SESSION 7: LANGUAGE AND MOOD

Part 1: Writing Lesson

HOW THE LANGUAGE YOU USE AFFECTS YOUR READER

"A sentence is not just a trail… it's also the walk the writer takes upon it, and after him the reader. For sentences live. They move and breathe. They travel, making themselves up as they go. A sentence – making it and taking it – is the walking, not just the walk."

– *Mark Treddinick,* the little red writing book

What are your memories of grammar? Boring? Pity. Because understanding some subtleties of grammar can make your writing even more powerful – and give you some insights into yourself/your life… So don't skip this session!

Let's jump in by looking at **nouns**. Remember what they are? If you said 'naming words', full marks.

In class you would have been asked to distinguish between common nouns (like boy, girl, dog, table) and proper nouns (like Australia, Botanic Gardens, Japanese). That's all well and good, but to write impactfully, the important distinction to get is between these two categories of noun:

Concrete Nouns – i.e. those that refer to tangible things, like fish, hammer, egg, girl; *and*

Conceptual Nouns – i.e. those that refer to intangible things, usually qualities, like love, fear, hope, generosity; and also abstract things like music.

If we were to write about an experience, let's say the experience of having a driving lesson, we could separate the kinds of words we would use in that piece of writing into the two categories as follows:

Concrete/tangible*: pedals, mirrors, sweat, eyebrows, instructor, hands, feet*

Conceptual/intangible*: excitement, anxiety, nervousness, disapproval*

EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE ON YOUR READER

The important thing to recognise is that these two categories of words have significantly different effects on the reader.

I'll exaggerate for a moment, so that you get my point. Here's a very **intangible/conceptual sentence**: "She longed for the realisation of her hopes and dreams and agonised over her flaws and missed opportunities. It seemed that her life-long anticipation of good things was doomed to remain unfulfilled."

Now here's a **tangible/concrete example**: "Her son was sitting on the floor in his pyjamas, trying to balance a worn plastic plate bearing his last crusts of Vegemite toast on a tower of blocks. The sun shone in his fair hair."

What different effects do you notice?

Do you find that you are 'with' the boy – you can see him clearly and maybe even feel his presence, or perhaps warm to him? This example demonstrates sensory specific action. This sentence *shows*.

The first example is so vague that we have no idea who she is or what she is thinking about or even what she is feeling. This sentence *tells*.

However, several students usually tell me that they find the first sentence quite moving; that it affected their emotions more than the second sentence; so let's examine the conceptual 'telling' style in greater detail:

A 'TELLING' STORY[1]

As Isabella reflected on her life, she saw it as an endless existence full of experiences that taught her, shaped her. From birth when the miracle of life began, her mother nurtured, loved and cherished her. Imprinting of the world that revolved around her taught her to walk, talk, laugh, love. Those early years were enchanted, all was awe and wonder, new and exciting. Wrapped in the safe, comforting care of home and family she was free, nothing could harm her, no threatening force entered the cocoon of devotion she was held in.

Then one of life's certainties occurred: change. Isabella was thrust into a forbidding, unfriendly classroom. Here, she would not be cradled tenderly when she

[1] This story was written by one of my writing students years ago, and was such a perfect example of the 'telling style' that I asked her if I might use it in my classes. Thank you, M!

cried, here she would not be adored as she was by a beloved mother, here were teachers who were threatening, distant strangers. Those school years seemed another lifetime to her now, there was a surreal quality to them, and yet they belonged to her, they helped form who she is. Isabella understood now that change always meant a parting from someone or something.

Moving into adolescence from childhood meant a parting from a sweet innocence and simplicity. Tumultuous brooding, unease replaced a bright, carefree time of certainty. Friendships formed at the beginning of her school years, which held fast through all the joy, laughter and learning of childhood, developed tensions in adolescence.

Isabella began to see a world where pain could rip through peace and harmony, and suffering could have many faces. She saw children as victims of war; their images staring out from newspapers awakened her to the reality and horror of mankind's brutality. Life started revealing to her the myriad ways in which we grow, the ceaseless changing paths of our journey. Through her own grief and suffering, Isabella gained insights enabling her to understand the connection of all life.

What is your response to this story? Do you relate?

I suspect that if you said 'yes', you are relating to YOUR memories of unhappy childhood, not Isabella's. You're not in her story but in *yours*, just as you would have been if you felt an emotional connection to the 'unfulfilled dreams' example above.

The language is so vague that the reader cannot construct clear images of what is being described. Since the images are all cloudy, we refer to our own details to give the story meaning. For example, the phrase 'a forbidding, unfriendly

classroom' is very general. We don't know HOW it is forbidding or unfriendly for Isabelle, so we have to make that bit up. If we have had happy school years, we may find it quite difficult to identify with the story. If we have had our own unpleasant school experiences we can do so reasonably easily, but note this: They will be *our* experiences, *our* memories, *our* meanings, not the character's. We will be in our own story, *not in the writer's story*. And what is our test of good writing? That we enter the world of the story.

A showing story, on the other hand, demonstrates the pain via an incident and moves one to care about the *story characters* rather than being detached from the story and occupied with one's own memories. For example, the words 'unhappy school experience' cause you to refer to your memories for meaning, whereas a phrase like 'the time the boy hit her' (especially if there is more detail than that!) will move you into *her* story.

Here's another example: 'Isabella gained insights enabling her to understand the connection of all life'. That sentence totally frustrated me the first time I read it. WHAT INSIGHTS? I want to understand the connection of all life too!

Whenever you use intangible/conceptual nouns, your readers will go into their own meanings. They will read subjectively, referring to their own associations in order to make sense of the story. When you use tangible/concrete nouns, your readers will stay with you. They will read objectively, and yet this form of writing can be very moving.

Remember Natalie Goldberg's point earlier about 'show, don't tell'? Just because we are using 'feeling' words, like love or joy or grief, doesn't generate those feelings in the reader. The feelings are generated by the use of details and incidents

that convey those emotions much more subtly and powerfully than their names ever will.

Rather than using a phrase like 'she was unhappy', which merely tells, consider this: 'She was the tenth child. Her mother had no time for her. She was brought up by impatient older sisters who preferred to be out with their friends'. Now we are in the writer's story and perhaps beginning to feel a tinge of sympathy rather than simply noting a label of unhappiness.

'Telling' language, with its tendency to speak in generalisations, keeps us distant and detached; 'showing' language reveals intimate detail and, understandably, brings us close. The latter is very grounding. It brings us here and now, into the present. The former sends us off into flights of fancy – even into a kind of reading 'trance'.

It's probably worth adding that telling/intangible language is lazy writing. It allows the writer to take short cuts: 'It was a beautiful day' – five words by comparison with the 20 plus that you would need to do the day justice.

Let's take the short cut phrase, 'the agony and ecstasy of Everest'. Have you climbed Mt. Everest? I haven't, so that phrase will never be very impactful for me. I must accept that comment on face value. If, on the other hand, I read a graphic description of the trials and beauty I'll be right there, at Mt Everest, even if I've never been to the Himalayas before.

Remember: if you want the reader to be in the world of your story, you must show, not tell; you must reveal the concrete details of your story's world and your reader will be irresistibly drawn into it.

Natalie Goldberg urges the reader to 'write about the ordinary':

'Give homage to old coffee cups, sparrows, city buses, thin ham sandwiches. Make a list of everything ordinary you can think of. Keep adding to it. Promise yourself, before you leave the earth, to mention everything on your list at least once in a poem, short story, newspaper article.'

She says: *'Writers write about things that other people don't pay much attention to. … A writers' job is to make the ordinary come alive, to awaken ourselves to the specialness of simply being.'*[2]

This, to me, is why writing is all about love. Pausing to honour details is appreciating those things – and appreciation is the expression of love.

IS THERE ANY BENEFIT TO INTANGIBLE LANGUAGE?

Of course. Everything has two sides.

The benefit of intangible language is that it takes us *beyond* difference. Details emphasise difference: you are black and I am white, you are Catholic and I am Jewish. Generalisations go straight to the sameness that unites us all: We are human. We are brothers and sisters.

Hypnotists use intangible language to grand effect because they are precisely aiming to entrance the listener and to send him or her 'inside' on a search for meaning – personal meanings, the client's meanings, not the therapist's meanings. They deliberately leave out details that might jar their client's process. 'You are walking down a wide stony path with rose bushes on either side' will jerk the listener out of the hypnotic state if actually, in his imagination, he was travelling a narrow grassy pathway blooming with banksias. So, a skilful hypnotist either deliberately

[2] ibid. pp. 99-100

builds the exact image or is 'artfully vague' and uses the word 'path' alone – and allows the listener to fill in their own details.

Our senses are both a blessing and a curse. Sensory specific language is a blessing in its power to evoke images and feelings, and a curse in its focus on difference; go to a higher level of generality and that person of different gender/skin colour/religion/culture is, essentially, a human: a brother or sister.

The telling style of writing is faster paced and so it's often used in popular fiction and storytelling. (It's quicker to say, 'She remained dignified' than to describe how she held her head up while they laughed at her, even though she was dying inside and fighting back tears.) Literary fiction is more likely to use more showing language, and one of the potential drawbacks of that style is drowning the reader in details. If you've ever seen a description coming and just skipped pages till you were past it, you know what I mean! Too much detail slows down the action too much.

HOW MUCH OF EACH DO YOU USE?

That depends on your outcome, the effect you are aiming to achieve.

"***Her children had been with her right to the end. Along with Mum and I. We'd both dropped everything in the last few months and become her nurses****. We washed her and emptied her pan, tended her sores and tried to make her comfortable. Mostly it was impossible, her bones were just about breaking through her skin. We gave her slugs of morphine cocktail and tried to moisten her cracked mouth with Vaseline-coated wool. Poor Mum, beyond crying, beyond exhaustion, ragged with sorrow, sitting at the end of the bed, almost lost in the mountain of pillows, combing her dying daughter's dull, broken hair."*

The bold sentences in this beautifully written excerpt from *Chain of Hearts* by Maureen McCarthy[3] are telling statements. They are followed by a series of specific details and actions that are moving and evocative. You will note that Maureen McCarthy also names the emotion, but she pairs it with such a beautiful, original adjective ('ragged') that it enriches our experience rather than remaining a bare label.

Now read the following poem by Shirley Harrison and ask yourself what it is saying.

Thirty Years

The old girl and I,

he said,

In thirty years have never disagreed.

He's known for a hard boss,

His sons have all left home.

We agree on everything,

he said.

Thirty years married and never a row.

She hears him out

With never a word

To disagree,

And never a light

[3] Penguin Books, p. 98

In her eyes,

And never a laugh

In her throat.

My impression of this poem is that she is crushed by her husband, but instead of being told 'he is mean' or 'she is crushed by him', we are given images: 'sons have all left home', 'no light in her eye'. This poem is written in telling language – we are told about the couple's marriage – but we are told *imagistically* rather than abstractly/through generalisations. 'Thirty Years' invites us to do two things: to learn about this couple's relationship and to consider our own.

Another example of 'imagistic telling' is the line 'later we will take our hats off'. I came across that line in a story about bush walking in the hot sun. We are being told that it is hot, but we receive the information via an image.

Have a look at the table on the following pages for a summary of what we have discussed here, and then try the exercises.

CONCEPTUAL LANGUAGE	**CONCRETE LANGUAGE**
eg. joy, love, happiness, passion, possibilities, past, future, etc.	*eg. brick, book, shoe, dog, sandwich, spade, hair, lipstick, etc.*
EFFECT:	EFFECT:
*** TELLS vs shows.** (applies labels and judgements and arrives at conclusions before the reader = 'lazy writing')	*** SHOWS vs tells.** (incorporates action, senses, specific details = 'good writing')
*** DISTANCE**. Sends the reader away into their own story/meanings.	*** PRESENCE.** Brings the reader here and now. Concrete nouns are grounding.
*** VAGUE.** Conceptual language is often vague and this can make the reading hard work. The reader tends to 'trance out' while reading because of the lack of detail or 'groundedness'.	* **REAL**. Concreteness, ordinary things, reality, grounding.
*** SUBJECTIVE.** There may be less association to the characters the writer creates and more to the reader's own meanings and interpretations because of the vagueness of the words.	*** OBJECTIVE.** The reader joins the writer's story and cares more about the characters and actual story.

* **IMPERSONAL.** Creates a slightly detached style of writing. The reader is less connected.	*** LOVE.** Because of the attention to detail. When you, as the writer, take the time to touch on intimate details, your reader is moved to care more about your characters and places. Caring is love.
* **PREACHY/judgemental**. The reader is told. Very 'parental'. Eg. "It was a beautiful scene." - > WHAT is a beautiful scene? The reader can't visualise anything – just a blank canvas with the abstract intangible words 'beautiful scene'.	* **ENGAGING and MENTALLY STIMULATING for the reader**. Use concrete words like 'river', 'mountain', 'pebble', 'grass', and now the reader can begin to paint your scene in his/her mind. When you show, instead of telling, the reader can discover the subtleties of the story for themselves.
*** GIVES IMPRESSIONS.**	* ie **MORE THOROUGH**.
<u>BENEFITS</u> * Causes readers to **look deeper into themselves** and to their own experiences - to **search for meaning**, so	<u>DRAWBACKS</u> * Emphasis on **difference** -> affirms individuality/our uniqueness but can also highlight differences in a less useful

useful when writing speeches and hypnotic inductions, for example. * Takes you to higher level of generality with emphasis on **sameness** -> affirms universality, 'brotherhood/sisterhood' of humanity.	way – i.e. separation. * Too much detail can be **boring**.

EXERCISE: **Convert a 'telling' story into a 'showing' story**

1. Write about Isabella as a young child, *showing* the cocoon of devotion she is growing up within. Select one or two incidents that would show this, and describe them with much use of sensory specific detail. Perhaps you might choose one incident in which she is happily exploring and her mother is enjoying her, and another incident in which she is hurt or frightened or startled, and how she is nurtured through this experience by her mother.

For example, if we were to take the line 'From birth… her mother nurtured, loved and cherished her', we might rewrite it in a showing style as follows:
"Isa, Isa, Isa," her mother murmured in a voice like warmed honey, a voice that rocked Isabel to sleep so easily, just like the constant motion as she was carried about all day in a sling, pressed close to her mother's chest."

Feel free to use mind mapping or free writing to help you get started. Challenge yourself to write only description and avoid all commentary.

2. Describe, again with plenty of sensory specific detail, her first experiences of school, those experiences that punctured the bubble of safety. In particular, describe a scene in which she is hurt or offended or lonely. Perhaps this is when she forms the belief that change always means a parting from someone or something.

Again, see if you can write only description and avoid all commentary.

3. Now let the reader see Isabella as an adolescent, going through one or two experiences that tear her out of her carefree childhood into the rockier teenage years. Allow at least one of these experiences to involve tension with a long-time

friend as everything shifts in those post-puberty years. NB. See if you can write only description and avoid all commentary!

4. Show the reader Isabella's grief and suffering as a woman. What specific experiences does she have that bring grief and suffering right into her life, and how does she now *feel* about life? How does she now see life?

By the way, see if you can write only… and avoid all…

5. Now what specific event occurs that causes her to change her view of things? How does she gain insights enabling her to understand the connection of all life? How does she come to see beauty and magic in the darker side of life? Give your reader sensory specific details to flesh this out…

EXERCISE: **Make a list of:**

(a) vague 'concept words' that interest you;

(b) specific things in your home, at work, in a favourite place. Commit to mentioning each of them at least once in your life! (cf. Goldberg)

LANGUAGE

Verbs

Most people remember that verbs are action words, and this, in itself, is very important. After all, the Editor's primary goal is to produce writing that sizzles with ENERGY rather than falling flat in a heap of words.

The key here is precision, and the warning, as with nouns, is against laziness. Instead of using words like 'got', 'went', 'walked', ask yourself *HOW* your character is moving and be as faithful to that style of movement as you can. Is 'seized' more appropriate to your meaning? Or 'shot' or 'darted'? Which word is *most* accurate?

Precision of language is one of the things that gives our work the ring of authenticity. One writer described boulders 'raining down'; that made no sense to me – boulders are too heavy! They would crash. Stones might rain down or hail down, but not boulders.

When choosing your words, as well as considering accuracy, think about which word is more interesting; for instance, 'he hauls' or 'lifts' or 'picks her up'? (Obviously the context will count for something.)

Character is revealed through action, so your care with verbs will pay dividends in this arena too. Consider this example from 'The Three Jolly Foxes' by Douglas Stewart: "His mouth takes on that savage, down-curving line that shows when he is heaving the car around a bend."

Lawrence Block gives a terrific example in *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*:

Parker went through the window elbows first, the rotted wood and shards of glass falling out in front of him. He lowered his head, landed hard on his right

shoulder, rolled over twice, and was moving before he was well on his feet. He heard shots behind him but didn't know if they were coming at him or not. He ran for a corner of the barn, and as he went round it a bullet dug into the wood beside his head, sending splinters toward his cheek.

He fell rolled some more, until he was against the side of the barn and out of sight of the house. He put his hand inside his coat and touched an empty holster.

That's a pretty good piece of action writing, but, as Block points out, it's not the way that Richard Stark actually wrote this passage in *The Sour Lemon Score*. Here's his actual version:

Parker dove through the window elbows first, the rotted wood and shards of glass spraying out in front of him. He ducked his head, landed hard on his right shoulder, rolled over twice, and was running before he was well on his feet. He heard shots behind him but didn't know if they were coming at him or not. He ran for a corner of the barn, and as he went round it a bullet chunked into the wood beside his head, spitting splinters toward his cheek.

He hit the dirt, rolled some more, and wound up against the side of the barn and out of sight of the house. He reached inside his coat, and his hand closed on an empty holster.[4]

Brilliant. Instead of 'went' through the window, he 'dove' – that shows us HOW he went. Instead of glass shards 'falling' in front of him, they 'spray' – again, that shows

[4] ibid. p. 203

us HOW the glass falls. Instead of lowering his head, he 'ducks' his head – again, a much more precise showing.

Make friends with your dictionary and Thesaurus and go after those precise verbs. Your reader will be moved, excited, impressed – he will feel precisely what you want him to feel.

Here are more examples of an author taking the time to find the exact verb, the one that would most faithfully show how the action was taking place:

From *Mao's Last Dancer* by Li Cunxin:

"Our dia **waded** into the conversation."

from *Emma Brown* by Clare Boylan:

"All the landscape that was known to me was **tossed** away beneath the wheels."

From *Chocolat* by Joan Harris:

"Lipsticks, compacts, necklaces and rings **spilled** from between her fingers." p 174

Yum.

Remember also to make use of **Onomatopeia**, where the very sound of the word reveals what it is describing. An example is the word 'cuckoo', which echoes the sound the cuckoo bird makes. Also: 'sizzle', 'snap', 'crackle' and 'pop'.

Remember, too, to **be precise**.

The other, more brain-stretching challenge with verbs, is to **be original**. Here's an exercise from Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* that I've been leading my students through for years.[5]

EXERCISE**: Verb Originality**

1. Make a list of 10 concrete nouns (like farmer, scissors, paper, soup).

2. Make a list of 15 specific dynamic verbs (i.e. not 'got' or 'went'!) Goldberg suggests that you refer to professions to come up with specific verbs, for example, the verbs we would associate with a chef or cook would be 'slice, chop, grate, peel, fry, sauté, steam, boil,' etc.

3. Now pick one noun from your nouns list and one verb from your verbs list and 'connect' them in a sentence. The sentence has to work, but it will preferably work in an unusual way, a bit like the synaesthesia examples we were talking about where logically we would not link certain words, but we know what they mean.

This exercise is not easy – it's a bit like being able to see the pictures in those dot-matrix images. Some get into the gear of it more easily than others.

Goldberg provides this example: "Dinosaurs **marinate** in the earth." Beautiful. Original. Unusual. We know exactly what she means but it's such an unconventional use of the word that it strikes us quite deeply.

[5] ibid. p. 87

Billy Joel offers this example in his song, 'Zanzibar': "The waitress always **serves** a special smile." That's a lovely, unusual, yet very fitting use of the verb.

Sonya Hartnett, in *The Silver Donkey*, writes: 'He could see their lean branches and their leaves **riding** the breeze.'

Joan Harris, in *Chocolat*, writes: "Her black eyes **fizzed** with laughter."

Enjoy the perfect verb that Geraldine Brooks writes in this excerpt from *People of the Book*: 'I was just outside the library when I finally caught up with [my lizard]. My hand hovered over his lacquered skin. His tiny heart beat hard. I lowered my hand, and in an instant he **poured** like liquid through my fingers and, shrinking himself somehow flat as a riyal, vanished under the library door.'[6]

In *Pastures of the Blue Crane*, Hesba Brinsmead writes: 'She moved about the house talking above the sound of her record, **unfolding** to Dusty her ideas about farming."

Douglas Stewart, in 'The Three Jolly Foxes' writes this description: 'his hard big belly **rolling** over the narrow black belt.'

'The slam of the door **killed** all sound,' is a great example from *Broken* by Daniel Clay.

Here are a few more from my students: 'the cat smooths its way upstairs', 'the scales measure her pain', 'his teeth wrestled with the steak'.

Now you have a go. (You'll find a longer list of inspiring original verbs below the next exercise.)

[6] Geraldine Brooks is a Pulitzer Prize winning, internationally best-selling author and journalist.

EXERCISE: **Uniqueness**

Something that always inspires me is a writer's ability to describe something in a unique manner, especially when it's something that has been described countless times, such as 'a beautiful day'. Have a go at describing a beautiful day without using any of the clichés or conventional descriptors, such as a blue sky, sunshine, birds tweeting… or choose another topic that is frequently plagued with clichés.

MORE STUNNING AND UNIQUE USES OF VERBS

From 'Not the sea' by Ashleigh Synott:

"His skin **screamed** and itched with burns."

From *Kipps* by HG Wells:

"… **pelting** him with gritty little bits of small talk."

And: “An idea **growing** up in his mind.”

From *All the Beggars Riding* by Lucy Caldwell:

“The shame at what I’d written is starting to **curdle** in my stomach.”

From *Feather Man* by Rhyll McMaster:

“I was live bait in a tin and it was just a question of time before he **threaded** me on a small hook.”

“My father **slides** me a look as he sees me watching from the dining room door.”

“I can’t see myself **rowing** through the huge stretch of water between here and growing up.”

“I can feel the day **breaking** out of its egg and **sliding** onto the pan of bubbly events.”

“The girls **flick** looks at me as if I am a pariah.”

From *Bring up the Bones* by Hilary Mantel:

“The conversation **canters** off in some other direction.”

“Henry likes to stick with men he is used to who were his friends when he was young… They know when he visits the Queen to try and **bounce** a son into her.”

“From time to time the cardinal would **sweep** them out but they would **seep** back like dirty water.”

From *Fatherland* by Robert Harris:

“In the bathroom, the rusted pipes clanked and groaned, the shower **dangled** a thread of cold water.’

From *The Valentine's Card* by Julie Ashton:

"Orla's secret **buttoned** itself back up."

From *Peripheral Vision* by Patricia Ferguson:

"His cries **tore** at her."

From *The Moment* by Claire Dyer:

"Elliott **peppers** answers into the stream of words coming down the line."

"Her face, where he kissed her, is **singing** quietly."

From *Separate Beds* by Elizabeth Buchan:

"The anger that had **smashed** through him…"

"The question was so loaded it almost tipped over."

From *The Last Time I Saw You* by Eleanor Morgan:

"… anger **pacing** around my body."

From *Billie Morgan* by Joolz Denby:

"… sleep **ate** me up."

From *Hide Her Name* by Nadine Dorries:

"But the words had been spoken. They were **crawling** all over her and already inside her."

From *Beatlebone* by Kevin Barry:

"He **unknits** long cold limbs."

From *Astonish Me* by Maggie Shipstead:

"Her expression **curdles** when she sees Joan."

You'll find many original uses of verbs in songs, too, such as the theme song from the film *9-5*: "**Pour** myself a cup of ambition…"

LANGUAGE

Adjective: description of noun **Adverb**: description of verb

Here's a brilliant descriptive paragraph from Blocks' *Telling Lies for Fun & Profit:*

"The tall ungainly woman walked haltingly up the winding tree-lined path that led to the large green-shuttered sprawling old white mansion. Her old arthritic vein-corded hands gripped her silver-topped cane, and its worn brass ferrule stabbed feebly at the unyielding earth with every faltering step she took.[7]

Brilliant? Maybe not. It's rather over-written. It reminds me of the sort of flowery writing my teachers at school seemed to admire, probably because they wanted us to expand our vocabulary.

[7] ibid. p 206

But for impact, it loses points big time. The kind of details contemporary writing admires are the ones that reveal the uniqueness of the person or place; the rest just slow us down too much.

If we took all the adjectives and adverbs out, we'd be left with this:

"The woman walked up the path that led to the mansion. Her hands gripped her cane, and its brass ferrule stabbed at the earth with every step she took."

Now we have some movement, but we've lost something as well. The solution, of course, is balance. What are the most important details to share in your piece of writing? Be selective and precise. Also vary the numbers of adjectives and adverbs that you use. A writer in *Chicken Soup for the Writer's Soul* was told that she was a 'Noah's-Ark writer' because her adjectives 'come in two by two'.

Self-published writer Fran MacDonald threw together this great example of contemporary over-writing: *"He slouched into class, throwing his dirty blonde fringe back from his pale forehead, which highlighted his large, dark brown eyes. Scowling, he threw his tall, thin, perfectly cut frame into his chair."*

Yes, this example earns points for sketching a character we can easily visualise, but loses points for doing it in a self-conscious sort of way. Or is it that we become so conscious of the laboured description that we are popped out of the flow of the story?

"Because one adjective is as revealing as a lightning flash, don't think that ten will make the story ten times as good. There is a law of diminishing returns. Adjectivitis [is] a dread ailment." – Stanley Walker[8]

EXERCISE**: The Three Bears**

To understand this better, I recommend you step into Goldilocks' shoes and describe someone or something, perhaps your bedroom, in three ways:

i) with stacks of adjectives, as per Block's example above (= too hot);

ii) with barely any adjectives or adverbs (= too cold);

iii) then rewrite your piece selectively (= just right).

The other thing to avoid, if you want your writing to sizzle, is judgemental adjectives**,** because they tell rather than showing, eg. 'he was bored', 'she was the happiest person in the world'.

Lawrence Block provides a beauty again: *'She was a very pretty girl, with a cheerful grin and a keen glint in her eyes. Her figure was well-proportioned, her clothing attractive.'*[9] Ugh.

Here's a great character description from *Country Girl Again* by Jean Bedford: *'She heaves herself out of the grubby heap of bedclothes, her flannel nightie rucking up above the enormously fat white legs, a glimpse of grizzled pubic hair between the*

[8] *City Editor, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1934*
[9] ibid. p 209

rolls of abdomen and thigh. She gropes for underclothes, puts on her pants and the huge brassiere before taking off the tent-like gown.

'She picks up a vest, a jumper and a pair of cut-down men's longjohns from the floor where she always steps out of them, and slowly puts them on. Last, the soiled and sweat-stained blue serge sack – she looks at it, it will do another day – and struggles until finally she is covered from neck to elbows to mid calf. She shuffles into the wrecked slippers and goes outside to the washhouse, where she wipes a flannel over her face, neck and hands. She ties her wiry bun behind her fat-creased neck. She doesn't look into the mirror above the basin. She moves painfully on down the dirt path to the dunny and settles gratefully for a long and relieving time.'[10]

Some readers may find this too long, too detailed, too intimate, and that is a question of personal taste. The word 'she' is very heavily used. But what is masterfully done here is that we gain an impression of this woman without ever being told that she is getting on in years, that she is overweight, or that she doesn't seem to have a great relationship with herself ('she doesn't look into the mirror above the basin'). Everything is *shown*.

HOW CREATE MOOD IN WRITING?

You now understand that instead of *telling* the reader 'he was angry' or 'she was bored', *show* these things through sensory-specific details and actions. But there's

[10] Ibid. p 46

another level you can go to in order to really powerfully communicate mood, and that is by understanding and working with the 'body language' of your prose.

When oral communication is broken down into its components, we find this:

Words = 7%

Tonality = 38%

Body Language = 55%

You know that's true because if someone were to snarl "I love you", you would believe their tone of voice and body language far more readily than their words. Likewise, if someone grins at you and bats you across the head affectionately while saying, "you dumb arse!" you'll probably feel loved rather than attacked.

How does this translate to a medium that appears to be 100% words? Well, there's a paradoxical thing happening here. Yes, a piece of writing operates exclusively through words, but the way those words are 'joined' is effectively the 'body language' and 'tone' of your piece of writing. Are the sentences short, sharp, abrupt, punchy and jarring or smooth, drifty, long and vague? The length and style of the phrase conveys the body language, which equates to some 55% in the 'impact' stakes. (You might be recognising a pattern here, because those stylistic elements are all about 'how' a piece is written. The 'how' is far more important than the 'what'.)

The big key to conveying mood in writing is therefore to capture the *rhythms* of speech. To identify those rhythms, ask yourself this: how do people talk when they feel bored? angry? impatient? sad? joyous? grief-stricken? Anger is an easy one to identify – someone who is angry speaks in short, abrupt, punchy bursts: 'Stop it!' 'Give it back!' 'Don't do that!' 'It's mine!' 'You idiot!' Someone who is bored has a

drifty quality to their speech: 'I don't know what to *dooo*…' Applying those rhythms to your dialogue (or monologue) is one thing, but applying them to the entire structure of your piece of writing is the key to conveying mood at an even deeper level.

The power in a communication lies in its degree of **congruence**. This is true for both oral and written communications. We will believe the statement "I love you" far more readily if it is spoken with soft eyes, open body language and a caring tone of voice than if those words are shot at us with hard eyes, evasive body language and a rough tone of voice. This is because the words (or 'what') mirror the tone (or 'how').

Likewise, when we are writing. The body language, or structure of our sentences, conveys the deeper meaning. The structure shows us what is really going on. When the structure mirrors the content, we have a congruent piece of writing that is more likely to affect the reader at a deep level. When we are depressed, for example, our language tends to fall into repetitive tracks; we literally get stuck in ruts of thinking and they are apparent in our expression. A depressed character will convey depression more effectively if both dialogue *and* descriptions show repetitive tracks and 'ruts'.

Listen to the body language of this piece of writing from *The Complete Short Stories of Somerset Maugham*. Does the form mirror the content?

"*He talked as though it were a natural function of the human being, automatically, as men breathe or digest their food; he talked not because he had something to say, but because he could not help himself, in a high-pitched, nasal voice, without inflection, at one dead level of tone. He talked with precision, using a*

copious vocabulary and forming his sentences with deliberation; he never used a short word when a longer one would do; he never paused. He went on and on. It was not a torrent, for there was nothing impetuous about it, it was like a stream of lava pouring irresistibly down the side of a volcano. It flowed with a quiet and steady force that overwhelmed everything that was in its path."[11]

The character being described 'went on and on', and the description goes on and on also. A beautiful example of form mirroring content. This piece both tells and shows us this character.

Here's a description about the Krakatoa tidal wave from *Krakatoa* by Simon Winchester[12]:

"Each of those snared by the Telok Betong wave speaks of running, wildly, panicked, trying madly to stay ahead of the wave, following natives running wildly too; and, in the particular case of the anonymous European writing in the Java Bode*, of running behind a woman who stumbled and dropped her baby and could not abandon it and so was swept away, of running behind another woman who was – somewhat incredibly it must be said – in the very process of delivery as she ran, screaming and bloody, of seeing a man desperately trying to avoid the wall of water by climbing up as high as possible, by running up every slope that could be found, of snatching hurried looks behind him to see, horrible in its immensity, the ever-pursuing wall, which from time to time smashed against some obstacle and broke, disintegrating into huge and dirty grey piles of spray and wreckage-filled foam, but then regrouping and following him always with a roaring restlessness, with an*

[11] p. 854

[12] Penguin Books Australia Ltd. 2003

unstoppable energy, with a dogged and seemingly murderous resolutions such that he could only continue to run, despite being so leaden-legged and air-starved and exhausted, run ever onwards, always impelled by the frenzied gale that howled ahead of the wave, and by the certain knowledge that if he stopped or took a wrong turn that set him downhill rather than up he would be brought down drowned and his body crushed and hurled against he broken walls and jagged edges of spars and smashed glass and masonry that was rising up all around him."

That excerpt is only one sentence – one sentence that rushes with demons on its tail, on all sides and ahead, perfectly embodying the urgency and drama of the moment.

The following story was written by one of my writing students. It's about the time when her family lost contact with her sister, who was travelling overseas. Notice the 'body language' of this piece of writing while you are reading.

Bernie has not heard anything. Apparently there was a boarding pass issued for the flight but that does not mean she was on the plane. I ask her again what the time difference is so that I can calculate it. Add seven hours and take away a day.

The phone does not ring. Impatient I call my mother back. The phone rings out. My mother cannot have just left again. I call the phone company and ask them to check the line. Yes, there is a fault on the line. If it is close I should drive over there and check that the phone is plugged in correctly.

My parents are 20 minutes away but I must do something so I drive over. This information helps. If my parents' phone is out of order my sister may have not been able to get through. She would not know my number off by heart (maybe she had everything stolen.). I arrive and tell them that their phone is out of order. I try on my

mobile. Their phone can call out but does not ring when I call it. My mother dropped the phone a week ago.

Do you agree that the 'body language' of this piece is jumpy? It is comprised of short, staccato statements that accentuate the speakers' frequent changes in direction. What emotional state are we in when we are jumpy and easily distracted, tending to go this way and then that way? The answer is 'anxious', and this piece of writing 'shows' anxiety through its tone and sentence structure.

Now here's another example to consider. Your children might have read the *Alex Rider* series, by Anthony Horowitz, which is about a teenage boy who becomes a spy. In the first book, *Storm Breaker*, Alex Rider's uncle is killed in a car accident, or so we are led to believe. The policemen who come to deliver this news are 'awkward and unhappy' but Alex's feelings are never revealed, and, in fact, those policemen's emotions are, by memory, the only feelings indicated in the entire book. [13]

Why so little emotional expression? Because spies don't show their feelings. They can't be vulnerable. So the structure, a factual, telling style which masks emotion, matches the content, a story about spies. Note also that the adjectives used are judgemental distancing ones – 'awkward', 'unhappy'. *What* is being said and *how* it is being said match.

The Book of Everything is an extraordinarily powerful and very unusual story about a boy whose father is beating his wife. The child, Thomas, is unable to cope with this violation of his own instinct about what is right, or with his feelings of grief and helplessness, so he escapes into flights of fantasy. Instead of being told that he is not coping, we are shown his extreme distress by transitions that occur from the

[13] p. 8 *Storm Rider* by Anthony Horowitz, Walker Books Ltd., London, 2004.

description of simple, everyday, domestic details to wild and unexpected imagery that becomes increasingly absurd and unreal:

Father was silent. Solemnly, he put his fork and knife down on his plate and stood up. He grew taller and taller until his head was higher than the lamp over the table.

Every living thing on earth held its breath. The sparrows on the windowsill choked on their trumpets. The sun went dark and the sky shrank.[14]

This is a beautiful demonstration of a writer showing his character's feelings via imagery rather than judgemental descriptive adjectives, but there is more to its power than that. Someone who is emotionally disturbed tends to exaggerate and distort their experience, often generalising and speaking in absolutes, and author Guus Kuijer demonstrates this superbly by drawing the 'structure' or 'nature' of mental illness right into his content. In other words, the dynamic works both ways.

When Thomas is himself beaten for rudeness, he prays to God to send all the plagues of Egypt to his father. *'God was silent in every language. The angels tried to dry their tears, but their hankies were so soaked through that it started raining even in the deserts.'*

When Thomas falls in love, and the girl in question shows that she also cares for him, *'All over Holland and the rest of the world, far into the deepest tropical regions, every bud was springing open, every blossom peeping out'.*

Another manifestation of anxiety is becoming 'disembodied'. That quality is beautifully expressed in *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates when a woman finds herself talking and talking and observing the sound of her own voice:

[14] Allen & Unwin, 2006, p. 35

Her voice had become the only living thing in Mrs Givings; all the rest was numb.

And actually, her voice reassured them, they'd be surprised at what a really excellent place Greenacres was… The voice went on and on, steadily weakening, until at last it came to its point.[15]

The following sentence from *Life and Times of Michael K,* by J M Coetzee, uses very simple verbs and simple, short-sentence descriptions, because the character, Michael K, is a very simple man. Coetzee takes us right into the simplicity at the heart of his every action, such as in these lines:

A woman was washing a bowl at a garden tap. She looked over her shoulder at him. K tipped his hat. She looked away.

These principles regarding the body language of prose are equally to be found in the writing of non-fiction. If we are writing a report, our language will often be restrained, conservative, general and passive – especially if one is attempting to avoid personal responsibility. As soon as a piece of writing is converted into personal, active language ('I did it' instead of the passive 'it was done'), the writing is much more energetic and responsibility is communicated.

EXERCISE: **Mood**

Choose an emotional state that you would like to explore, and describe a character who is in that mood, being sure to write in the language that matches the mood being described so your form matches the content. Aim for congruence.

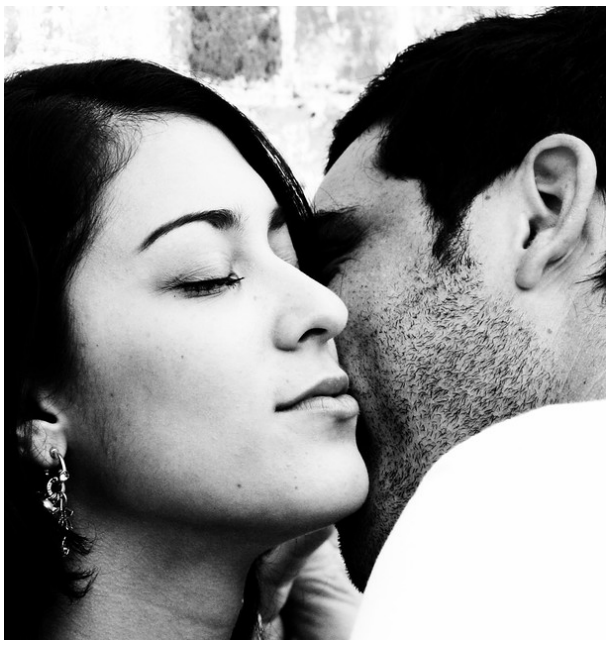
The following is an example from one of my students. The mood is 'tired':

[15] *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, Vintage Books, 2009 (first pub. Little, Brown in 1961), p 161.

Gerry's eyes slid down to his hand. Some small part of his mind wafted out to the digits, but through the fog no signals returned. His eyes drew closed, but this battle he fought. He fought and he won. Just. It's just… A yawn broke his thoughts. It's just what? What was he thinking? Was he thinking about this comfortable chair? His eyes were so heavy. All they wanted to do was droop. His mind was slowing. Slowing. Sleep was coming. Sleep. Sleep.

A NOTE RE WRITING ABOUT SEXUAL INTIMACY

When a couple is attracted to each other and wants to make love, they will be very grounded in their bodies, so make your writing especially sensual. This is where that second Editor's tool of 'showing through senses' is particularly important. Allow feelings, sensations especially, to lead, rather than your character's thoughts. Candles, eyes, breath, thigh, skin, scent… all of these things bring us close and highlight our senses. A beautiful evocative expression is this one, in *Beatlebone* by Kevin Barry: 'chocolate moans'.



On the other hand, if the couple making love is not *in* love, then perhaps thoughts will dominate. Perhaps she will be thinking about tomorrow's shopping list

while she 'does her duty'. As ever, your combination of ingredients must match your outcome if your writing is to be impactful.

Sex scenes definitely reveal character. (In fact, everything we do reveals our character.) The degree to which your story characters permit intimacy, are inhibited or uninhibited, quirky or conventional in their bedroom habits, all these elements help to reveal and unfold the lives of the people you are writing about.

Then there's the issue of sexually explicit material. I know that I've laboured the importance of detail thus far, but it ain't necessarily so when it comes to writing about sex. Being a very private thing, many readers will prefer you to merely hint at what is about to happen and then close the door and tiptoe away, and leave the rest to their imaginations… On the other hand, going into detail helps to dispel taboos. It seems to me that some myths and fears are profitably illuminated by exposure. And, of course, writers of erotica deliberately go there either to titillate or simply to be authentic.

When writing about sex, there will be such a variety of writing styles and such a variety of reader preferences that you certainly can't please everyone, you gotta please yourself…

PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is a marvellous, underrated thing. It's like the traffic signals of your piece of writing. Get it wrong, and the reader will crash; get it right, and the reader *must* follow your signals, *must* feel what you want them to feel. They will have no choice.

As a child, I used to walk to school running sentences through my mind with different punctuation and word arrangements, looking for the sentence that would flow the most easily. I know, mad… (But this is why I say that writing is not about talent; it's about love and the commitment to play with language until one has developed skill and mastered it. In truth, discipline is about being the disciple of your soul.)

A great test of your writing is to read it aloud. Better still, get someone else to read it aloud. When my children wrote essays, I'd always teach grammar and punctuation by asking them to read what they had written aloud and literally, exactly as they had written it, so they could hear where it 'crashed' – where the reader was not allowed to pause, or where the pause interrupted the flow. Your sensitivity to this will grow as you pay more attention to it.

I have to confess that I do tend to pepper my emails with !! and ??? and – and … but if it's a piece of writing that 'matters' I'll go back and take most of them out again. In general, it's best to keep it simple: avoid the dramatic punctuation wherever you can, since the writing itself should convey the energy of the sentence. Full stops and commas will usually do the job.

EXERCISE: **Read aloud**

Read your own writing aloud and listen carefully to how it flows. Or record it and play back to listen. Or ask someone else to read it aloud to you.

THE FOUR SENTENCES, BUILDING BLOCKS OF EVERYTHING

A wonderful writing book called *Sing me the Creation*[16]*,* by Paul Matthews, offers an exercise that really confronts the writer with 'the body language' of written expression. Matthews explains that everything we say or write is bound to be one of the four kinds of sentence: a statement, question, exclamation or command.

STATEMENT: the act of naming, describing, defining the state or the truth of things.

QUESTION: language between you and me; the dialogue.

EXCLAMATION: where inner feeling comes directly to expression in language.

COMMAND: language as power and movement, directing will into the world.

He adds that we find this 'four-foldedness' in mathematics as well, 'in the four principles of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, which need to be thoroughly practised and understood before anything else is possible'.

These four sentence types are also 'four different ways in which we relate to the world. The ancient world referred to this four-foldedness in our human nature as the four temperaments – Choleric (strong, quick-tempered, aggressive, leaders),

[16] *Sing Me the Creation – a sourcebook for poets and teachers, and for all who wish to develop the life of the imagination* by Paul Matthews, Hawthorn Press, UK, 1994, pp. 8-11

Sanguine (easy-going, sociable, graceful, easily-distracted), Phlegmatic (calm, patient, slow, lazy) and Melancholic (quiet, serious, empathetic, brooders).'

The 'four different acts of language', he points out, are also recognisable in the four elements of Water, Earth, Air and Fire. Matthews draws connections between all these states, suggesting the following relationships:

• Command – Choleric – Fire

• Exclamation – Sanguine – Air

• Question – Melancholic – Water

• Statement – Phlegmatic – Earth

EXERCISE: **Select a picture and then respond to the picture in the following four grammatical ways:**

i) JUST STATEMENTS – Make a series of statements (observations), and ONLY statements, about the picture. Eg. 'A woman stands alone. There is a tear on her cheek. The sun is peeping out from behind a cloud. The woman's shoes are dusty.'

ii) JUST QUESTIONS – Ask a series of questions of the picture. Your piece of writing should look something like this: 'Why are you looking so sad? How did you come to be so alone? Where are the people who love you?'

iii) JUST EXCLAMATIONS – 'You look so sad! You're so alone! You've travelled so far!'

iv) JUST COMMANDS – 'Stop being so self-reliant. Go and ask someone for help. Get someone to keep you company. Chin up!'

Matthews says, 'Each of these four acts of language embodies a certain ideal. In practising them, therefore, we are exercising human virtues as well as sharpening the power of our word.

'**The Statement** seeks to be true and clear at least, and lastly, to be wise.

'**The Question** seeks to be receptive. It springs out of genuine interest. (Questions that begin with 'Wouldn't you agree that…?' are really statements in disguise.)

'**The Exclamation** seeks to be the full expression of what the heart holds. It strives for beauty.

'**The Command** seeks to be effective in the world, powerful for the good.'

SESSION 7: LANGUAGE AND MOOD

Part 2: Life Story Work

HOW YOUR OWN LANGUAGE AFFECTS YOUR MOOD/STATE

"In every word you use, there is a power germ which expands and projects itself in the direction your word indicates, and ultimately develops into physical expression. … words are the embodiment of thoughts, and thought is creative; neither good nor bad, simply creative."

– *Genevieve Behrend,* Your Invisible Power

MY STORY

I have been fascinated with language since I was a child. Writing stories was like playing God – at the flick of my pen I could create a person and have him live or die. I could create a world of my own choosing. I was hooked.

When I was a teenager, my mother introduced me to books in which real people who were facing health, relationship or financial crises, changed their language, and in doing so, changed their lives. Again, I was hooked.

I became fascinated by the power of the word; that we can use language to create imaginary worlds **to entertain**, and also use language **to create our reality**, the world we are physically inhabiting. *The Mastery Club*, my first novel, combined those two loves: it is an imaginary story about creating one's own reality.

Perhaps you have heard of Louise Hay, and particularly her famous best-seller, *You Can Heal Your Life*. This book includes a list of health issues and relates them to 'thoughts'. It was one of the early works in what is now a robust science, that of psychoneuroimmunology, which is defined as 'the study of the effect on the mind of health and disease'[17]. I consider it to be the reverse of that: to me, it's the study of the effect on the body of our thoughts and beliefs.

Supposing you find yourself with a backache – you pull out your Louise Hay and look up 'backache', only to find that the antidote is the affirmation[18], 'I love and approve of myself. Life supports and loves me.' Now this makes sense – clearly our backs are about support, just as our eyes are about seeing and insight, our legs are about how we move through life, our elbows and knees and ankles indicate how flexible we are, our heads relate to our thinking and our hearts to feeling and loving. However, I could never apply those affirmations I read in her books (and others like them) very successfully. Perhaps it was because they were written in language that I found contrived. I don't know anyone who walks around saying, 'I love and approve of myself' or 'I accept myself unconditionally' or 'my good comes from everywhere and everyone'. Even though Louise Hay might be correctly identifying the idea that is needed to correct an imbalanced perception, the statements we use need to feel natural and good to us, as Michael Losier and Jerry and Esther Hicks explain in their books on these matters.[19]

[17] Websters dictionary

[18] 'process of affirming or being affirmed'. Contrary to popular belief, I don't hold that affirmations are 'positive statements'. An affirmation is whatever we 'make firm' through repetition. It can equally be a statement like 'I am ugly', if that is what we are 'affirming/repeating.

[19] *The Law of Attraction* by Jerry & Esther Hicks; *Law of Attraction* by Michael Losier.

Robert Fritz, the author of *The Path of Least Resistance*, makes the point that claiming the opposite of a negative thought often activates the universal principle that what we resist persists. Saying 'I am lovable' to correct the belief that 'I am unlovable' actually energises the idea of being unlovable. Kind of along the lines of 'he doth protest too much'…

When I was going through a difficult time, I found myself simply saying, "I deserve better than this." Just 'I deserve better than this', over and over, and that was such a genuine and heartfelt statement that it became quite transformational. If you are finding yourself in a 'hole of your own thinking', do your best to find phrases that support you that also feel natural and true, because what you say determines your mood and your behaviour and your expectations, and ultimately, your destiny…

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a field that I explored in my 20s and 30s, building on my fascination with language and personal mastery. NLP is essentially a very precise and detailed study of how we learn, how we form our beliefs, and how we communicate with ourselves and others. NLP taught me that our language reveals how we represent the world to ourselves, and that most people have a tendency to 'distort' or 'generalise' reality. For example, the statement, 'you *always* criticise me' is a generalisation that allows one to sweep out of consciousness all the times when 'you' has been/is appreciative or supportive rather than critical.

NLP also teaches that often our perceptions are actually 'hallucinations' – they are impressions and beliefs, and are often not backed up by 'reality'[20]. There is

[20] Hm. Reality. That's an interesting concept. I choose to view reality as something that is completely subjective. I believe that we give everything that happens all the meaning it has for us – another person could interpret the same experience or event completely differently. We always have the

a part of the brain, called the Reticular Activating System, which essentially finds more of the same. You will have experienced this whenever you did or bought something new and then found yourself noticing that thing left, right and centre; for example, buying a new red Honda and then seeing red Hondas everywhere, or becoming pregnant and then seeing pregnant women everywhere. Likewise, when we arrive at a belief, for example, 'nobody likes me', we can entrance ourselves with that idea to the point that we literally do not register when people are being friendly towards us.

Dr Demartini takes this idea further. He teaches that every single event has an equal balance of positive and negative aspects, a ratio of 1:1, and that when we can see that balance we are centered, appreciative and loving. Most of us exaggerate and minimise – we might exaggerate the negatives and minimise the positives or vice versa, but we end up with a distorted ratio. The more distorted the ratio is, the more emotional and reactive we are about that event. We are living through a fantasy rather than in reality.

Dr Demartini goes so far as to state that cancer is the result of a wildly distorted perception. Somewhere along the line, a person with cancer made one or more black-and-white judgements and completely lost their sense of balance on an issue. Demartini's *The Breakthrough Experience*™, book and program, guides participants through the process of balancing their perception, 'equilibrating the

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choice to interpret something in useful ways or non-useful ways; i.e. in ways that either empower us or disempower us. So a hallucination might be 'that person is talking about me' when 'that person' merely glanced at you idly before returning to a discussion about something else entirely. The 'reality' in this case is that the person was not talking about you at all; your hallucination is that they were. You can then make it your 'reality' that they are talking about you, even that they dislike you; or you can make it your reality that whatever they are talking about is none of your business and you are fine.

charge', and arriving at a state of love and appreciation. The 1:1 'place' is a healing state in which physical disease cannot exist. This process brings one into present time like nothing else.

I have been very inspired by his work, which I consider to be the most grounding and transformational personal development work that I have ever experienced. That doesn't mean that I find it very easy to apply! But I do consider it incredibly valuable.

YOUR STORY

EXERCISE: **Charges**

Identify an issue about which you are 'charged' and emotional, and see if you can see the other side of the issue. If the issue is something or someone you are criticising, judging or condemning, can you find the benefits? If it's something or someone you are admiring or infatuated with, can you find the drawbacks?

If you are feeling guilty, scattered or worried, those feelings are sure indicators that you are hanging out either in the future or the past but definitely not in the present. The most powerful strategy for coming into present time is to disempower false beliefs by giving them a good shot of Reality, which means finding how every experience is perfectly balanced. The last writing exercise in Session 5 in which you observe something happening around you is another fabulous way of grounding yourself. I also mentioned it as a great centering meditation. Speaking of meditations, you can turn the senses meditation into a writing exercise too. Try that one now.

EXERCISE: **Present Time**

Notice what each of your senses is experiencing right here, right now. And make sure you write in the present tense!

