. That's more than an office rental! John is Dutch, so I tried to justify my habit by evoking Continental chic. Didn't European intellectuals hang around in cafes all day?

He looked at me blankly. "Europeans don't *work* in cafes," he explained. "We just talk and drink."

So it was back to the home office. With steely determination, I sat down at my lovingly fashioned oak desk, determined to limit my cyber procrastination to just half an hour. Then, with a deep breath I got ready to focus on my article about foreclosures. But I glanced out the window. And what did I see? Two green parrots. *Parrots in the snow*.

Was I hallucinating? Maybe it was the solitude. Of course I had to poll the neighbors. Did anyone lose a pet? Should we call the police? One thing led to another, including a vigorous group chat about exotic animal sightings.

"Did you hear a wild raccoon was stalking 138th Street?"

"No kidding!"

"And what was that sorry-looking, bedraggled rodent outside my neighbor Ricky's window? A fugitive hamster?"

The conversation reverberated to Facebook. Presto, the afternoon evaporated.

I took the parrots as a portent. It was time to give up the delusion of productivity in my home office. Once again, I was at my wit's end. Was there any recourse, besides abandoning writing? Deeply troubled, I unburdened myself to an acquaintance on the block, a squatter who sometimes borrows books. Maybe I was a tad insensitive, because he lacks not only a home office, but also a home. Still, he's affable and always ready with advice.

As hoped, the man offered a solution: Take the A train. His social circle frequents that subway line because they can doze

uninterrupted on the three-hour-long trip. At 31 miles, the longest trip in the system, maybe that would suit me? "If I can sleep there, surely you can write," he said, recommending that I avoid rush hour.

It sounded promising, especially considering three hours is about the extent of my attention span. So I gave the A train a whirl. Not bad, minus the hard seats and commuters yelling at each other. You can't get more public than this. I efficiently whipped off the foreclosure article and then dreamed up a few more story ideas.

And so, here I am, sitting on the subway somewhere near Far Rockaway, hours from my home office uptown. A woman just spilled her coffee on me. A guy got sick two seats away. No problem. Once I finish the first draft, it's time to turn around and revise on the journey back. Then onward, to the perfect home office to check e-mail but, alas, never to meet a deadline.

Judith Matloff is the author of Home Girl (Random House.) She teaches at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.