One invaluable writing lesson

Back in October I pledged to myself to complete National Novel Writing Month or NaNoWriMo. If you haven't heard of it, it's an annual event where the goal is to write 50,000 words during November. People self-monitor and track their word count on the NaNoWriMo website. Once the "novel" is done, you upload the document for "validation." And if you indeed wrote the 50K words, then you are labeled a "winner." Although you can order a winner t-shirt (and pay for it), there are no prizes. The only reward you get is self-satisfaction.

Try, try again?

I had tried to complete NaNoWriMo once before, and only got to about 9,000 words. This time, I made it all the way to 20,000. I wasn't even half-way through and I only had about 10 days left. The website helpfully reminded me that to complete the "novel," I would have to write at least 3,000 words a day or, if I stayed at the pace I was going, I would finish sometime at the end of December or early January. It was then that I realized that I simply didn't have it in me.

The "novel" I was writing was not compelling. I did not have a sense of how to keep the plot (such as it was) moving forward. And here's the thing: Novels are not a bunch of words strung together to beat the clock.

What's a novel, really?

In fact, the word novel has two meanings. As an adjective, novel means new and fresh. As a noun, Merriam-Webster defines novel as "an invented prose narrative that is usually long and complex and deals especially with human experience through a usually connected sequence of events." If we put both definitions together, a novel should be a new, fresh, and long narrative or story.

Writing is a discipline

Here’s the good thing about NaNoWriMo: If you develop the discipline to write every day, and if you work toward a clearly defined goal, you will get somewhere with your writing. In other words, you become a writer if you write consistently.

But is writing is more than that

On the other hand: A successful writer has to communicate something specific and has to do it clearly. Just hitting a word count does not make you a writer (certainly not a good writer). It makes you someone who has placed a certain number of words on paper (screen).

You have to tell a story

For me, the big lesson of NaNoWriMo is that writing is not enough. You have to have a story to tell. There’s got to be more than words on a page.

I have always been an avid fiction reader. And doing the NaNoWriMo experiment gave me much more appreciation and respect for published writers. Writing 50,000 words is hard. Writing 50,000 words (or more) that actually are interesting, make sense, and share a story is immeasurably harder.

Have you tried NaNoWriMo? If so, what are your lessons learned? Did you write something that was published?