SESSION 6: BUILDING YOUR CHARACTER

Part 1: Writing Lesson:

THE FOUNDATIONAL CHARACTER

"Stories are engaging because the characters in them are."

– Denise Faithfull and Brian Hannant, author of Adaptations,

A Guide to Adapting Literature to Film[1]

"Only one source is available to you for the material of your fiction. That source is your own experience, your own life, your own memory."

– from Dear Writer *by Carmel Bird*

If you completed the exercise in a public place exactly as suggested, it is highly likely that you have produced a good, strong piece of writing. This is why I say that anyone who applies the (right) principles can be a masterful writer. It's not about talent.

Since it's always valuable to practise a desired skill, at odd moments throughout the day, such as when you are sitting at traffic lights or waiting in a queue, take a 'sensory snapshot' of what is happening around you. Observe the simple facts unfolding around you; take note of your immediate sensory experience;

[1] Currency Press, 2007, p. 124

see if you can pick up some details that you would not have noticed if you had remained on automatic pilot.

When we allow ourselves to 'be with' what we are seeing, hearing, experiencing, we just naturally open a door to original expression; when we write from our 'heads', stereotypes and caricatures sneak in.

I have an article cut out from an old newspaper about Australian cartoonist Marj Millar, which says, 'The characters Marj depicts are usually found in country bars where they don't realise she's at a table discreetly sketching them with pad and pencil'. It must be confessed that, at one level, becoming a writer is about becoming a silent observer/eavesdropper. How else are we to create convincing characters?!

Here is a gorgeous piece of 'poetic prose' that takes a snapshot of a moment, and does so with beautiful attention to action, senses and detail:

Another Long Day

by Kevin Elliot Milam[2]

She says *What story will you read*
me tonight? And what will you feed
me for dinner? I stand beside
her in the kitchen, cutting cracked
wheat bread for her lunch, made
to be brought back home in her red tin
lunch box, sticky from spilled

[2] Published in the Poetry section of Mothering magazine a long time ago… (It's been in my file for ages – not sure what the date is. Somewhere in the 90s.)

lemonade. I cut off both brown curved

crusts, spread jam. I have answered

her *why why why* all day and tried

not to snap. She has been close beside

me since I caught her, elated,

flying headfirst from the big slide.

I peel two navel oranges, seed

a pale honeydew, and dinner is made.

We eat slowly, sitting side by side

on tiny wooden chairs. She tries to hide

her yawns, thinking I will be fooled.

It is late, and she is determined

to avoid her own room. I am tired

enough to let her sleep in my bed.

She grinds her teeth, flops her heavy head

back and forth on my yellow striped

pillow. Before her birth, I dreamed

our life simple, serene, well-ordered.

I never saw this restless joy ahead.

'Another Long Day' is a good piece to use to segué into our session on Character.

Character is what makes or breaks fiction. Character drives plot. You might have a great plot idea, but you're not likely to produce a great work if your characters are weak or uninteresting. "Stories are engaging because the characters in them are," say Denise Faithfull and Brian Hannant, authors of *Adaptations, a Guide to Adapting Literature to Film*. "Originality and complexity lead characters to make unconventional decisions that urge a story in new and surprising directions."

Here's a character piece that I love from 'Getting Ahead' by Tim Winton:

It was three years after Dad died that Mum started to get ideas, and it nearly drove the five of us mad. After dinner, when all the pots and plates were washed, dried, inspected and put away, and the smallies put to bed, Jilly and I would do our homework and Mum would get thinking. She was like a broody hen sitting there in the corner of the sofa on her clutch of ideas, keeping them warm. Dad was the one with all the ideas before that, but all of them were lousy. It took Mum a few nights to come up with hers, and without a word one evening she got up, wrote them on a Scott Towel and stuck them to the door of the fridge.

BE HEALTHY

BE ORGANISED

BE CAREFUL

GET AHEAD

We were dumbfounded. No one in our home had done anything like that before. Soon afterwards, she went out and bought a Dymo labeller (all the rage then) with the savings in the Vegemite jar in the cupboard. And then things started to happen. Labels: warnings, reminders, instructions appeared on everything. WASH HANDS! said the cistern in the outhouse. SHUT DOOR! cried everything with hinges.

On our bedheads adhesive checklists appeared in our absence: who to pray for, duties to be done, cautionary notices. Mum began to develop powerful wrists from punching out those sticky messages. You could hear the grot-grot sound of the pistol-like gadget all over the house.

She was a big woman, my mother. In poor light she resembled an untidy stack of tea chests. She rumbled around the house at night checking us in our beds, not sleeping herself until Mahoney's rooster started to crow. We always liked the Mahoneys despite the rooster. Mrs Mahoney had what Mum called 'a generous bosom'; she was a good neighbour. Mum ironed and mended and we left her in bed when we got up for school in the mornings. She ironed and mended. And three years after the old man turned yellow and died, she got to thinking as well.[3]

Gorgeous. I actually felt worried when I read about the Vegemite jar being raided. That's a great example of how detail causes the reader to care…

SO, WHAT IS 'GOOD' CHARACTERISATION?

Simply, we consider characters to be 'good' when they are arresting, unique, and convincing. Even if we are portraying stylised or fantastic characters, our characters must, at some level, be believable. Lawrence Block is an American author who says, "In order for a piece of fiction to work, its characters must fulfil three requirements: they must be plausible, sympathetic, and they must be original."[4] 'Real' people have strengths and weaknesses, make mistakes, affect others, are affected by others,

[3] Ibid. pp. 15-16
[4] *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit – A Manual for Fiction Writers*, Arbor House, USA, 1981 p 219

often have something at stake – a secret, perhaps. They are rich and complex; certainly not caricatures or stereotypes.

It is often said that writing good theatre is simply 'life without the boring bits', and writing good character is a similar dynamic: our aim is to present characters at critical moments, such as when they are challenged or gaining insight. We want to watch them changing or growing, not waiting in queues, so we tend to leave the 'same old, same old' out of it. Conflict is the stuff of life, and while in our lives too much conflict is draining and damaging, no conflict makes for a boring life in which we are not challenged or tested, and no conflict in literature results in a book being closed and cast aside. 'Another Long Day' might appear to present 'same old, same old', ie mundane daily tasks, but in the midst of those tasks is a moment of realisation that gives way to tender appreciation.

Screenplay writer, Robert McKee, says, "A character is no more a human being than the Venus De Milo is a real woman. A character is a work of art, a metaphor for human nature."[5] Exactly. No queues; moments of truth.

[5] *Story – Substance, structure, style and the principles of screenwriting* by Robert McKee, Methuen, 1999.

There are countless 'personality profiles' out there that one can take to assess one's 'type', but let's operate with the following simple model in an attempt to identify 'character'.

PEOPLE ARE MADE UP OF MULTIPLE 'LAYERS'

First 'layer': What can be observed from the outside

- physical appearance, dress, type of vehicle, type of home; also, our relationships, our actions, behaviours, habits and idiosyncrasies.

Second 'layer': Our inner world of thoughts and feelings that we share to some extent or can be observed, to some extent, by our behaviour

- our thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, cares, hopes, concerns….

Third 'layer': Our deepest driving forces, both apparent and hidden

- our deepest desires, dreams and fears. These are an expression of our *values*, or what is most important to us. These are indicated by what we spend our time, money, energy and resources on, what we think about, dream about, talk about and worry about most.

- our values determine our life purpose and our hidden agendas – the latter make life troublesome and confusing, and make literature interesting and life-like!

- also, secrets, secret lovers, etc. The things we don't want others to know about us. *Our shadow.* Our shadow contains the things we reject, condemn, deny and are afraid to own, whether positive or negative. (We are sometimes so busy admiring others that we neglect to recognise our own skills and value.)

- Our subconscious associations and meanings. From the time we are in the womb (and, some would say, even earlier than that), we are being 'emotionally imprinted' by our experiences and we are forming beliefs that will influence us for the rest of our lives. These beliefs constitute our 'programming', which is another factor that drives our behaviour at very deep levels since it forms our core personal identity. Some people believe that we are ever at the mercy of childhood programming, but I believe that it is always possible to rewrite our programming and change our identity. Dr Demartini's work is particularly powerful in this regard.

For the purpose of the exercise, I am identifying the three 'layers' identified above. There are, of course, deeper levels than this if we include the soul and spirit etc., but these three levels are adequate for our purposes. You see, we are going to 'peel the onion of Character' in this session, and to do so, we're going to begin by studying the character you are most familiar with – YOU!

YOU ARE THE ONION

Perhaps you are now feeling disappointed. You'd like to embark upon the journey of inventing characters rather than dillydally about 'looking within'. Perhaps you are (still) thinking that your life is not nearly as interesting as the characters you have in mind? If so, have a look at the following:

Carmel Bird is an Australian author who has written a marvellous book called *Dear Writer*, in which lessons about writing are conveyed through letters to a would-be author. Here's an excerpt from the first lesson:

First of all I want to sum up your plot:

A group of neighbours hears a scream in the middle of the night. They all imagine something terrible has happened. However there is a simple, sad, but funny explanation for the noise. This is not a very strong plot, and the characters are suffering from being forced into it. You seem to have thought of the plot first, and then put in the characters.

Probably no such thing as a weak plot exists. Yours is not weak because it is common, it is weak because you have borrowed it. I know you didn't sit down and think: 'Now which plot can I borrow today?' These borrowings come to us unconsciously. They sneak up on us, and if we succumb to the temptation to borrow them and force them on our writing, then our writing will suffer.

Only one source is available to you for the material of your fiction. That source is your own experience, your own life, your own memory. The busybody is probably like somebody you know or used to know, and she is strong and vital in the story. Before you put another character or situation down on paper, you must examine your own memory. I suggest you spend a few minutes recalling your early life. Remember the house where you lived when you were six. Remember the people, the food, the toys, garden, sounds, smells. Is there an incident that stands out in your memory of this time? You could continue to think quietly about the distant past and then start to write an account of an incident from your early life. Begin with the words: 'I remember…'

This is the first exercise I give the students who come to class to study the writing of fiction. It is a simple enough exercise, you would think. But some people find it very difficult. Some students are so frightened and shocked by what they remember and what they write and what they discover that they leave the class

forever or don't come back for a very long time. They come to a fiction writing class to write borrowed stories and they find the idea of discovering and exposing their own memories and feelings too much to bear. They seem to be to thinking: 'Oh, I wanted to be Agatha Christie or David Malouf; I didn't want to be me.' The excuses they sometimes give for their disappearances are often interesting pieces of fiction. One student said she was leaving because she objected to the way I was dressed. But many students find that this exercise sets them on a path of self-discovery that can lead to the creation of fiction.

I don't mean to suggest that all fiction is an autobiographical account of events. All I am saying at this stage is that my experience with the students has shown me that a sure approach to the creation of fiction can be made through exploration of the early life of the writer. The memory of early life is only a beginning, only an important first exercise in your development as a writer of fiction.[6]

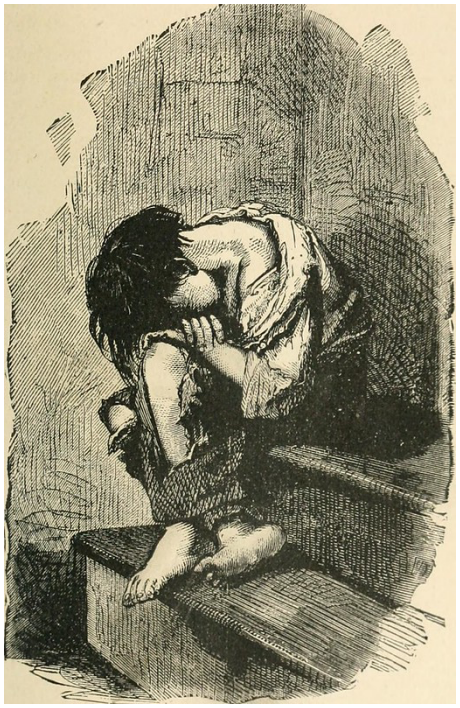
Graeme Kinross-Smith, another Australian author and teacher of writing, says, "You may have already overcome the fear common to new writers that their experience is not 'deep' or significant enough to write about. That is nonsense. What is important about the experience you have written about is that it is yours, unique, and no-one else can write about it as you can. You have the material from which to write – it is sacrosanct, it is yours, and, as we shall see later, if you go too far beyond it, you may strike trouble in convincing the reader."[7]

Steve Manning, an American author, claims that, "Any writer who says their character is not about them would lie about other things too."

[6] *Dear Writer*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 1988, pp 8-10
[7] *Writer – A Working Guide for New Writers*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

This doesn't mean all characters you write about must be 'like you'. You might never have committed a murder, but if you've ever been in a rage or out of control, those feelings might be a springboard into understanding the perspective of a murderer…

American author mystery and murder writer Lawrence Block says, "In my own writing I have found that my most effective viewpoint characters are aspects of myself. This is not to say that they are based on me, or that I share their views or attitudes or patterns of behaviour. Perhaps the best way I can put it is to say that they act as I would act if I happened to be them. In addition, some aspects of their nature and circumstances can often be seen to derive from my own nature and circumstances."[8]



Robert McKee, says: "Lean back from your desk and ask, 'What do I know from personal experience that touches on my characters' lives?' You're writing, let's say, about a middle-aged executive who faces a career-making/career-destroying presentation. His personal and professional life hangs in the balance. He's afraid. How does fear feel? Slowly, memory takes you back to the day your mother, for reasons you'll never understand, locked you in a closet, left the house, and didn't come back until the next day. Bring back those long, fright-filled hours when the dark smothered you. Could your character feel the same? If so, vividly describe your day

[8] *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit – A Manual for Fiction Writers*, Arbor House, USA, 1981

and night in the closet. You may think you know, but you don't know you know until you can write it down. Research is not daydreaming. Explore your past, relive it, then write it down. In your head it's only memory, but written down it becomes working knowledge. Now with the bile of fear in your belly, write an honest, one-of-a-kind theme."

All the characters we create either express aspects of ourselves or draw on our experiences. Let's now do an exercise that will take you through those onion layers. The first layer, you'll recall, is our outer appearance and behaviour, so this exercise is one of observing yourself *from the outside*.

EXERCISE: **Third person observation of self**

Describe your trip to work or home or some other activity in third person. (i.e. 'he grabs his jacket and keys and dashes out the front door…') Describe yourself for a reader who hasn't seen you before. What do you look like? How does your personality show up? How do you move, speak, drive, interact with others?[9]

To do this exercise, you can draw on your innate ability to self-observe. As Robert McKee says, "It's that deep observer that comes to you when you're going through the most agonising experience of your life, collapsed on the floor, crying your heart out… that little voice that says, 'Your mascara is running'."[10]

You might not have been collapsed on the floor in the scene you are about to describe, but there is a silent part of you that was observing whatever you were doing and will be as forthright as you allow it to be.

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[9] An exercise in *Dear Writer* by Dorothea Brande inspired this particular exercise.
[10] ibid; p 145

Have you ever had the thought that your life has been boring? It's an illusion! The next two exercises will show you what has shaped your life and what your resources are.

EXERCISE: **Chapters of my life**

Your task is to write the chapter *headings* of your life. No content, just titles. This exercise invites you to take a 'macro' view, to look at the broad sweep of your life. (The micro view is coming.) Write these chapter headings as if you are plotting out your autobiography. For example:

Chapter One: Sand, Sea and Sailing Boats – A Blissful Childhood.

Chapter Two: The Loneliest Kid in the School.

Chapter Three: The Boy with the Long Nose (Subtitle: I fall in and out of love)

Chapter Four: Rebellion. I Reject the World.

Chapter Five: The Bottom of the Dung Heap.

Chapter Six: Saved!

** There is no limit to the number of chapters. In one course my youngest student, who was 16 years old, had more chapters than my oldest who was 78 years old!*

This exercise is often quite moving to listen to in class. It gives us a taste of a person's entire life, the ups and downs, in just a few strokes of the pen, in just a few moments of listening. Often the listeners urge the writer to now go ahead and write their autobiography! You might feel that way too.

EXERCISE: **Write an inventory of specific things you've done**. This is the 'micro' view exercise. Your aim is to list as many of your experiences as possible – aim for 50. I suggest you do this as a Freewriting exercise – write fast!

Eg*. I have taught Sunday school, I have eaten fish and chips hot out of the paper, I have made love on the beach, I have entered a read-a-thon, I have been married, I have been divorced, I have been around the world, I have studied Politics, I have a pen friend, I have vacuumed the carpet, I have washed a toilet, I have worn nail polish, I have pulled a car apart and almost put it back together again,* etc*.*

This is the exercise in which I remembered that I had once lived, albeit briefly, in a log cabin with no running water, which my boyfriend had built from scratch. My sense of having lived a 'boring life' was gradually undermined as I went more deeply into both of the exercises described above. It's an exercise that has always proved interesting in class as participants revealed some of their more unusual life experiences, and also as they identified some of the ordinary things we can all relate to.

Australian author Alan Marshall took the following approach when writing his autobiographical book, *I Can Jump Puddles*: He made a list of the peaks in his life in simple terms such as 'learning to swim' and 'the day I fought the boy with sticks', and then structured his story around them. This is Alan Marshall describing the process in his own words to a group of children:

"I began by making a list of the peaks in an exercise book. They were the experiences that I felt influenced us greatly and had some effect on our character and on our lives. I numbered them all. I'd write in an exercise book: Number One:

Describe Joe and me bringing water to the dying horse. Two: The time Joe lost his trousers when we were fishing. Three: The fight I had with sticks. Four: The first ride I had on a pony. Five: Falling in love with Maggie Mulligan. And so on. That was the way I did it, until there was quite a long list of peaks, over pages and pages of the exercise book. I think I wrote down about eighty peaks. Then I arranged them in the order in which they happened. But sometimes, to make the book more interesting, I had to alter this order. And after I'd arranged them in the order in which I thought they would be most effective in the book, I began writing it.

"So *I Can Jump Puddles* is really a description of all those things that happened in my childhood which I will never forget. Today, you girls and boys are living a life that is full of peaks. I hope you do not feel you are living a dull life. You're not. You have schoolmates, as I did, and they're interesting. You'll never forget them. The talks you have with them, although you may not know it, are really the stuff of literature. You're living a book that some day you may write. And people reading it will say, what an interesting life this writer has led. It is interesting because you have made it so."

As Dorothea Brande says in *Becoming a Writer*, "You can write about anything which has been vivid enough to cause you to comment upon it. If a situation has caught your attention, to that extent it has meaning for you, and if you can find what that meaning is, you have the basis for a story."[11]

Ramona Koval was discussing Alan Marshall's life on her ABC National radio show, 'Books and Writing' with writer Paul Jennings and John Embling. She said, *"I'm going to read from a letter of the 23rd August 1983 to you, John, and he says, 'When*

[11] *Becoming a Writer* p. 128

you set out to examine your life in detail, you will find that the things that made the greatest changes in you and altered the course of your life, are not major events but trivialities. But they are significant trivialities. The most important thing that happened in my life as far as its effect on my future is concerned, I see it very clearly as if I had seen it in sunshine. I was six years old at the time and had just contracted polio. I was lying in a long, flat pram. I could not turn or twist very much. I just had to sit, and lie, and look at the sky. My mother used to sing me different songs and one of them was called, 'Shush, Go Out Black Cat'. I sang it to myself and then out aloud while I was lying in the pram. It seemed to me a very good song and I was singing it loudly. An old shearer walked toward me. He paused for a moment to listen to my song, intensity in his voice: 'You have the heart of a lion, son.' It was a remark I suppose he forgot almost as soon as he made it. How odd that it should remain with me for the rest of my life. Many a day after that, when I was in hospital or at home in bed, when sadness settled upon me, I would hear his voice, 'You have the heart of a lion, son.' I often wonder at the remarks I remember, but when I think about them, it is not so amazing, because they are more than just remarks. They were really a clear and loud bugle call to stand up to what was coming to me and fight. I wanted to earn the title of a boy with the heart of a lion."

So do realise that this stuff you've just poured onto paper (or screen) is gold – writer's gold. Treasure it – it is your source material. Each of these points is a doorway into a story, and, as you will have gathered from all the quotes above, your personal experience gives your writing the power of authenticity. The jellyfish sting I received while swimming in the ocean at Cinqueterre in Italy might have hurt but it gave me an experience I can now describe authentically. Similarly, all the

relationship problems I have faced in my life have both enabled me to grow and given me content that I can use in stories and articles.

Since that is the case, I urge you to live a rich life. Give yourself as many new experiences as you can, since they provide your raw material. Whatever you *know* truly, deeply, from personal experience, IS your power as a writer.

EXERCISE**: 100 Things**

Begin a list of 100 things you would like to do to grow a treasure trove or bank of experiences. They might be places you would like to travel, ways that you would like to travel, classes you would like to attend, languages you would like to learn, people you would like to meet, skills you would like to master… Even simple things like 'walk on gravel in bare feet' or 'apologise to Emily' or 'find seven other (i.e. unfamiliar) routes to get to work'.

Commit to completing at least one of those 100 things by the time you have finished working through this e-course. Those people who lead interesting lives write interesting books.

We talked in Session 4 about the comfort zone, and how multiple spatial viewpoints, as well as temporal viewpoints, develop pathways between our brain cells, thus developing both our intelligence and our intuition. The more new experiences you have, the more you grow your intelligence.

THE SECOND AND THIRD LAYERS

The first three exercises gave us a look at you and your life 'from the outside'. Now we want to move in more deeply, toward the core of you. Words often give us clues

as to the other, deeper meanings they hold, especially when we probe into their roots, such as seeing the connection between 'whole', 'heal' and 'holy'. We began this session by using the word 'character' to mean 'invented people in our pieces of fiction', and very soon we were also speaking about our 'character', those 'mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual'.[12]

What are the experiences that most build or develop our character? It is usually the crises in our lives that prove to be turning points and cause us to make character-determining choices.

Robert McKee makes the point that, "The function of STRUCTURE [of a screenplay] is to provide progressively building pressures that force characters into more and more difficult dilemmas where they must make more and more difficult risk-taking choices and actions, gradually revealing their true natures, even down to the unconscious self."[13]

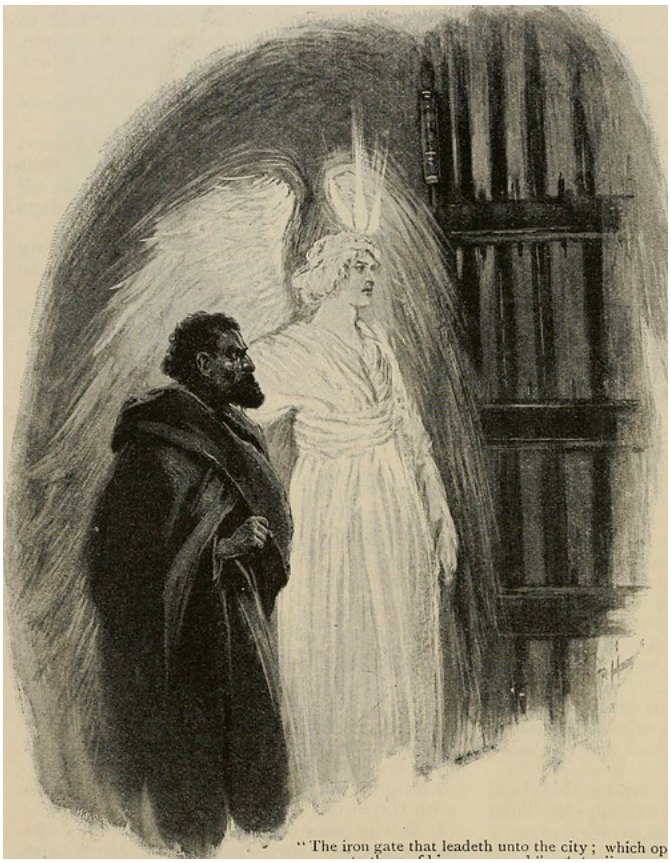
These pressures occur in our lives and, while we may consider them to be painful or nuisances or frustrations or obstacles that get in the way of our living, through them we form our characters and assert who we are. McKee gives the example of Macbeth. Is he a compelling character because of his 'vaulting ambition', or for the reason McKee gives below?

"If Macbeth were merely ambitious, there'd be no play. He'd simply defeat the English and rule Scotland. Macbeth is a brilliantly realised character because of the contradiction between his ambition on the one hand and his guilt on the other.

[12] Webster Dictionary.
[13] Ibid. p. 105

From this profound inner contradiction springs his passion, his complexity, his poetry."[14]

Ancient mystics, including the Oracle at Delphi, have for aeons stressed the importance of this dictum: 'Know thyself', and writing, coupled with honesty, is a sure path to self-knowledge. Robert McKee says, "Self-knowledge is the key – life plus deep reflection on our reactions to life."[15]



EXERCISE**: Turning points in my life**

i) Mind Map or Cluster a list of turning points or influential moments, of most difficult things ever done/faced etc., or moments when you became present to something special/wonderful, such as the birth of a child or a realisation as is

[14] Ibid. p. 378
[15] Ibid. p 15

described in the poem 'Another Long Day'. (I.e. it doesn't have to be a 'negative' crisis.)

ii) Choose one of those experiences and Mind Map or Cluster it specifically.

(Eg. 'breaking up with my boyfriend', 'giving birth', 'failing my final exam', 'first day at the new job', 'dad's death'…) Your branches in this exercise will tease out the DETAILS of what happened. Give one branch to:

* **The context**

- where were you and what time of day or night was it? (eg. twilight at the beach)

- who else was there?

Give another branch to:

*** What actually happened** (NB. *HOW do you know?* Ie give the senses, details, action.)

- what was said, by whom, and how? (eg. 'averting his eyes')

- what was done? ('his clothes were missing from the cupboard', 'there was a note on the dresser')

- what was heard? ('the neighbours were shouting', 'it was silent', 'birds were singing')

And give a branch to this:

*** What it MEANT to you**

- what were your inner thoughts and feelings at the time?

Remember, good writing is the result of this process: If you begin by being honest and accurate in your showing, your writing will be detailed and have energy, and the result is that you will affect the reader.

iii) Write a vignette. Now draw those jottings into a short piece of writing, either poetry or prose. Here's an example from *Natural Writing* by Gabrielle Lusser Rico, in which one of her students, Heide Kingsbury, writes about her mother.

"I remember wanting to tell my mother what happened. 'Mama, listen, Mama, listen to me, I want to tell you…' I remember that she only sat there, staring straight ahead. I wanted her to turn her head and look at me, so I would know definitively she was listening to me alone, not to some other voice inside, a voice louder than mine, more insistent than mine. I put my hand under her chin to turn her head to me. I remember the soft, warm skin, and I remember the pull of her chin away from me, until she finally turned her head. I remember my joy as I felt her turn – and I remember panic as her eyes, unfocused, looked past me. 'What is it, child?' she asked, but I could not remember what it was I wanted to tell her."[16]

[This is actually the second of two pieces of writing on the topic 'My Mother' by the same person. The first piece (below) relies heavily on 'telling'; the second (above) is written six weeks later and demonstrates the use of greater 'showing detail' by honing in on a specific moment.

"My Mother was a caring person, but she was also a person who had many problems, so she didn't pay as much attention to me as I wanted her to. She would stare in front of her a lot worrying about things I was too young to understand, but it made me feel sad and even a little bit rejected. I guess every kid needs to believe she is the center of her mother's universe."

This piece also has value, of course; it's just in a style that conveys information more so than story.]

[16] Ibid. p. 26

iv) Another option is to take your piece of memory and fictionalise it; put the essence of your experience into a third-person invented situation with made-up characters.

v) Improve it. Invite your Editor out to play. Look for opportunities to energise your piece of writing by including more details, action and senses. If you are game, read what you have written to a friend and ask for feedback. Ask your friend to tell you what would help them to hear it, see it, feel it?

EXERCISE: **Observe yourself, your appearance, etc. and then ask 'WHY?'**

'Why do you dress like that? Why do you accessorise like that? Why do you wear your hair like that? Why do you drive that car? Why do you live with that person/those people? Why do you work in that field?' In other words, what core values do your behaviours and choices reveal about you?

I've often been fascinated by the 'types' that people our world – the Goths, the conservatives, the high-powered, the tramps, the 'earth mothers'… What are they revealing about their values by the way they dress and behave? No matter how much we might try to be

individuals, it seems that we all fit into 'types' as well. Those types indicate shared values. We are each both individuals and 'generalisations.'

Graeme Kinross-Smith says "The greatest of dramatists for stage and script have stressed that before you develop the knowledge to create honest and deep characters you should come to know yourself in a way that you may never have attempted before." He has put together a list of 55 questions that help you to drill down into your character, and it's worth asking yourself what values your various choices reveal while you're at it…[17]

EXERCISE: **Observe your style**

One of my writing students, who was going through a very difficult time and feeling like a victim, had a tendency to write in the passive voice. Another writing student, who was prone to running late and speaking fast, seemed to have an aversion to using full stops – her emails were one looooong paragraph peppered with ellipses. I went through a period of often using the words 'a little bit', and realised I was afraid of making a strong statement.

Observe your own writing and see if you have a writing habit that reveals something about your character.

NOW TO GO TO THE DEEPEST LEVEL – YOUR UNCONSCIOUS ASSOCIATIONS!

EXERCISE: **Down the rabbit hole of your unconscious associations…**

This exercise bypasses your logical, controlling, conscious mind and taps into the unconscious for some information about you that can reveal your deepest

[17] Ibid. p. 145

'meanings'. Complete the statements below, trusting your first impulses, which are your Creator at work. Notice when your Editor urges you to change your first reply.

My favourite food is …

If I were a vehicle, I would be…

If I were an animal, I would be…

If I were a colour, I would be…

If I were an item of clothing, I would be…

An embarrassing memory…

Happiness is…

Become your most frequent illness – If it were saying something to you, what would that be? ('I ab his blocked dose. I want hib to…' 'I am her backache. I am trying to tell her to…')

My clearest childhood memory is…

A person I admire… and why.

My most unpleasant emotion… and why… and how it is serving me.

If I had three wishes…

Men are… (if you're a woman), or 'Women are…' (if you're a man).

Life is…

EXERCISE: **My American Indian name**

Perhaps you're familiar with the wonderful creative names of the American Indian tradition. 'Dances with Wolves' was made famous in the movie of that name starring

Kevin Costner. I once decided that if I had an American Indian name, it would be 'Reaches for the Stars'.

I introduced this exercise to my students and one of them sent me this message after the class: 'My American Indian name WAS 'Sleeping Log' so I'm expecting that my new name (following your course) will become something like 'Galloping Wind' or 'Spirit of Wildfire'??? I trust that that's not just wishful thinking.'

This is a great opportunity to tune into the name that touches on your essence. One's name and one's nature have long been linked in various traditions, and in some cultures the true name is never shared with strangers so that its essential energy cannot be harmed. All very thought-provoking…

So… what's *your* American Indian name?

EXERCISE**: My Animal Self**

If you like, pick up on the 'If I were an animal, I would be' line and expand into all the animals you identify with. Cluster each one, finding how you relate, and then write about it.

EXERCISE: **What I know**

List the truths you KNOW from direct personal experience, rather than 'truths' you have been told or have read. (eg. Something my life journey has taught me is that 'it is far more important to honour myself than to keep myself small in order to make

someone else comfortable'. On the other hand, something I have gleaned from the world around me that 'women are impossible to understand'.)

EXERCISE: **Unlovable Self**

Create an imaginary character, giving him or her all of your *least* loved characteristics. (You know, that nose-picking, quarrelsome, procrastinating person who hovers at your elbow and who you do NOT wish to be associated with – least of all, recognised as! Give that character a name that fits, such as Loretta Loudmouth or Sidney Stinkwort.)

EXERCISE: **Lovable Self**

Create an imaginary character, giving him or her all of your *most* loved characteristics. (This is where you get to be the tall poppy without anyone there to cut you down.)

These exercises invite you to explore and play with your own sense of self. The more deeply you know yourself, the more powerfully you will convey your characters. They will strike us as real people rather than merely 'a collection of character tags.' In the words of Lawrence Block:

"It's not uncommon for writers to do a lot of labelling and mistake it for originality of characterization. 'I'm starting a detective series,' a hopeful writer said to me not long ago, 'and I think I've got something really original. My character never gets out of bed before noon, and he makes it a rule always to wear one piece of red clothing, and the only thing he ever drinks is white crème de menthe on the

rocks. He has a pet rhesus monkey named Bitsy and a parrot named Sam. What do you think?'

"What I think is that the speaker has not a character but a collection of character tags. It might work to have a character with any or all of these labels in his garments… [however] it is not the quirks that make an enduring character but the essential personality which the quirks highlight. How that character views the world, how he acts and reacts, is of much greater importance than what he had for breakfast."[18]

ARCHETYPES

Carl Jung considered there to be certain patterns of thought and action that recur over time and across people from all countries. We each have them within us, the four main patterns being our animus (male qualities), anima (female qualities), shadow (denied or repressed qualities) and Self (our spirit or sense of oneness, connectedness, wholeness). Jung also described a range of archetypal characters in our collective unconscious that occur universally, such as the 'the Wise Old Man', 'the Innocent', 'the Hero', 'the Villain', 'the Fool', 'the Maiden', 'the Earth Mother', 'the Sorceress', 'the Seductress', 'the Trickster' – also 'the Mother', 'the Father' and 'the Child', and 'the faithful dog', 'the enduring horse', 'the devious cat'…

It can be quite illuminating to ask ourselves which of those archetypes are most dominant in our lives. They are not stereotypes but fundamental forces that have deep and primitive origins and particular potential for significance in our lives.

[18] Ibid. pp. 219-220

WRITING EXERCISE: **Archetypes: "I am…"**

Allow your gaze to flit across the list of archetypes above and notice which one of them pulls your attention. Can you relate to one or several of those archetypes more than the others? Which deep forces are you dealing with and learning about in your life – the qualities of being stern and controlling or nurturing and soothing? Or are you exploring purity or desire or mystery or power?

Years ago, I participating in a 'Train the Trainer' program. One of the exercises was to deliver a presentation in front of the rest of the students, while being videoed, and then sit on a high stool and receive feedback. The feedback participants were asked to give each other was along the lines of archetypes – we were looking for significant patterns of expression. I remember feeling very naked and vulnerable during that exercise, but it impacted me forever because I could easily own what the other participants saw in me, and when I was in the audience looking at each student in turn, I was also struck by how strong these impressions were. This person was so clearly portraying 'the child' and that person 'the mother' or 'the teacher'. Each one seemed to have a predominant 'act' or essence; an 'I am' energy that was quite distinctive.

Begin a piece of writing with the words "I am…" and explore your archetypal energies, or go for a walk down the street and notice what 'I am' the various people you encounter are projecting.

DIALOGUE

Character drives dialogue. Dialogue is stiff and awkward when it's imposed on the character rather than flowing naturally from the character. When you know your

characters well, their speech will be natural and effortless. Often our first attempts at dialogue are exercises in 'good sentence structure', but that is not how we speak. In an interview in *Dumbo feather*, Justin Abrahams says, "I just stopped there with the Bedouins and completely… you know, backgammon and coffee, the ocean, the most incredible reef, it was just so dreamy."[19]

As I was saying before, you really must do a little eavesdropping if you are going to be a good writer. I've done so quite shamelessly at times. I remember, as a seventeen-year-old, sitting outside a cubicle while my mother was having a foot reflexology session, and busily recording everything the practitioner was saying about her love life. It was priceless!

Paul Jennings is an Australian children's author who said: "You sit on the train and you notice that the kids are saying, 'He goes—she goes,' instead of 'He said—she said.'" This comment highlights the critical value of observation and accuracy to your characterisation and dialogue.

So be alert to opportunities for observing how people speak. During a period when I was dedicated to promoting organic farming, I dropped notes into all the letterboxes in my street, inviting my neighbours to a free organic afternoon tea at my home. I received the following reply from one neighbour, handwritten on a small piece of green jotter paper: 'Thank you for your invitation But I lost my Husband recently and I am not in a mood.'

What does that lovely note tell us about the writer?

She is ethnic and probably an older woman. *'I am not in a mood…'* See if you can put yourself in the mood to write the following three pieces of dialogue:

[19] *Dumbo feather, pass it on*, p. 60

EXERCISE**: Dialogues by Degree**

Write the following three dialogues as play scripts, i.e. just the words that are spoken without the setting or character descriptions or actions. Aim to communicate everything through what is *said*.

i) a **conversation in a milk bar** with the proprietor – i.e. everyday speech.

ii) **a 'generation gap' conversation** incorporating emotional change – i.e. bring together two characters from different generations and see if you can indicate their age differences through their speech. Also tackle a shift in emotion.

iii) **a conversation which *shows* that the people speaking are very close,** without ever telling the reader so – i.e. an exercise in revealing intimacy.

REAL UNREAL CHARACTERS

I guess you might, by now, be itching to write some fictional character descriptions. If that's the case, try these:

EXERCISE: **Character Notes** – *again*

This time use completely unknown (and unknowable) people as a springboard into invented character. Go for a walk down the street paying attention to the people around you. When someone grabs your attention, discreetly make a few notes and when you have the chance, apply the Character Notes exercise to this person. Give them a name, a background, an occupation, relationships, some problems and some dreams…

EXERCISE: **Character Tags**

Write a few 'character tags' on scraps of paper and put them into a box. For example, 'a woman in her 50s', a child, 'a teenager', 'an executive'. Write down some traits, such as 'pompous', 'timid', 'exotic', and put them in another box. Fill another box with 'activities', such as 'writing a book', 'contemplating murder', 'studying secretly'. At random, pick a scrap from each box and construct a character that will be convincing and meaningful from those cursory 'tags'.

EXERCISE**:** **Photos**

Cut out a stack of photos of people from magazines, preferably people you don't know rather than famous actors or political figures. And then write a piece in response to what you see. Ask yourself what the person is thinking or saying, and write their thoughts or speech. As with the dialogue exercise, don't bother with setting the scene or descriptions, just give the words that you feel are being thought or spoken in the moment that the picture was taken.

EXERCISE: **The secrets of the bedroom**

What can be learnt about someone from the objects and order/disarray in their environment?

Psychologist Samuel Gosling conducted a study in which a total stranger walked into a student's dorm room and answered a series of basic questions about the student's character based on the objects in and appearance of the room.[20] The stranger's answers to the questions were then compared with answers given by a friend of the student, and in some instances the stranger's responses were more accurate.

If you have the opportunity to visit the bedroom (or any room) of an unknown person, see what you can guess about their character from their possessions. Or invent a bedroom and a series of objects and decide what they mean about the character.

EXERCISE: **Recording dialogue**

When I was a teenager, I once accompanied my mother to a foot reflexology session. I had to wait outside but the walls were thin… I jotted everything the very colourful Eastern European practitioner was saying – a great lesson in natural dialogue.

More recently I sat beside my bookkeeper as she worked on my tax at her dining table. Her husband was preparing dinner. "Grate?" he asked, out of the blue. "No, just wash and cut in half because sticky," she said immediately, without taking her eyes of her laptop screen. (Later I discovered they were talking about chokoes.) I

[20] From *BLINK – The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* by Malcolm Gladwell, Penguin Books London 2005, pp 34-35

asked her something about my books and she answered, and then her husband asked, “Cold?” and she said “Yes.” (This time they were talking about the temperature of the water.) I was impressed, not only by her ability to multi-task, but by this example of dialogue between two very connected people.

That was a long preamble to a suggestion that you record the conversations you hear around you as a way of practising natural dialogue!

A NOTE REGARDING CHARACTER ‘RESEARCH’

I gather that best-selling Australian author, Monica McInerny, writes ‘back stories’ for each of her characters that run for as many as 70 pages. This is not a requirement for developing solid characters, but something that flows out of the individual writer’s style. Other writers don’t do any conscious character ‘research’ at all; they simply trust their impressions and their intuitive sense of who their character is. As you unfold your stories, play with both approaches to discover which most enriches the process and the result for you.

A NOTE REGARDING THE WRITING EXERCISES

There are lots. I’ve provided more exercises here than are covered during a typical Writing Mastery Course session; just work through them in your own time, at your own pace, dipping in here and there as you wish.

SESSION 6: BUILDING YOUR CHARACTER

Part 2: Life Story Work

REAL PEOPLE

"It's great being a writer. Whenever my life isn't going as I want it and I'm feeling miserable or depressed or angry, those feelings and experiences are valid as research and raw material for future writings."

– Liliane Grace

MY STORY

As a teenager studying Shakespeare's Cleopatra, I was struck by the line that she was a woman 'of infinite variety'. I loved this description, and immediately decided that I wanted to be a woman 'of infinite variety' – in other words, I didn't want to be stuck in a box. To this day I am as comfortable at a hippie down-to-earth gathering as in corporate clothes at a business function. I like this flexibility – that I don't have to limit myself to one form of expression.

Dr John Demartini states that there are some 4,600 character-traits. He has apparently trawled through a dictionary to make that bold claim, and I've decided to take him at his word! Further to that, Demartini states that we each have each trait. There is not a single trait that we can point to in someone else that is not also somewhere in our own personalities, though it may show up in a different form.

Hm. So that nasty person in our life about whom we feel so critical is merely reflecting a trait that is in us… This ties in with the ancient mystical teaching that 'the world is our mirror'; in other words, whatever we see 'out there' is also 'in here'. This idea is expressed in spiritual terms as 'I AM THAT'.

If we go to metaphysics, we find that the qualities we observe in others that 'plug us in' are precisely the qualities we least like in ourselves, and that's why we have a 'charge' on them. Everyone around us is reflecting back to us the aspects of ourselves that we still need to own, and, in Demartini's terms, come to love and appreciate.

I have found this to be a transformational idea when I apply it honestly. For example, at one stage my teenage son was irritating me because he was being particularly unproductive. The clue is the words 'irritating *me*'. As soon as you notice that *you* are getting a rise out of something, go looking for where you do that thing. I finally stopped judging and started looking, and realised that I was actually irritated with myself because I was not working on my novel, *The Mastery Club*. The idea had been kicking around at the back of my mind and on scraps of paper for some eight years. I decided to take my claws out of my son and apply myself to some writing. The result was that I began to immediately feel better and was on my way to producing the book that transformed my life… and he became productive. (Are the people in our lives just playing roles for us?!!)

Over and over again I find that whatever trait I judge in someone else is also right here at home inside me. And, most importantly, whenever I own the trait, it stops bothering me in the other person.

Some time ago I wrote an autobiographical story called 'A Bit of a Tart', in which I explored my sexual history. It presented as fiction, but was very close to the bone, and in the very last sentence of the story there was a gift for me. I was writing about a problem that I was facing at that time in my relationship and I found myself explaining to myself exactly what I was doing. The story ended with the words: "Maybe the tart would be her ally, keeping her alive through the dry years."

Needless to say, I had always been fairly judgemental of people I considered to be tarts. Suddenly, there I was, identifying myself as exactly the thing I most condemned. I even gave my story character the name of someone in my life at the time who I considered very tartish.

Another story, called 'The Prince Who Would Not Grow' was about my parenting. The characters presented as a Queen and a Prince and a Wise Woman, and the story was written in fairy tale format, but it was absolutely about me and my 'difficult' son. Even though I felt that I already 'knew' everything I was saying through the fictional form, it was healing and nourishing to name the parts of myself that I was judging, and to express them gently and kindly in the story.

The phrase 'real people' reminds us that real people have strengths and weaknesses, positives and negatives. No-one can express only one polarity – all traits exist along a continuum, and inevitably if we have one 'end', we have the other as well. It can be disconcerting to have held a certain self-image for years, such as 'shy' only to find that in another context, to which one has been blind for some time, one

also demonstrates aggressive behaviours… But this honest looking and the subsequent process of ownership contribute to the journey of becoming whole.

Remember, also, that the traits outside of us that we admire are also within us. As Thackeray says, "The world is a looking glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own." Anaïs Nin puts it this way: "We don't see things as *they* are. We see them as *we* are."

YOUR STORY

You've already done a great deal of 'investigative work' in the first part of Session 5. Now take it further.

EXERCISE**: Deeper work**

Scan your list of Specific Things you have done, or your Turning Points exercise, or your 'Unlovable Character' to find an experience or aspect of yourself that you would like to explore more deeply, and take those exercises further.

For example, I used to hate drawing attention to myself in a classroom, so even if I was busting to go to the toilet, I would stay put rather than be watched as I rose and walked out of the room. This trait persisted into adulthood and I still sometimes have to scold myself about it. Choose one of your traits and give it a story.

EXERCISE: **Me in my best dreams, Me in my worst nightmares**[21]

Mind map or cluster these two ideas separately, and then write two separate vignettes exploring how you appear to yourself in your best dreams – what you hope and imagine for yourself that is inspiring, how you see yourself when you are confident and successful (whatever that means for you); and then again write about how you appear to yourself in your worst nightmares – what you dread and worry about, how you see yourself when you are ineffective and depressed or edgy…

EXERCISE: **Letter to my younger / older self**

[21] ibid. also courtesy Rico

There are many books written about the Inner Child. Sometimes we become stuck at a particular age where perhaps we experienced something particularly traumatic, and deliberately communicating with our younger self (or our memories of that younger self), can help to unravel painful memories. If you feel you would benefit from writing to your child-self or teenage-self, dive in.

Then again, you might like to write to your future 87-year-old self…

EXERCISE: **Someone I've loved, someone I've hated**

That's pretty straight-forward.

Perhaps, in writing about this person, you'll learn more about yourself. After all, you attracted him or her into your life – for what purpose?

EXERCISE: '**Own the Trait'**

List some qualities that you judge or criticise in others, and go find them in you. I salute you if you take this one on, especially if you go after traits that you particularly condemn.

EXERCISE: Another confronting character exercise is to **step into the shoes of someone in your life, someone with whom you are not very friendly, perhaps, and write a piece about *you* from *their* point of view**. Mm. Gruelling stuff…

But so rich, so healing.