

## **SESSION 5: WRITING WITH IMPACT**

### **Part 1: Writing Lesson**

#### ***THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MASTERFUL AND MEDIOCRE WRITING***

*What does a toilet roll have to do with impactful writing?*

*'We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived.*

*Let it be known, the earth passed before us. Our details are important.*

*Otherwise, if they are not, we can drop a bomb and it doesn't matter.'*

*– Natalie Goldberg*

We can have the best idea in the world (evidence of a powerful Creator at work), but have we *communicated* it well (i.e. is our Editor equally powerful)? Being able to write impactfully is just as important as being able to generate good ideas.

Where an attitude was the key for the Creator, for the Editor there is one core principle that must be mastered. Just as there were three strategies to assist the Creator in getting into its flow, there are three applications of that core principle to help you improve your expression.

But first, what sort of writing do you admire? I often share this passage by John Marsden from his book, *The Journey*<sup>1</sup>:

*But suddenly there it was – the wonderful ocean, fretting at the edge of a wonderful beach. Argus felt mad delight. He did not know what to look at first: the infinity of beach curving away to his left and right, or the infinity of flecked blue stretching out in front of him. He had never known before how something so empty could contain so much. He laughed and laughed. Making wild chortling noises, shedding his clothes and inhibitions, he ran down towards the edge of the water some distance away.*

*When he had thrown off his last piece of clothing he turned and ran backwards, pissing as he ran, wetting the sand in a pattern of huge zig-zags. A series of untidy somersaults then brought him to the ocean itself, and he stood with his feet in the water, watching the exhausted waves froth around his ankles. ‘Fantastic!’ he laughed excitedly. ‘Fantastic! Fantastic!’*

Alternately I might read a passage from John Steinbeck or Ursula Le Guin or Gary Disher or Elizabeth Gilbert or Richard Yates, like this one from *Revolutionary Road*<sup>2</sup>:

*He forked a piece of pork chop into his mouth so angrily that he bit the fork as well as the meat, and as he chewed with all the strength of his jaws, exhaling a long breath through his nostrils to show how self-controlled he was, he realised that he didn’t quite know what he was angry about.*

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<sup>1</sup>Pan Australia, 1988, p 61

<sup>2</sup> Vintage, 2009, p 175

A few participants will have remembered to bring in writings that impress them, and we will listen as they read them aloud. After each reading, I ask: ‘What do you like about that piece?’ and ‘why do you like it?’

It’s a worthwhile exercise to pause for a moment after you’ve read something you appreciate, and ask yourself why. What I’m seeking to elicit from the group is the *criteria* of good writing. An interesting discussion will follow as participants identify what they consider those criteria to be; for example, an engaging plot, convincing characters, striking imagery, beautiful language, a story that flows, feels authentic, affects us emotionally, provokes thought, you can’t put it down, etc. And then I share my criteria for good writing. I look for three things in particular:

### **My Criteria for Good Writing**

- i) **The writing ‘creates a world’:** I, the reader, am transported into the world of the story and I lose track of the world I am physically in.
- ii) **The writing is like a clear glass window:** When a pane of glass is brand new and spotlessly clean, we don’t notice it and our attention is fully focused on the scene outside the window; when it’s scratched or smeared, we notice the glass. Likewise, good writing is like that clean pane of glass: when it’s good, we don’t notice the sentence structure at all – we are 100% in the story. On the other hand, when the writing is flawed, our attention is arrested by those errors of grammar or punctuation or expression, and they detract from our experience of the story.
- iii) **The writing stays with me – it affects me in some way.** I am still thinking about it hours or days or even years later.

So how do we write for maximum impact? Naturally we will need to address grammar and ensure that our expression is correct; I will entrust you to grammar books for that task (unless you want to call upon my editing services), and focus instead on the fine points that distinguish powerful writing.

### THE EDITOR'S CORE PRINCIPLE

Suppose I want to communicate the idea that a character is excited. I have a choice:

(i) I can TELL the reader – eg. “She was excited by my news.”

OR

(ii) I can SHOW the reader – eg. “Her eyes were shining and she was breathing faster, hanging onto every word I said.”

Which has more impact? And why?

People generally agree that statement #1 is flat, static, parental, judgemental. It says ‘I told you so.’ As the reader, we must just accept what we have been told, but, like most children, we prefer to find out for ourselves.

Statement #2 paints a scene; it’s stimulating. As the reader, we are invited to participate in the creation of the scene by applying our imagination.

Which do you prefer: to listen to a lecture or watch a movie?

Most people say they prefer to watch a movie because it’s more colourful, absorbing, entertaining – a film *shows* us the story rather than telling us. (‘A picture tells a thousand words...’) Even those who claim to prefer a lecture usually admit that a good lecture fulfils the same criteria: it’s not a dry list of facts; instead, it’s an entertaining series of anecdotes and stories that bring the facts to life.

Eighty percent of a good movie is visual information; only twenty percent of the information in a film is conveyed via dialogue. Even though book-writers are working exclusively with the medium of language, good writers aim to *show* their story rather than tell it. As readers, we don't want to be told that 'she was excited' – so what! Excite us! Make us feel it.

In fact, the core principle I have been leading to is this age-old writer's adage:

### **'SHOW, DON'T TELL'**

This is how Natalie Goldberg puts it in *Writing Down the Bones*<sup>3</sup>:

*There's an old adage in writing: "Don't tell, but show." What does this actually mean? It means don't tell us about anger (or any of those big words like honesty, truth, hate, love, sorrow, life, justice, etc.); show us what made you angry. We will read it and feel angry. Don't tell readers what to feel. Show them the situation, and that feeling will awaken in them.*

*Writing is not psychology. We do not talk "about" feelings. Instead the writer feels and through her words awakens those feeling in the reader. The writer takes the reader's hand and guides him through the valley of sorrow and joy without ever having to mention those words.*

*When you are present at the birth of a child you may find yourself weeping and singing. Describe what you see: the mother's face, the rush of energy when the baby finally enters the world after many attempts, the husband breathing with his wife, applying a wet washcloth to her forehead. The reader will understand without your ever having to discuss the nature of life.*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 68

## THE 3 ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

### 1. Show Through Action

Life does not stand still. It's dynamic. Everything is in constant change, so convey your character or scene through action, through the changes that are occurring – the twitching muscle, the speed of movement, the scurrying clouds etc. To *show* your scene, look for the action, the movement.



- 'She leaned forward' etc. conveys action whereas 'she was excited' is flat and static.
- 'She was really angry' is a bland telling statement. Boring. But 'she stared at him, cheeks reddening, then reached forward and slapped his face' – ah, now we can see the scene and co-create it with the writer. We're not being told what is happening, as if we were little idiots.

- 'He was tall' is another boring description. How do we know he was tall? We have to take the writer's word for it. But 'he ducked his head as he came into the room' allows us to participate, to conjure our own image of him.

- Compare 'she was impatient' with 'she could hardly keep still, she kept bobbing up and down in her seat, her mind racing, eager to begin.' The latter is far and away a better expression of this idea.

Award-winning author, Murray Bail, describes a visually impaired character in these ways, without ever telling the reader that the man is almost blind:

i) *"'Dogs?' said Kaddok, looking straight ahead. 'They shouldn't be here. What sort of dogs?'"*

ii) *"During the flight he had looked up several times as Kaddok, a pale heavy man, felt his way down to the plane's lavatories, blessing each seat with his hand and occasionally someone's startled head."<sup>4</sup>*

### **EXERCISE: Telling to Showing**

Transform the following static telling statements to active showing statements. For now, don't indulge in a whole paragraph to write your description. See if you can do it very succinctly in one sentence. And remember, your aim is to play with the technique of Showing Through Action rather than to produce polished writing. At this stage, raw is fine.

He was bored.

She was angry.

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<sup>4</sup> *Homesickness* by Murray Bail, Penguin Books, 1980

He was nervous.

He was terrified.

She was ugly/beautiful.

He complained all the time.

He was a good father.

She is such a kind person.

It was a lovely day.

If you are working in a group, listen to each other's sentences. Now that we are in the land of the Editor, feedback is acceptable, but establish permission first and give your feedback in useful, constructive ways – eg. "I really liked...", "I could see..." "I could feel..."

## 2. Show through Sensory Descriptions

How do we experience the world?

Through our senses. So, if you want to draw your reader into your imaginary world, appeal to their senses. Talking about a character's 'onion-smelling hands' will help bring that character to life for your reader; describing a place by its smells is equally powerful. For example, "Summer... smells of the circus; of sawdust and frying batter and cut green wood and animal shit."<sup>5</sup>

And here's another fascinating discovery I made: *In order to understand what we are reading we physiologically go through the experience that is being described.*

For example, just reading the word 'running' will cause us to physiologically access

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<sup>5</sup> From *Chocolat* by Joan Harris, Doubleday, 1999, p. 346.

our experience of running. We do this on very subtle levels that are usually below our awareness, but here are two examples to illustrate this fact: (i) you have probably had the experience of salivating when reading a menu or thinking about food; (ii) you might not read erotica/pornography, but you are probably aware that those entire markets rely on this physiological response in the reader.

Your reader will more fully experience the world of your story if you activate their senses, so when you are writing, check: can what you are describing be touched, seen, felt, smelt, heard or tasted? *Showing through the senses* invites the participation of the reader's imagination and physiology.

A great exercise to practice this skill is 'A Meal I've Eaten'. It just begs for sensory detail!

**EXERCISE: A Favourite Place**

Firstly, choose a place that you love to be – it might be the beach, your bed, a bridge...

Then create a mind map/cluster in which each 'branch' identifies a different sense:

- . Describe the sounds that can be heard in this place.
- . Describe the smells.
- . Describe the tastes (or use simile/metaphor: 'tastes like'/reminds me of...).
- . Describe physical sensations.
- . Describe what can be seen there.

Now you are going to write a few lines drawing on your cluster, and following these three rules:

- i) **Leave the visuals out** of your piece of writing. Describe your favourite place as if you were blind, using the other four senses and leaving your visual notes on your mind map. (Eg. Instead of telling us that ‘the cliffs are crumbling’ you will have to say something like this: ‘my feet slither across the crumbling rock’.)<sup>6</sup>
- ii) **Write in the present tense.** (I walk/I am walking/it is cold...)
- iii) **Stick to the senses.** Don’t go into commentary. (Go straight to describing what you are hearing without bothering with the introductory phrase, ‘I can hear...’; just describe what you are hearing.)
- iv) **Aim to keep your sentences as short and tight as possible.** The effect will be a little like modern poetry.

When you have finished, read your piece aloud. If you have followed the rules, you have probably produced a tight and impactful piece of writing that conveys a sense of immediacy and aliveness. If your piece is not as striking as you would like it to be, hold onto it because the next exercise will probably make all the difference.

### **A FINAL WORD ABOUT OUR SENSES**

It might seem that we are going through life unconsciously, like automatons, but we are actually living with awareness such that we are able to later draw upon our experiences and reveal details that we hadn’t even realised we were noticing. A

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<sup>6</sup> If you’re wondering why I suggested that you leave the visuals out, it is simply because we over-rely on them. We are living in a world that is dominated by screens and visual information, and sometimes we forget how rich our other senses are. The novel *Perfume*, by Patrick Süskind, is a wonderful example of a book that explores the olfactory sense so thoroughly that we are almost overwhelmed by odours and scents. And, interestingly, references to sounds, tastes, textures and smells tend to conjure visual images anyway, so nothing is lost.

writer decides to do this as consciously as possible, and to deliberately develop the art of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling.



One of my favourite meditations, in fact, is to sit with my eyes closed and concentrate all of my attention on each sense in turn. I begin by gazing around me, resting my attention on one item after another and really looking at it. Then I listen intently, with closed eyes, trying to pick up every sound that I can possibly hear. Then I focus my attention on everything I can feel with my body: hands resting in my lap, chair against my back, feet on the floor, even the position of my tongue in my mouth... Then I breathe in deeply, doing my best to discern the different smells around me. I'm not very good at this, so I often feel quite triumphant when I've managed to identify something, such as the smell of paper, for example, or the scent of cut grass that is wafting in through the open window. Taste can be even harder, unless I've just brushed my teeth or eaten garlic... This is one of the most grounding and calming exercises I know. It helps to bring me present, and is one of the reasons I am so adamant about sensory-specific writing: when I concentrate on the senses in my stories, I am giving myself a mini-meditation. Very healing.

It was long believed that life on earth was a burden and trial and that we must do our best to endure it before we are rescued and sent back to heaven, but mystics teach us that we are here on earth in order to have this sensory experience of materiality and limitation, and, in fact, there is great beauty caught up in the difficulties of the physical world, to say nothing of great sensuality. If you can convey that mixed bag of pain and pleasure, your writing will sing and you will be bringing spirit into matter.

### **THE MASTER STROKE TECHNIQUE: SYNAESTHESIA**

Have you heard the expression – ‘that colour is loud’? Or that something ‘sounds bright’? If so, what you are hearing are examples of synaesthesia, when two or more senses are juxtaposed.<sup>7</sup> ‘Syn’ means ‘together’, and when our senses are ‘crossed’ in this way, the description has a deeper impact. Logically speaking, what we have read doesn't make sense; but at another level it does. It goes ‘straight in’.

Sappho was an ancient Greek poetess from the isle of Lesbos. Most of her poetry has been lost and only fragments remain, such as this: ‘the glowing news went from friend to friend’, and ‘bride, warm with rose-coloured love’. ‘Glowing news’ and ‘rose-coloured love’ are two examples of synaesthesia.

### **3. Show through Detail**

Now we get to the toilet rolls! Go and grab one. How do you think a toilet roll might help you to develop your skills as an impactful writer?

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<sup>7</sup> Synaesthesia is experienced by some people as the production of a sense impression relating to one sense of the body by stimulation of another sense or part of the body. For example, a certain note will produce the impression of a certain colour.

If you find yourself looking through it and noticing that it narrows your field of vision and forces you to notice details, then you are right on target. One of your most powerful tools as a writer is the magic and power of detail.

Consider the line, ‘the woman was sitting in the tram’. As are lots of women, true? So ‘the woman’ is not standing out to us at all. What is going to make that woman interesting to your reader? Suppose we now ZOOM IN and get a close-up: ‘the woman was sitting in the tram and biting her nails’. Ah. Now we begin to get something of the individual. If we ZOOM IN even further, we discover that ‘the woman was sitting in the tram, biting her nails, and thinking about the argument she had last night with her husband.’ Now we have someone much more interesting. As the reader, we are moved to wonder, to ask questions: What was the argument about? Is it serious? What will happen next?

The key to good writing is moving your readers to care about your characters and situations, and details help to stimulate that caring. If a Hitler, for example, were to be presented with a map of an enemy territory that has only the main population centres marked out, there would be very little preventing him from pointing to one of those cities and saying, “Bomb that one”. But if he were to land in that city, walk the streets, meet the people, fall in love with someone, meet her family, sit down to soup, marry her, have children, attend primary school concerts... it is much more likely that he would protect that city because he now cares about it. It’s no longer an anonymous dot on a map. The place is meaningful to him because it’s rich with personal details.

To impact your reader, you want to find the *unique essence* of the scene or character – the ‘cigarette stains on her fingers and teeth’ or ‘the flickering

fluorescent light in the bare kitchen’. Our individuality is our most precious thing. ‘Tall with dark hair’ is a too bland description. Half the people in the world might fit that description. On the other hand, you want to avoid the epics: ‘She had ash blonde hair with finely sculpted arching eye brows, the bluest of blue eyes and soft peachy skin with a fine sprinkling of freckles, rosebud lips, and a nose which was her pride and joy...’ Ugh!

Author, Morris Lurie, says: “Show me one detail – choose carefully, just one – that opens, that reveals, that unlocks the character for the reader, that lets the reader feel and see how she touches that pointy nose, say, each time she’s about to tell a lie.”

Here’s a great example of character uniqueness from ‘Mother’ by Judah Waten: “She turned away, her narrow back stooped, her gleaming black hair curled into a bun on her short neck, *her shoes equally down at heel on each side*<sup>8</sup>.” What a masterful use of the art of detail.

In *Chocolat* by Joan Harris, a child’s voice is ‘doughy with sleep’; and later her hand is ‘soft with sleep’; both beautiful observations.

### **EXERCISE: Specific things**

Use your toilet roll to look around and make a list of specific things that you can see through it. Notice the small things – the scratch on a window, the stain on a shirt, the pimple on a nose – rather than generalisations like ‘the man’ or ‘the clock’. What is it about the clock that makes it unique? What specifically do you notice about the man? Artists and photographers are particularly good at capturing these ‘visual

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<sup>8</sup> My italics for emphasis.

moments’ – a chipped china bowl on a wooden table, a rose with a dew drop poised on a petal, a child with her finger up her nose... If you’re working with others, you have my permission to spy on them. 😊

## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MASTERFUL WRITER AND A MEDIOCRE WRITER**

The mediocre writer produces a sentence like this: “He woke up, had a shower, ate breakfast and went to work.” The masterful writer asks the question: **‘how?’** – *how* does he wake up? *How* does he shower? *How* does he eat breakfast? – and in doing so, uncovers the rich experiences that the mediocre writer has completely missed. Perhaps the character woke up out of a bad dream, perhaps he woke to a farewell note from his lover, perhaps his child had climbed into bed with him with a wet nappie... Perhaps there was hair in the shower plughole, no hot water, someone’s undies hanging from the tap... Perhaps he ate last night’s left-over lasagna for breakfast or burnt his toast and set off the smoke alarm... Each of the mediocre writer’s generalisations masks a whole raft of possibilities that make the person or situation unique and interesting.

When we use general labels for a rich experience our writing becomes superficial and peopled with caricatures. This is ‘short-cut writing’, and there is a place for it, but generally speaking, the masterful writer takes the time to honour the details, the individuality of people and places and relationships. If you remember that inside the word ‘SHOW’ is the word ‘HOW’, you will have a quick and handy strategy for reminding yourself to go looking for the details that will give your scenes more life and make them memorable.

**SHOW**

**-> How do you know?**

**-> How does it happen?**

**A Mediocre writer approaches**

**A Masterful writer approaches**

**the story from this end ->**

**<- from this end**

= Generalisations

= Details

Tim Winton is an Australian author who is a master of detail. Here's a wonderful excerpt from his story 'My Father's Axe'<sup>9</sup>:

*I used to watch him chop with [the axe] when we drove the old Morris and the trailer outside the town limits to gather wood. He would tie a thick, short bar of wood to the end of forty feet of rope and swing it about his head like a lasso and the sound it made was the whoop! of the headmaster's cane you heard when you walked past his office. My father sent the piece of wood high into the crown of a dead sheoak and when it snarled in the stark, grey limbs he would wrap the rope around his waist and then around his big freckled arms, and he would pass me his grey hat with bound hands and tell me to stand right back near the Morris with my mother who poured tea from a Thermos flask. And he pulled. I heard his body grunt and saw his red arms whiten, and the tree's crown quivered and rocked and he added to the motion, tugging, jerking, gasping until the whole bush cracked open and birds burst from all the trees around and the dead grey crown of the sheoak teetered and toppled to the earth, chased by a shower of twigs and bark. My mother and I cheered and my father ambled over, arms glistening, to drink the tea that tasted faintly of*

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<sup>9</sup> From *Scission* by Tim Winton, Penguin Books, 1985, p 23

*coffee and the rubber seal of the thermos. Rested, he would then dismember the brittle tree with graceful swings of his axe and later I would saw with him on the bowman saw and have my knees showered with white, pulpy dust.*

*He could swing an axe, my father.*

What magnificent writing! Tim Winton shows through action, senses and detail, and the scene is vivid and alive and evocative. Not once does he tell the reader how to feel, never does he tell us that this is a special experience; he shows us, and we come away from witnessing that family moment knowing for ourselves that it was special.

Author Richard Yates is another master of the kind of observation that makes writing ring with authenticity and power. Here are a few examples:

*“Shep did what he always tried to do when a great many pieces of upsetting news hit him one after another: he rolled with the punch. He took each fact as it came and let it slip painlessly to the back of his mind, thinking, ‘Okay, okay, I’ll think about that one later; and that one; and that one; so that the alert, front part of his mind could remain free enough to keep him in command of the situation’. That way, he was able to have the right expression constantly on his face and to say the right things...”*

*“Up in the woods behind the house, steaming in the sun, the newly rainwashed earth gave off an invigorating fragrance. The Wheelers and their guest, relaxing in an unexpected camaraderie, had to walk single file on the hill and pick their way carefully among the trees; the lightest nudge of an overhanging branch*

*brought down a shower of raindrops, and the glistening bark of passing twigs was apt to leave grainy black smears on their clothing.”*

*‘It was at times something like this, in the past, that he’d gone out and wrenched the car into gear and driven for miles, stopping at one blue- and red-lighted bar after another, spilling his money on wet counters, morosely listening to the long, fuddled conversations of waitresses and construction workers, playing clangorous jukebox records and then driving again, speeding, eating up the night until he could sleep.”*

*“As she talked she stared in absent-minded fascination at the way the dying sun shone crimson through her husband’s earlobe and made his dandruff into flakes of fire, but her thoughts were hurrying ahead to the evening.”*

*“Ordway thought this over, tilting his handsome head to one side, lifting his brows and curling out his underlip, which looked pink and unpleasantly slick.”*

Here are a couple of examples from *The Untouchable* by John Banville:

*“He grinned at me, showing the gap between his rabbity front teeth.”*

*“We were sitting on deck chairs in the sun in the little back garden below the windows of his rooms at Trinity. Alastair tended the garden himself and was touchingly proud of it. There were roses and snapdragons and the lawn was as smooth as a billiard table. He poured out tea from a blue pot, daintily holding the lid in place with a fingertip... Alastair did a soundless slow handclap. Hartman, frowning thoughtfully at my ankle, ignored him. Alastair suddenly stood up and began fussily gathering the teacups, making a great show of not treading on our toes, and walked*

*off muttering, with a sort of resentful flounce, bearing the tea tray aloft before him like a grievance.”*

‘Honour the details’ is your mantra when writing if you want to be powerful.

One of my teenage writing students was working on a novel of his own about a king and a quest. At one point he wrote, “They arrived just in time to save him.” I gaped at him. You’re going to leave all that magnificent juicy detail out? About their triumph in finding the missing ingredient for the potion that will save the life of their beloved king? About their journey through a town that is already in mourning and already preparing for attack from a neighbouring enemy? You’re going to skip past their walk through the castle without describing the mood therein, and the sense of the king’s bedchamber and his pallor and how he responds as he drinks the potion? You’re going to miss the prince’s vigil all night by his father’s bed and the moment when he wakes, recovered?

’Nuff said.

## **ENERGY**

William Carlos Williams, the poet, said to colleague, Alan Ginsberg: “If only one line in the poem has energy, then cut the rest out and leave only that one line.” And this is the essence of what the Editor is going after: *Energy!*

So here is your Editor’s ‘formula’:

**SHOW don’t tell -> HOW -> ENERGY -> GOOD writing (our outcome).**

If you stick with showing, with providing the ‘how’, your writing will just naturally have energy and therefore be ‘good’. You’ll avoid banality and stereotypes, the mark of ‘bad’ writing.

Interestingly, editing is also an exercise in trust. During the rewriting phase I will feel drawn in a particular direction and follow that path. As I’m re-reading what I’ve written, if something jars, if it draws me back to read it again and again, I’ll know it’s not right. I’ll stop and fiddle with it till it flows and I can read *through* that part without stopping. I call this my ‘clunkometer’– if what I’m reading feels clunky, I stop to rewrite.

#### **EXERCISE: Editing**

Take the time now to rewrite one of your pieces of writing so that you can integrate this material. Read it with the discerning eye of your Inner Editor, looking out for where you have skimmed over potentially rich detail, and SHOW the reader HOW the scene is unfolding, providing sensory-specific, active detail. Tune into your sense of energy and flow...

#### **IS THERE A TIME TO USE TELLING LANGUAGE?**

Yes, of course: for speed. If we were to dive into detail for everything, our story would risk becoming gluggy and slow. We certainly don’t need to know everything, and part of the writer’s art is in knowing which details to reveal. (I don’t mean by this that there are ‘right and wrong’ details but that a writer needs to be sensitive to which details will build, advance and enrich the story, and which will just be unnecessary baggage.)

Popular fiction is fast-paced and action-oriented and tends to offer less detail than literary fiction but it can present stereotypical characters and stories if there is no attention to uniqueness. On the other hand, literary fiction slows down to honour the details but can get bogged down in detail and become too slow and even boring. I believe that the very famous author, Proust, produced sentences that are twenty pages long... The moral of the story is, of course, balance.

### A NOTE RE 'GOOD WRITING'



In a way there is no such thing as 'good writing' as it's all totally subjective. A friend of mine who used to judge story writing competitions told me about the disagreements that she and the other short-listing judges

would have in the process of choosing the winning story. They might agree on the top three but disagree on which is the 'absolute best'. That's because there is no such thing as an absolute standard of 'excellent writing'. It's all subjective; it's just opinion. I've read books that have won major awards and been unimpressed by them. I've read some of my own students' unpublished work and been moved to tears. Just because something has been published, is not an official measure of its quality. NEVER assume that you are not a good writer because someone doesn't like what you've written. It might simply be that your style doesn't resonate with them. (Is Proust's 20-page-long sentence insane excess or brilliant literature? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and literary excellence is judged by the reader.)

This is not to say that your writing might be unpolished and need more work. It's important to be able to receive that sort of feedback, especially when it comes from skilful writers, but don't allow anyone's opinion to put you off writing. How many would-be artists or musicians/singers have been put off because of the thoughtless comment of a teacher or parent? This is about skill, not talent, and if you love it enough, over time you will develop the skill to impress others with your work.

Just remember, though, that many of our mostly widely-lauded writers were widely rejected first. J K Rowling is a recent popular example of this fact, but the list includes famous authors such as Dr Seuss, Stephen King, John Grisham, Ann Frank, Rudyard Kipling, Richard Bach, Judy Blume, ee cummings, and many more whose works were rejected before becoming award-winners, multi-million bestsellers and even classics. Here are a few stories to encourage you:

- Gertrude Stein submitted poems for 22 years before having one accepted.
- *The Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot was rejected multiple times before becoming a major film.
- Best-selling author, Zane Grey, self-published after receiving dozens of rejections.
- Pearl Buck was rejected by all but one publisher in New York.
- Richard Hooker, who wrote the book that inspired the M\*A\*S\*H series and film, was rejected 21 times.
- *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig, was rejected 121 times and is now read by millions.
- *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hanson, was rejected 134 times and is now a multi-million bestseller with its own far-reaching brand.

- William Saroyan received 7000 rejection slips before selling his first short story.

(And I haven't included here the publisher comments that accompanied rejection slips about some of these works, which, in hindsight, are often quite amusing.)

I was sitting in a lecture at the Victorian Writers Centre one evening when a member of the audience asked how the publisher on the panel knew if she was reading something 'good'. She replied that she knew the piece was good by the tingly response in her body. I thought, 'Bullsh\*t. It's completely subjective. 134 publishers didn't ignore their physical tingle when they read *Chicken Soup for the Soul!* They didn't like it, didn't think it would take off. It didn't 'speak to them', so they didn't take the risk. Health Communications Inc. did. And the rest – well, you know.

Perhaps this is a good time to apologise for the fact that there will be no magic bullets in this book, no 'Three Steps to the Perfect Story'. Travelling the road and making the mistakes are how we get 'there' (wherever 'there' is).

If you read the biographies of other writers, you soon find that there is no right way. Each one has a different writing practice, different strategies that he or she swears by. Some write daily no matter what, some write when they feel like it; some plan their work, some discover the story as they go. These and other issues are as completely subjective as the idea of 'good writing'. The only thing we can know for sure is that the journey is about self-knowledge: if something feels bad while you are writing, is that your clunkometer warning you that you have some tweaking to do, or is it just your inner critic talking? Only you can know for sure.

#### **EXERCISE: Observation**

Go into a public place with your notebook and pen. You might choose a café, a park, a train/tram/bus, a laundromat – it doesn't matter. Now look around you with a child's eyes – or, indeed, a foreigner's eyes. Your task is to *record* what you are seeing, to observe, to report what is happening around you: the action and the details and way it all strikes your senses. Don't make it into a story and don't try to interpret what you are seeing. Instead of writing 'she is angry with him' just note that 'she is scowling at him'. This piece will, of course, have to be written in present tense because you are observing what is happening around you *as it is happening*.

I was discussing this exercise with students in one of my writing courses years ago when the Life Drawing Teacher in the adjoining room gave her class an instruction that we heard through the thin partition between our rooms. She said, "Draw what you see and not what you think you see." I grinned at my class and said, "That's exactly what I've been trying to say. Write what you *see*, and not what you *think you see*."

I consider this exercise the most important one in my entire course, and therefore in this e-course, so do take the time to do it. And enjoy it.

P.S. If you're working through this e-course with a writing buddy, do the 'café writing exercise together (if you can): both write about the exact same person at the café, or in the park or laundromat or wherever you are, and then compare what you've observed.

## The Whole-Brain Writing System Map

\* TALENT = Time And Love - Energy, Not Talent \*

### Writing

To create, to generate from nothing

You as CREATOR

Creator goes 1<sup>st</sup> - abundantly!

\* QUANTITY \*

Key: An Attitude of Trust & Acceptance

3 Tools:

i) Clustering or Mind Mapping

ii) Automatic or Free Writing

iii) Writing Marathons

It's about FLOW...

### ReWriting

To improve, to refine

You as EDITOR (not Critic...)

Editor waits, then focuses on...

\* QUALITY \*

Key: A Strategy: SHOW, Don't Tell

3 Tips:

i) Show through Action

ii) Show through Senses

iii) Show through Specific Details

It's about ENERGY!

-> SELF-AS-TEAM <-

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## **SESSION 5: WRITING WITH IMPACT**

### **Part 2: Life Story Work**

#### ***LOVINGLY DWELL ON THE DETAILS OF YOUR LIFE***

*“For a long time it seemed to me that*

*life was about to begin – real life.*

*But there was always some obstacle in the way,*

*something to be gotten through first,*

*some unfinished business, time still to be served,*

*a debt to be paid. Then life would begin.*

*At last it dawned on me that these obstacles*

*were my life.”*

*- Fr. Alfred D’Souza.*

### **MY STORY**

I’ve been talking about fiction a lot, but you can equally embrace details and senses etc. in non-fiction articles or books, and again, if you do, you will make them more lively and interesting for the reader. Over the years I’ve written a number of articles about my journey through life, usually with a focus on relationship or parenting. (Can anyone pick up a virtual theme here?)

‘Unravelling the Person from the Pattern’ is an article about my childhood influences; ‘Rescuing my I’ is an article about coming to value myself; ‘There’s a Woman in My Shoes’ is about – well, it’s obvious; ‘Leg Sleeves and Other Childhood Magic’ and ‘Designer Birth’ are about my kids; ‘The Perfect Partner – Perfect for What?’ and ‘Don’t Give Up on Mr Right – Design Him’ are articles about relationship; ‘Can Anybody Hair Me?’<sup>10</sup> is a whimsical story about having one’s hair (and image) cut. In each of these articles I am honest, sometimes devastatingly honest. (I mean, one of my articles even refers to a dream in which I’m on the toilet... naked...). Each article shares details about my life and is written in simple, conversational language. And each article was healing for me to write.

Maybe the process is healing because we become more objective about our dramas when we write about them; maybe it’s good for us simply because we are expressing ourselves and not locking things up inside; maybe because we gain insights in the process of writing about these things; maybe because we are demonstrating acceptance of ourselves. The theory doesn’t really matter, it’s the result that counts.

**Just as using details in fiction causes the reader to care about your characters and story, acknowledging the details of your life story causes you to care more about yourself.**

The expression ‘God is in the details’ expresses the idea that whatever one does should be done thoroughly. In other words: details are important.

By the way, I’m interpreting ‘God’ here to mean the Grand Organising Design/er that is in evidence in the magnificent order in the world. Intelligently

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<sup>10</sup> Articles in my eBook, *Living with Grace*.

balanced ecosystems, the stunning relationship between foetal development and evolution, bodily systems that mirror each other (did you know that the spine, the iris of the eye, the sole of the foot and countless other body parts reflect *all* organs and body parts?), the relationship between foods and the body systems they support, correspondence between our brain cells and stars in the galaxy... there are



far too many signs of order and intelligent design for life on earth to be merely a series of random events. And it seems to me that such an Intelligence doesn't just set it up and then walk away. I am convinced that

the way we process the world and interact with each other is equally orderly. It might seem that we are failing or alone or making mistakes, but perhaps those things are only the illusions of a limited perception. Perhaps we are never failing, never alone, never making mistakes.

An idea I've come to in recent years is that 'it's all God'; put in other words, 'Where is God not?' If everything is an expression of an original energy, and modern science shows that this is so, then nothing is a mistake, nothing is wrong, nothing is bad, and everything is worthy of love and appreciation. This is not an easy idea to embrace, but the more I consider it, the more I am inclined to agree with it. One quick example of this, which stopped me in my tracks, was the realisation that for someone to help, heal or nurture someone or something else, that other has to be in trouble, lost, sick or deprived. Conclusion? Trouble is also a divine experience. We

can't have Mother Teresas without lepers and we can't have Dian Fosseys without poachers. It must be that those who are most 'broken' and the 'evil-doers' in our midst also fulfil an important function; they are an essential part of the whole. They are as divine and 'of G.O.D.' as healers and saints. <sup>11</sup>

I find it nurturing and enlivening to write about the senses and details, whether I'm writing fiction or non-fiction. In fact, often my troubled experiences make for the most interesting or entertaining reading. Acknowledging those parts of my life seems to help me love and accept my journey and who I am. I wish the same for you.

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<sup>11</sup> Visit the website for more on this topic or direct to [www.drdemartini.com](http://www.drdemartini.com)

## YOUR STORY

### EXERCISE: Observing my life

Choose either a painful or a joyous time in your life story and write about it in extraordinary detail – *not reporting but observing*. Refrain from judgement. Show your experiences through action and detail. Let us, your readers, experience your story with all of our senses. You might find yourself laughing or crying. So be it.

### EXERCISE: And this is the way...<sup>12</sup>

Do a quick cluster to identify some of the things that you do in your life – such as clean the house, resolve an argument, sing a song, weed the garden. Now choose one of those things and cluster it, finding all the little detailed bits that belong to that experience. Begin your piece with the words, ‘And this is the way you...’

This exercise comes from *Natural Writing* by Gabriele Lusser Rico. Here’s an example that I wrote when working through her book during the autumn of 1997:

*And this is the way you wipe crumbs off benches and stack dish washers and scratch at dirt with finger nails; and this is the way you wash clothes, scrubbing at stains and soaking the tough ones overnight; and this is the way you cook three hundred meals a year and soak beans and toss out mouldy fruit and wash and chop and grate; and this is the way you pick and choose among the items on the supermarket shelf and scan for bargains and worry over cents and fume over car parks; and this is the way you chauffeur your family here and there and back and forwards and collapse after doing nothing; and this is the way you pick up games and socks and schoolbags and newspaper and shout and chase after and in the end again pick up; and this is the*

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* pp. 132-133

*way you walk barefoot in the kitchen over sticky patches and gritty grains and step over the dog and taste a casserole that no-one likes and listen to the cartoons playing on the box. And this is the way your life unfolds.*