

## **SESSION 8: FINDING YOUR INNER GENIUS**

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

#### **ORIGINALITY. GENIUS. HONESTY.**

*“Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition.”*

*– W. Strunk and E.B. White*

*“There are no rules in writing. There are conventions, some of them strong, but there are no rules. There’s a convention, for example, that every sentence should finish with a full stop. But once you understand these conventions and all their subtleties, you should consider yourself free to break them.”*

*– John Marsden*

*“Everything I do in this odd business of writing poetry is based on intuition. I have no rules, only patterns that I fall into. Most of my reasons for doing what I do, craft-wise, can be answered, ‘Because it felt right at the time’.”*

*– Judith Minty*

*“To know is nothing at all; to imagine is everything.”*

*– Albert Einstein*

When you arrive for this class, you'll be drawn into an impromptu word association exercise. Maybe I'll throw out the word 'snow' and ask someone to say whatever they associate with that word. It might be 'cold' or 'angels' or 'skiing' – or something much more surprising. We'll move around the group in a circle, each person associating to the word that came before them, and then we'll leap to an even crazier exercise, the One-Word-At-A-Time story. That's right, each person is only allowed to contribute one word. This exercise either falls over pretty quickly or the group gets the hang of it and a strange story staggers out, word by word.

Everyone usually agrees that it's a pretty frustrating, though interesting, exercise. We definitely want to capitalise on the craziness that can emerge when multiple people contribute their ideas, but we also want to be able to follow the story. Some people seem to completely abandon all rules of grammar (which translate as 'common sense') when they are confronted with this exercise, and they produce some very weird sentences. It becomes strikingly clear that we need both creativity (the Creator) and logic (the Editor) for the story to work.

Most people want more control than is possible with only one or a few words, so eventually I relent and allow them Three-Words-At-A-Time – or even a whole sentence! Nonetheless, the same difficulty persists: when we see an opportunity emerging, we want to explore it, so it can be quite frustrating if the person before us detours away from an idea we found interesting. The challenge of co-creating an interesting story with the other participants without getting attached when that story takes a turn away from the themes we find interesting is what makes this exercise so stimulating. However, it's way more satisfying to be able to

contribute a paragraph at a time, or even a whole session. Now, that's a fun exercise to participate in. (I'm actually writing a novel for youth that began as a session-each story exercise with my daughter.)

One of my groups initiated this idea in a class before I had a chance to get to it. They decided on the rules: one person would start writing at home; they would then email their part to the next person who would write the next segment and email both parts to the third person on the second day. By the end of the week, all seven people would have contributed to the story and we could read them aloud in the following class. The agreement was to write approximately a page, and they also decided to each write the final segment so that we could marvel at all the different endings that would emerge. This is a fun exercise that brings up its own challenges, but I'll let you discover them when you tackle it.

Another stimulating exercise that we do on the spot is the old classroom game, 'Fortunately, Unfortunately'. Each person must contribute a sentence of a story, commencing either with 'Fortunately...' or 'Unfortunately...'. For example, the starting person says, 'Yesterday I received a letter from my grandmother saying that she is coming to visit for a few days.' The person sitting next to the 'starter' can choose whether this is good or bad news. Let's say they continue with 'Fortunately that's good news as she is such a good cook.' The next person **MUST** respond with 'Unfortunately' – maybe, 'Unfortunately she has broken her leg so she won't be able to cook'. The next person **MUST** return to Fortunately: 'Fortunately she is also a great storyteller, so she can tell me stories while *I'm* cooking.'...

The challenge here is to keep to the alternating pattern and still have the story emerge in a consistent, logical sort of manner. It's not just about throwing in

wild and random ideas; it does have to make sense and each person's contribution must build on what came before. Once again, we need both creativity (the Creator) and logic (the Editor) for the story to work.

In the aftermath of these exercises, we launch into a discussion about originality.

## ORIGINALITY

In particular, the questions: What IS originality in writing? How does it 'show up'? How do we recognise it? How important is it? Why does it matter? How do you make your writing 'zing' with originality?

The responses to these questions usually reveal that originality in writing is marked by the words *fresh, new interpretations, thought-provoking, unexpectedness, can be uncomfortable to read it, random, no clichés, out of the box.*

Clichés are considered boring and overused, but actually they are phrases that used to be original and have been overused largely because they were considered so effective. For example, 'the river wound like a ribbon through the fields'. Who was the first person to use that phrase?



Someone sitting high up on a hill, perhaps, who was suddenly struck by the association between a river and a ribbon. Their phrase became a cliché because thousands of other writers admired the association, and simply adopted that phrase instead of doing their own looking, noticing, being present, tuning in. Clichés, therefore, are insightful writing that is adopted widely by others. So that's kind of a compliment, however beware of admiring others' writing too much. Webster's dictionary defines plagiarism as 'the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing it off as their own'... ('The spectacles pinched her nose' is another example, and I'm sure you can think of many more.)

Originality is a step in the direction of genius. Natalie Goldberg shares this fabulous story about the risky process of allowing that sort of brilliance 'through':<sup>1</sup>

*Three summers ago David took an intensive week-long workshop with me in northern Minnesota. There were twenty students in the workshop. Several of the students were teachers who had the time off; others were adults who had regular careers in other fields. They all had an interest in writing, though many were timid and very nervous the first morning of class. I gave them the usual pep talk about trusting their own voices and saying what they needed to say. Then we wrote for ten minutes, and went around the circle and read what we had written. People were shaking as they read, not necessarily because they had written anything earth-shattering this first morning, but because it is very naked to put your voice out there for the first time in a group of strangers. People read about their childhoods, their farm, how nervous they were. It was a regular beginning. Then David began in a very loud voice:*

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 127-129

*Masturbation. Masturbation. Maaaaaaaas... Ma! Ma! Ma! Ma! Mastur ba ba ba tion tion tion... And so forth. It certainly woke everyone up.*

*David wrote little else on any other subject for the entire week. Now, on the basis of that kind of writing, one would wonder why I had a great belief in his ability, but I did. Right from the beginning he broke all the rules of syntax, said what he needed to, and continued to trust his own voice to all our amazement. I also felt great energy from his writing and knew if he could harness it – why, he could even move on to other subjects. As he came to writing groups during the next two years, I was impressed by his determination and I loved his sense of humour (though at times I was the only one laughing in the group). It is true that no-one could quite understand what he was talking about but I trusted the energy behind his words.*

*Often I have had students who were very coherent right from the beginning. They wrote complete sentences, were descriptive, detailed and grounded. In Minnesota, in the heart of the Midwest, almost everyone could write like this. I heard stories about tornadoes, winters, grandmothers, but after years of that I felt there was nowhere to go in their writing. Because they did write well, they were unwilling to leave what they knew, to break into new frontiers and crack open their world into the unknown. I remember in one Tuesday-night class, the writing was so basically solid and good, I couldn't shake them. I wanted them to foam at the mouths, become blithering idiots, and wander into unknown fields. At the end of the class, after they were eager to understand and didn't, and I was eager to shake them and couldn't, I suddenly stopped and said, "I know what the problem is! None of you have taken acid!"*

*Now, I don't propose that LSD or psychedelics necessarily make a person a better writer. What I meant was at some point in our lives we have to be crazy, we have to lose control, step out of our ordinary way of seeing, and learn that the world is not the way we think it is, that it isn't solid, structured and forever. We are going to die someday, and nothing can control it. Don't take LSD. Go to the woods alone for three days. Extend your boundaries. Live on the edge for a while. We act as though we are immortal and are comfortable in that illusion. We don't actually know when we will die and we hope it will be in old age, but it can be this next minute. This thought of mortality is not droll; it can make our lives very vital, present and alert right now.*

*I trusted that while David was out there flying in his writing, he would land someday and make his vision clear to us who were living in the solid land of Minnesota. He would down-spiral and hit the mark exactly like a great archer. **He had given himself a lot of space.** If you begin too exactly, you will stay precise but never hit the exact mark that makes the words vibrate with the truth that goes through the present, past and future.*

'He had given himself a lot of space.' Pioneers move into uncharted territory and so do geniuses. Originality requires being willing to go outside the norm, outside the comfort zone. This applies equally to writers. Think about that: the first person to write in a stream-of-consciousness style or a diary style or to conclude their story with the words 'and then I woke up; it was all just a dream' – each of these fresh approaches was once notably 'original' and it opened up the field for all other writers. If you've ever read something unusual and thought, 'Oh! you can do *that...*'

you know what I mean. Each writer who is truly original opens up space for all the writers coming after her.

The Verb Association exercise from the previous session, and the Synaesthesia challenge, invite you to make connections and associations that you might not have made before, thus drawing you into new territory and enabling you to come up with original expressions that might, one day, become clichés through overuse by others!

Also consider breaking with convention by using verbs-as-nouns or nouns-as-verbs or adjectives-as verbs or verbs-as-adjectives, etc. Lawrence Block gives the example, 'I marmaladed the toast' – that's a noun being used as a verb. Very practical. At one time I used the phrase, 'my body temples life'. I was deliberately applying the sacredness of the noun 'temple' to the process by which a body is, and expresses, life force. I rather like that connection. Another time I wrote the phrase, 'a scatter of paper' which allowed me to create an image for the reader by using the verb 'scatter' as a noun, and thus also acquiring some of the energy and imagery evoked by the word 'scatter'.

Remember, though, that you must have mastered the rules of grammar before you can break them, or it will just seem as if you've made a mistake; i.e. the rest of your writing must be grammatically flawless so that it is clear to the reader that you are being creative rather than sloppy. And while you can be as wild and wacky as you like in your personal writing, if you want your work to be taken seriously, it has to be effective in that 'good writing' way that doesn't call unnecessary attention to itself because it is seamlessly creating an experience for the reader.

In summary: the key to original writing is that it **opens up space**. It creates a sense of **freedom**. It offers **new** combinations and **unexpected** juxtapositions. It is absolutely about **energy**: original writing is *alive* on the page.

### **HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE THAT SORT OF ORIGINALITY?**

By being **playful** – hence the word association games at the start of this session.

When we are too serious about our writing, too busy trying to be correct and clever, we hamper ourselves. A sense of freedom and playfulness accompanies all original writing, allowing us to enter the zone of originality, to explore and express freely.

Lateral thinking always occurs ‘outside the box’. That means taking risks and it often takes us outside our comfort zone. Originality hangs out in the UNcomfortable zone.

The UNcomfortable zone is also marked by **honesty**. ‘True seeing’ enables us to write originally. It’s not always easy to be honest, especially if we are concerned that what we are writing will make the people around us uncomfortable. (I’ll discuss this more later.) For now, let’s simply acknowledge that honest writing rings with originality because it offers a unique and true perspective. We have already found that writing honestly will ensure that our writing is good. So... good *and* original – sounds like honesty has something going for it...

Honesty also requires an attitude of acceptance towards oneself, of course.  
Ye old Self-As-Team!

Natalie Goldberg gives the example of some writing pieces that are right outside the box by Russel Edson<sup>2</sup>:

### ***Sautéing***

*As a man sautéed his hat, he was thinking of how his mother used to sauté his father's hat and how grandmother used to sauté grandfather's hat.*

*Some garlic and wine and it doesn't taste like hat at all, it tastes like underwear...*

*And as he sautéed his hat he thought of mother sautéing his father's hat, and grandmother sautéing grandfather's hat, and wished somehow he had gotten married so he'd have someone to sauté his hat; sautéing is such a lonely thing...*

### ***With Sincerest Regrets***

*Like a white snail the toilet slides into the living room, demanding to be loved.*

*It is impossible, and we tender our sincerest regrets.*

*In the book of the heart there is no mention made of plumbing.*

*And though we have spent our intimacy many times with you, you belong to an unfortunate reference, which we would rather not embrace...*

*The toilet slides from the living room like a white snail, flushing with grief...*

These pieces are startling, discomfoting, honest, and rather lovely all at once. Edson has certainly given himself a lot of space. He also takes a big risk as that sort of material can be jarring to read.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pp 66-67

You might not be drawn to his style of writing, but I'm sure you can appreciate that sometimes going way out to the extreme gives us the freedom and space to create; we can then find a balance that allows us to express our originality in ways that will feel true to us and strike a corresponding note in our reader.



### **SYNTAX AS THE DRIVER OF PERCEPTION**

Goldberg explains how our use of syntax influences how we think and how we perceive the world.<sup>3</sup> Syntax is 'the rules and conventions regulating the order and relationships of words in a sentence; branch of grammar concerning this'.<sup>4</sup>

*'Our language is usually locked into a sentence syntax of subject/verb/direct-object. There is a subject acting on an object. 'I see the dog' – with this sentence structure, 'I' is the center of the universe. We forget in our language structure that while 'I' looks at 'the dog', 'the dog' is simultaneously looking at us. It is interesting to note that in the Japanese language the sentence would say, 'I dog seeing'. There is an exchange or interaction rather than a subject acting on an object.*

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* pp. 61-63

<sup>4</sup> Websters dictionary

*We think in sentences, and the way we think is the way we see. If we think in the structure subject/verb/direct-object, then that is how we form our world. By cracking open that syntax, we release energy and are able to see the world afresh and from a new angle. We stop being so chauvinistic as Homo sapiens. Other beings besides human beings matter on earth: ants have their own cities; dogs have their own lives; cats are always busy rehearsing for a nap; plants breathe; trees have a longer life span than we do. It is true that we can have a sentence with a dog or cat or a fly as the subject – ‘The dog sees the cat’ – but still there is the pattern of self-centeredness and egocentricity built into the very structure of our language. It is a terrible burden to have to be master. We are not ruling the world. It is an illusion, and the illusion of our syntax structure perpetuates it.*

Enlightenment, mystics say, is the state of being at one with all beings, and oneness means total acceptance, no judgement.

**EXERCISE: Natalie Goldberg’s exercise on Syntax from *Writing Down the Bones*.**

**i) Find a piece of your own writing. Copy out a paragraph on a fresh page and then rewrite it:** ‘See each one of those words simply as wooden blocks, all the same size and colour. No noun or verb has any more value than the, a, and. Everything is equal. Now for about a third of a page scramble them up as though you were just moving wooden blocks around. Don’t try to make any sense of what you write down. Your mind will keep trying to construct something. Hold back that urge, relax, and mindlessly write down words. You will have to repeat words to fill a third of a page.’

Her example begins: ‘Write I’m an mouth rather cream say eat ice and nothing dry I an write rather say and m goes cube because an there’s I’d to dry goes write and mouth cream...’ etc.

There is no place whatsoever for your Editor in this exercise as the aim is not to create logical meaning and certainly not to ‘improve’ or ‘refine’. This is about playful, creative, risky wildness. It’s a Creator exercise in free writing.

**ii) If you like, you can insert punctuation as you feel.** Do it arbitrarily – with a sense of playfulness and fun. A comma here, a full stop there, an exclamation point somewhere else.

**iii) Now read it aloud, and read it *as though* it were saying something meaningful rather than just as a list of random words.** Read with inflection and expression, *and listen*. Listen for surprises, unexpected juxtapositions that work and fresh rhythms. Notice words that jump out, themes that emerge. It’s a bit like learning another language; we must tune the ear to hear the sudden beautiful or insightful phrases that might emerge.

In his book *Poetic Medicine*, John Fox shares how his poet friend, Suzanne Peterman, “likes to read her poems, line by line, backward. She wants to experience the poem not just for what she thinks she means, but to hear the words/lines alone as separate from sense. The sound of each line comes into high relief and she experiences how that sound sings in the poem.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Poetic Medicine, The Healing Art of Poem-Making* by John Fox, Tarcher Putnam, 1997, p 89.

As you do this exercise, pay particular attention to words or concepts that are repeated, and you might learn something valuable about yourself and how you are ‘processing life’ at this time. For example, one student’s piece kept returning to the word ‘wrapping’, as if she were exploring the idea of wrapping, or ‘appearances’. Our unconscious / subconscious delivers these associations to us in the same way that we make ‘Freudian slips’ or experience hunches and intuitions.

This is an exercise in trusting your voice, your Creator, so if you don’t emerge with any insights, know that you are gaining simply by practising trust of your instincts.

#### **DOES THIS EXERCISE HAVE ANY RELEVANCE TO ‘REAL’ WRITING?**

Here are some quotes from published work that indicate a writer who has been willing to play with language and perception and subject/verb/direct-object consciousness:

*“I’m stuck, **like the chair has hold of me.**”* – from *That eye the sky* by Tim Winton.<sup>6</sup>

*“The record player shut off with a loud springy clunk, and **the room vacuumed in the noises** from every corner of the neighbourhood.”* – from *The Object of My Affection*, by Steven McAuley.

In both these examples, the object has a life of its own. This change in perspective is unpredictable, unexpected; it gives the reader a surprise, it’s fresh, it hits home. We are struck by truth. This sort of writing bears the hallmark of

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<sup>6</sup> my bold

originality, along with phrases like ‘dinosaurs marinate in the earth’ or ‘the fiddles boiled the air’.

*“The floor quakes as Joe Packet’s wife goes about her business... But here comes that woman behind her; the long sharp **nose is making a hole in her spine.**”* – from *The Three Jolly Foxes* by Douglas Stuart.

If you have ever felt someone watching you from behind, you know exactly what is meant here. But how many thousands of writers have written ‘I felt her watching me’ by comparison with this extraordinary image?

Goldberg goes on to say,

*‘This does not mean that... we should abandon our syntax structure because it is wrong. Only once you have done this exercise, though you probably will go back to sentences, there is a crack, a place where the wind of energy can fly through you. Though ‘I eat an artichoke’ sounds sensible and people will think you are sane, you now know that behind that syntax structure, the artichoke happens to also be eating you and changing you forever, especially if you dip it in garlic-butter sauce and let the artichoke leaf totally taste your tongue! The more you are aware of the syntax you move, see, and write in, the better control you have and the more you can step out of it when you need to. Actually, by breaking open syntax, you often get closer to the truth of what you need to say.’*

So original writing is not clichéd; it opens up spaces; it calls for the child’s eye; it is honest, authentic, unexpected, fresh, different, risky, perceptive; it startles us with unusual juxtapositions, it sings with energy, it moves us with its insights. And to get there, to become an original writer yourself, you must be willing to be playful, to be different, to take risks, to be honest.

Are you?

If so, you will find your writing edging into the realm of brilliance, of genius.

Remember, geniuses go into uncharted territory. Through taking risks, they produce striking, original writing.

Here's a unique poem by Peter Bradbury:

***Dead Man's Blood***

*Boat, map, anchor, land;*

*Feet, boots, mud, sand –*

*Pack, load, tie, mules;*

*Picks, hatchets, shovels, tools –*

*Jungle, logs, vines, trees;*

*Creeks, bushes, bugs, bees –*

*X, dig, tension, stare;*

*Strike, metal, uncover, bare –*

*Look, greed, hunger, cry;*

*Loud, scream, murder, die –*

*Cut, slash, strangle, brawl;*

*Mutilate, howl, mangle, maul –*

*Silence, twitch, none, mud;*

*Jewels, treasure, DEAD MAN'S BLOOD!*<sup>7</sup>

Peter Bradbury took a risk. He *played*. And the outcome is a piece of original writing that opens up space for all writers coming after him. He has allowed the 'wind of energy' to fly through him, rather than feeling tied to pre-existing poetic patterns.

**EXERCISE: Write your own word poem**

Choose any subject – a picnic, a conversation, a dream, a meal. Build the story just through single words as above. Work with rhyming couplets as Bradbury has done so that you can feel the rhythm growing as you go.

**EXERCISE: Dominant sound**

Choose a letter of the alphabet and create a cluster of words beginning with that letter, then create a poem around those words. Here's an example that I wrote years ago for the letter 'M'.

*Mummy stands in the light of the moon,*

*Mummy crooning a looney tune,*

*Me watching the magic box:*

*Minnie Mouse and the wiley fox.*

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<sup>7</sup> Maybe Peter Bradbury didn't originate this style, but it was the first time I had come upon it.

*Mummy making a marvellous cake,*

*Mummy gazing out at the lake,*

*Me watching the magic box:*

*Minnie Mouse and the wiley fox.*

*Mummy's mixmaster making a mess,*

*Marvellous cake all over her dress*

*Me watching the magic box*

*Mixmaster sounding like grinding rocks*

*Makes wriggly lines all over the fox.*

*Me moaning in mild despair,*

*Mummy's hands in her long red hair.*

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall,*

*Mummy dreams of a royal ball.*

*Mummy crooning a loony tune,*

*Mummy dancing under the moon.*

*Me watching the magic box*

*Minnie Mouse and the wiley fox.*

*Me alone in the awful night,*

*The silence gives me a creeping fright –*

*Me gazing out at the lake,*

*At Mummy... Mummy...*

*Mummy floats in the light of the moon,*

*Mummy no longer singing her tune.*

The next exercise invites you to lock the door on your Editor/conscious/logical mind and come out to play!

### **EXERCISE: Impossible Questions**

#### **1. Write a question 'you've always wanted to know the answer to'.**

*For example*

- Where does the rainbow end?
- Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?
- How does a baby know when it's time to be born?
- Why do we dream/daydream?
- How do TVs work?
- How does electricity work?
- How does music get into tapes and CDs?
- How do snails mate?
- What was before The Beginning?
- How did things get their names?
- Where do odd socks go?
- What is God? Or Does God exist?

This exercise is particularly fun in a group, so you can benefit from some collective madness in generating questions.

**2. Now choose one of the questions and write a fantasy nonsensical answer.**

The purpose here is to be absurd, NOT realistic or well-informed. Be imaginative! Go for playfulness, creativity. This is an exercise in ‘nonsense wisdom’. (I gather that Jerry Seinfeld’s answer to the odd socks question is that the ring around Saturn is made up of odd socks.)



If you’d like to throw yourself more deeply into absurdity, try writing a nonsense poem (or prose). Lewis Carroll’s poem ‘Jabberwocky’ is a great example. Here’s the most famous excerpt from Jabberwocky:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Here's an excerpt from one by Spike Milligan:

On the Ning Nang Nong  
Where the Cows go Bong!  
and the monkeys all say BOO!  
There's a Nong Nang Ning  
Where the trees go Ping!  
And the teapots jibber jabber joo.

**EXERCISE: Write your own piece of rhyming nonsense**

Notice how freeing it is to make up words or bend grammar rules to your own ends. Notice, also, how accepting of yourself you must be to do so. If you are locked up in rules, you'll find this very difficult.

As Roald Dahl says in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,

“A little nonsense now and then,  
is relished by the wisest men.”

We've been focusing on sentences and phrases, but entire books have been built around extraordinary ideas that don't submit themselves to the constraints of logic. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is one of them. So is *Alice in Wonderland*. In fact, any fantasy and science fiction story worth its salt takes you somewhere unexpected and unusual.

When I was a teenager and feeling restless with the desire to write but not inspired with any particular idea, my father would give me a set of parameters to work within. Perhaps my story had to begin in Melbourne but end up in New York; someone had to die; there had to be a pair of red shoes in the story somewhere; and someone's name had to be Maurice. I'd rush excitedly to my desk with that bunch of bits, a story brewing immediately. My short story 'The Genius and The Fisherman' evolved from a Creative Writing class task to write something incorporating the words 'genius', 'fisherman', 'rice' (and two others that I don't recall). Leonardo Da Vinci apparently said that 'everything connects to everything else.' So literally any idea or image can be the launching place for a story. The brain, remember, works by association.

**EXERCISE: Five Random Words**

Select five words at random and write in response to them. Make sure that you come up with five *unrelated* words because that challenge will send your mind on a search for meaningful connections and you'll be quite likely to come up with an original story. So instead of selecting words like 'bicycle, wind, fun' etc., put 'bicycle' with 'soup' and 'pencil case' and 'plug' and 'corporation'... Now there's a challenge for you!

**EXERCISE: Writing from Imagination**

This is a great exercise if you are working with others. Gather a list of experiences you have each had that are unique or rare, like getting lost in an Amazonian jungle or biting the dentist, and then each pick someone else's experience and write about it

AS IF you have experienced it yourself. Draw on your common sense, your intuition, your imagination and everything you have read or heard about that experience.

When you've finished, read aloud and ask the person who 'owns' that experience to give you feedback and share something of their knowledge of it.

## SIMILES AND METAPHORS

You probably remember similes and metaphors from school. They can add absolute magic to a story.

**A simile** is a figure of speech in which one thing is explicitly compared to another; eg. 'the sea was as smooth as glass' or 'looked like a sheet of glass'.

**A metaphor** is a figure of speech implying (but not stating explicitly) a comparison between two objects or actions; eg. 'the glassy sea'. In each of the examples below, the writers have made a thought-provoking association and expressed their insight very succinctly, incorporating a simile or metaphor that lends something fresh or eye-catching or thought-provoking to the idea at hand.

Joan Harris, the author of *Chocolat*, is master of both the simile and the metaphor. Here are a few that leapt out at me while reading her lovely book:

- *"I find their absence is still a shock, **like** the ugly patch of yellow grass where a circus tent once stood."*
- *"He looks better, too, more relaxed and without that dreadful look of hostility and suspicion which shuttered his face **like** a haunted house."*
- *"... his stupid wailing following me **like** an unwanted child."*
- *"My anger is rising **like** boiling milk, uncontrollable."*
- *"Her smile narrowed between twin brackets of disapproval."*

Read on for more examples where the writer was willing and able to be creative and think outside the box.

**Similes:**

*“They exchanged a few laughing words, **like** the bubbles in honey.”* – By Naguib Mafhouz, Egyptian Nobel Prize winner for Literature.

*“Rachel had finally let go of his arm, and Simon dragged his feet glumly as he followed the mistress of chambermaids **like** a stick caught in a skirt hem.”* – from *The Dragonbone Chair* by Tad Williams.

*“I’d learned early that the third floor was the only place in the house where I could sit and read and not hear my sisters’ voices rising and rising **like** engines finding only higher gears.”* – from *The Dress* by David Ebershoff.

*“The idea is **like** grass. It craves light, likes crowds, thrives on cross-breeding, grows better for being stepped on.”* – from *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin.

*“Freya is **like** a small tornado on Tabitha’s knee”* – about a two-year-old’s tantrum; from *Having a Lovely Time* by Jenny Eclair.

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

*“Being loved by Abina would be rather **like** standing in the blast of a jet engine.”*

From *The Dead in Their Vaulted Arches* by Alan Bradley:

“Lowering my lids was **like** trying to force down a paint-encrusted sash window.”

From *Meeting the English* by Kate Clanchy:

‘This thought went down Struan’s body **like** an ice cube.’

“And those were the points. When they were all stabbed in and vibrating in their targets **like** spears, Mfanwy looked up at Struan Robertson.”

From *Meet Me in Manhattan* by Claudia Carroll:

“Worry is working **like** yeast on my mind.”

From *The Taming of the Queen* by Philippa Gregory:

“The crown settles on my forehead **like** a headache.”

‘Pleasure rises in me **like** a blush.’

‘The gowns smell **like** wealth.’

From *The Versions of Us* by Laura Barnett:

“His eyes shine **like** buttons in the fleshy cushion of his face.”

From *Billie Morgan* by Joolz Denby:

“... shrugged them off **like** a warm cardie.”

From *Amy Snow* by Tracy Rees:

“Grief, **like** the tightest, meanest of corsets...”

“I felt anger **like** a little hard seed, waiting to sprout.”

“London is **like** a river current: it demands to be taken seriously.”

From *One Life* by Kate Grenville:

The old arguments were starting up again **like** a toothache.”

From *Hide Her Name* by Nadine Dorries:

“... a laugh **like** a pebble rolling around in a tin can.”

From *The Miniaturist* by Jess Burton, describing a whippet:

“The animal moves **like** spilled liquid.”

From *Love Like Water* by Meme McDonald:

“The other two eventually dragged themselves **like** crumpled butterflies out of the car.”

“Cathy’s face had set **like** cement.”

One of my students, Alex Wallace, wrote a book with his father in which they describe a body falling ‘**like** a broken dream’ and landing with ‘a sad thud’.

From the song ‘Wishes’ in Human Nature’s album, ‘Telling Everyone’:

“I used your heart **like** a stepping stone...”

**Metaphors:**

From *Love Like Water* by Meme McDonald:

“The last hug [with her brother] she’d clung to his smell of clothes dried hard in the sun and skin that smelled honest. He left his arms hanging where they were, his chest solid as rammed earth for her to lean against. **She was the water and he was the soil.** Being separate would be tough on them.”

From *The Tremor of Forgery* by Patricia Highsmith:

“**The sun was a golden weight** on Ingham’s head.”

From *Odd One Out* by Lissa Evans:

“**His face was a clenched fist.**”

James Robertson’s entire book forms an overarching metaphor in *The Professor of Truth*, as this line indicates: “It seemed I had come to **put out a fire.**” (His main character travels from Scotland to Australia to resolve a long-standing issue but ends up literally helping his ‘enemy’ save his house from a bushfire.)

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

“**Her hope, a pathetic creature** grooming itself in the corner, did a little jig.” (Note the unusual application of the verb ‘grooming’, too.)

From *Meeting the English* by Kate Clanchy:

“**His misery was a great bag of water** which he was holding in both arms against his chest. He had to get it upstairs before it burst.”

From *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama:

“She told me about evenings in the kitchen with uncles and cousins and grandparents, the **stew of voices** bubbling up in laughter.”

In the historical drama, *The Taming of the Queen*, by Philippa Gregory, Kateryn Parr has had to marry King Henry VIII against her will – because he commands it. She is in love with someone else. The wedding feast scene is fabulous and very symbolic as the king eats his way through tiny quails, crunching their bones. There are many other death images as he eats each dish. A metaphor for the death of her dreams.

### **MORE EXAMPLES OF MAGNIFICENT CREATIVITY**

From *Every Good Girl* by Judy Astley:

“His mother was at home, not in body but in spirit, in influence, in omnipotence and control. She was in the floral wallpaper, the kitchen smells, the bathroom bleach, a reminding hint of her cologne waited for him in the hall. He couldn’t take [his girlfriend] there because she’d know.”

From *The Dead in Their Vaulted Arches* by Alan Bradley:

“‘I don’t care’ is the last bit of baggage to be thrown overboard in a losing argument.”

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

“The thought let itself in without knocking. It didn't even wipe its feet.”

“Father was not a person who wore his heart on his sleeve. In fact, I used to wonder if he wore it anywhere about his person at all.”

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

“I just wanted ta relationship that did what it said on the tin.”

From *The Bronze Horseman* by Paullina Simon:

“Tatiana didn't just walk home. She flew. She grew brilliant red wings, and on them she sailed through the azure Leningrad sky. Closer to home, her heavy-with-guilt heart brought her down and the wings disappeared.”

From *Brother Odd* by Dean Koontz:

“Romanovich could peel an apple with his stare.”

From *Separate Beds* by Elizabeth Buchan:

“Her fingers never ceased their tarantalla.” (on the keyboard)

From *Meeting the English* by Kate Clanchy:

“As soon as she opened her mouth words poured out of Juliet as if they'd been tightly stacked behind her teeth.

“Juliet... felt the meaning of the letter pulse up her body in waves over the bubbling sounds of the still boiling kettle... The long trumpeting parade of Jake’s successes, the bells and whistles and trombones of it. Jake’s stage parts, Jake’s essays, Jake’s common entrances, Jake’s O Levels and A Levels and what the tutors had said at his Oxford interviews all danced before her in their shiny triumph and fell straight off a cliff into a boiling sea of rustification.”

From *The Miniaturist* by Jess Burton:

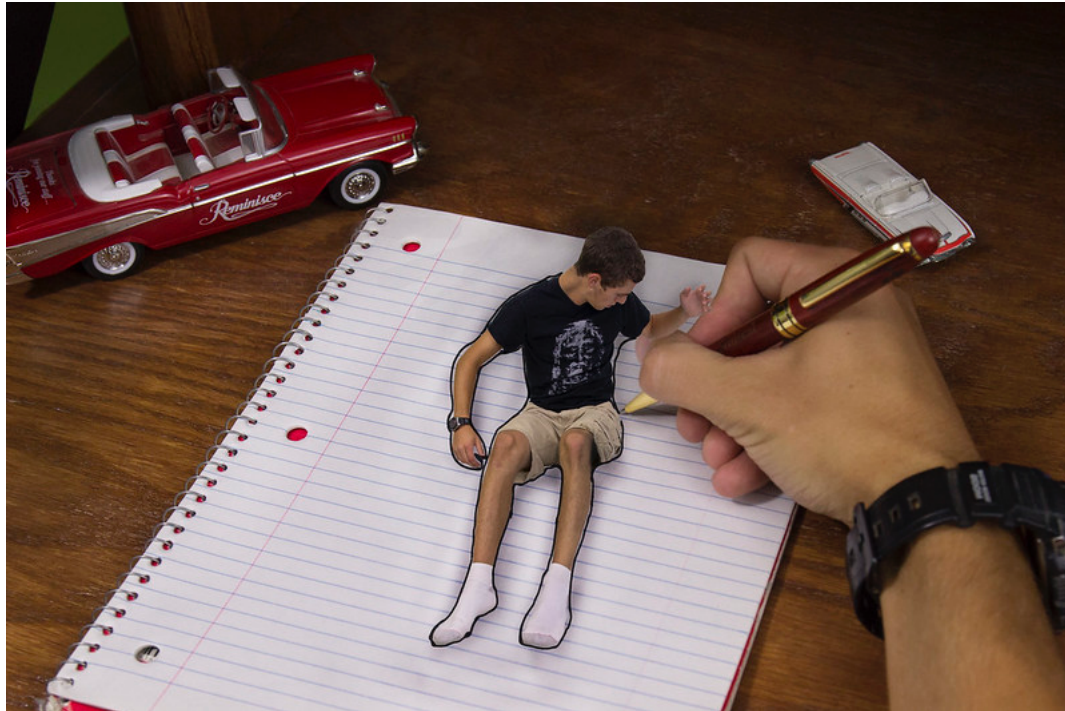
“His voice sounds far away from the roar of her thoughts.”

**Look at the tools you now have available to take your own writing into the realm of genius:**

- \* Trusting yourself -> tuning into your deeper mind, your wisdom, your insights.
- \* Sensory specific, active, ‘showing’ language -> strength, aliveness, presence, energy.
- \* Honesty -> accuracy -> genius.
- \* Playfulness and risk-taking -> freedom and space -> originality.
- \* Consciously working with the body language and tone of your writing to establish mood -> greater impact.

*“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.”*

– Carl Jung, Swiss psychologist (1875 - 1961)



### THE EDITOR'S ROLE IN CREATIVITY

Don't think, however, that the Editor is barred from the business of creating original works of genius. Robert McKee says in *Story*: “Genius consists not only of the power to create expressive beats and scenes, but of the taste, judgement and will to weed out and destroy the banalities, conceits, false notes and lies.”

This is why being a writer is not about talent but about love, commitment, and skill development. Like any form of mastery, it is an apprenticeship, a journey we go on that requires us to face ourselves and to grow and evolve.

There are always tools and support systems available to those who are serious about growing in this way. If you don't yet trust your judgement regarding your own writing, enter story competitions, submit work for publication and call upon editors or manuscript assessment services for opinions on your work.<sup>8</sup> Over time you will gain an accurate sense of your own level of skill and what you can do to improve. (There is more information on these issues in Session #10.)

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<sup>8</sup> Consider my services! Visit [www.lilianegrace.com](http://www.lilianegrace.com)

## **SESSION 8: FINDING YOUR INNER GENIUS**

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

#### ***UNIQUENESS. GENIUS. HONESTY.***

*Genius: exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability.*

– Websters dictionary

*“Neither a lofty degree of intelligence nor imagination nor both together go to the making of genius. Love, love, love, that is the soul of genius.”*

– Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

### **MY STORY**

I went through much of my life feeling stupid. You know how we have a certain experience, arrive at certain conclusions in the wake of it, and then hug those conclusions close to us for years? When I was maybe nine years old, my classroom teacher at primary school sprang an oral times table test on us. I still remember standing there, frozen, unable to come up with the answer to her question when it was my turn, and feeling conscious of everyone looking at me. That blank-mind-petrified state translated into a kind of performance anxiety that followed me around for years until I became consciously aware of it and began to address it. Believing that you're stupid doesn't do much to enable you to tap into your genius.

And then there was secondary school, where I worked like the blazes, fuelled by my fear of looking stupid, to be one of the best. And I did excel, finishing Year 12 as the Dux of Humanities. But we all know what schools teach us to do: regurgitate. And that has very little to do with ‘exceptional intellectual or creative power’. Today I can recall very little of the material I crammed during those six years of high school. I guess that is partly why my partner and I decided to home educate our children. We didn’t want them becoming mere receptacles for the information other people considered important. We wanted to honour their uniqueness and allow them to follow their interests, even if that meant there would be gaps in their knowledge. And there are. Huge gaps. But considering the gaps in *my* memory when it comes to huge chunks of my educational journey, those gaps hardly seem to matter.

The things we remember tend to be intense experiences, both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ – experiences that frighten us, nourish us, cause us to wake up. We are also more natural and more committed learners when what we are learning is meaningful to us. The School of Life delivers far more of those experiences than any bricks-and-mortar school I know of, so if you want to develop your intelligence, go forth and have new and meaningful experiences!

*-> New experiences stimulate us as writers, giving us lots of raw material to work with.*

*-> New experiences stimulate a developing brain when we’re just starting out in life.*

*-> And new experiences will influence the growth of new brain cells, the laying down of myelin sheaths (which increase the speed by which nerve impulses are conducted),*

*and the making of new connections, right into our senior years, since the brain, science has now proven, is not hard-wired.*<sup>9</sup>

Having shared that, it's also true that the brain can arrive at new insights even in the absence of new information; just by changing our perception of the puzzle pieces already in front of us.

As a teenager I used to feel awed by the many smart people around me who were doing 'all those complicated jobs'. How did they remember everything? How did they know what to do? What to say? Which button to push? It was only as I joined the workforce and began to learn new skills myself that I began to understand that every complicated job breaks down into a number of smaller, simpler components. Then as an adult, I was blown away by speakers who seemed to be living geniuses with extraordinary depth and breadth of knowledge and wisdom. As I read more widely, I discovered that much of *their* astounding insights had been gleaned from books. Everyone was standing on someone else's shoulders. Bit by bit I have been lifting myself out of the pit of stupidity that I fell into as a child, and lowering the way-high pedestals of brilliance I had erected for others.

Dr John Demartini declares that genius is within the realm of everybody. At the age of 17 he was still unable to read, having dropped out of school at 14. He believed himself to be stupid and unlikely to amount to anything until, as a 17-year-old, he was introduced to a compelling new possibility for himself and told to declare the statement, "I am a genius and I apply my wisdom", every day. He did so, and a

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<sup>9</sup> *The Brain that Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge is a great reference on this issue of the brain's 'plasticity'.

few short years later was not only reading but tutoring others at university – and being described as a genius by his peers.<sup>10</sup>

The National Geographic show on the nature of genius that I watched years ago said that everyone has the potential to be a genius; the difference is that the genius makes the decision to activate their potential. That rings quite true to me. I've witnessed too much brilliance in student writing to believe that genius is only available to some of us. Just as we are told that everybody has the same 1,240 minutes in a day, everybody has essentially the same brain potential. What we do with it is up to us. We can choose to waste time or use time wisely, and we can choose to disbelieve our potential and play a small life game, or we can trust in the biological potential we were designed with, and play a grand game.<sup>11</sup>

I've done both. The small game and the grand game, the procrastination and the action. I know which I prefer! In some areas of my life I still play a very small game, and in others areas I am increasingly owning my skills and valuable qualities. When I was 39 and going through the crisis that resulted in nearly separating and then beginning to transform my life, one of the things I did was to make a vision book of the kind of life I wanted to live. One page was about the writing I wanted to have published, and within a year, some of those 'wins' were already happening. In 2002 I set a goal in a journal that, by 2007, my book for children about universal laws would be published and doing well. At that stage it was only a twinkle in my eye; by

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<sup>10</sup> See *The Boy Who Barked* on <https://lilianegrace.com> to read about his story.

<sup>11</sup> If you're not sure that you believe that last comment, just pick up a book like Tony Buzan's *Brain Child* or Howard Gardiner's *Multiple Intelligences* or Joe Dispenza's *Evolve Your Brain – the science of changing your mind*, and learn more about your extraordinary brain.

2006 it was published and within twelve months I had sold out the first two print runs (5000 books).

Dr Demartini says that genius comes about through listening to one's soul and acting on one's inspiration. The original meaning of 'genie' was 'guardian or protective spirit'. I truly believe that doing what you love, what makes your heart sing, is the way to unfurl your genius (and your destiny). Following my heart is certainly the thing that has brought untold riches into my life. (It's also brought sizable challenges, a new set of fears and uncertainties, tiredness and overwhelm. So don't fall for the illusion that following your heart means a rose-coloured journey through life. It don't. But the challenges are somehow more acceptable when we're doing something we love.)

### **Another Word about Honesty**

In 2004, having decided to take my writing more seriously again, I sent numerous stories out to competitions and magazines. By the end of the year I hadn't won any prizes or received any recognition. And I knew why. I had a very definite feeling that I was blocking my own success. My stories were quite personal and so my internal logic went like this:

- 1) If I win one of these competitions, I'll want to tell my family;
- 2) If I tell them, they'll want to read them;
- 3) I don't want them to read my stories because they're so personal – they'll learn 'things' about me...
- 4) So, I'd better not win anything.

But the writer in me was not very satisfied with the not-winning scenario. I mean, writing something and not having it published is like cooking a meal and then having it sit on the table going cold with no-one there to eat it. So I asked my sister to do some ‘tapping’ with me. Tapping, or EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) is a technique for releasing stress from one’s nervous system. You simply tap on certain points around the face and hands, while declaring certain statements aloud, like ‘Even though I may not win any writing competitions, I love and accept myself completely’.

In the process of tapping, I discovered that I was judging myself (again) for the content of my stories. I dredged up an old memory of my father calling me an ‘exhibitionist’ and criticising me for writing about the same old themes all the time. So I tapped on all of those issues to do with being seen, being vulnerable, being judged, and being myself. Two weeks later I was shortlisted in one competition, and two weeks after that I won First *and* Second Prize in another. I was staggered. (NB. I told my family about my wins, and no-one asked to read the stories. Figures.)

As I’ve said all the way through, honesty gives our writing its power, but it’s not easy to be that self-revealing. Sometimes there is a process to go through in order to feel comfortable about revealing our story, in order to be truly honest.

It’s a different issue when we want to write honestly about someone else, especially if they are close to us. In those cases, it is essential to either get that person’s permission, or to use false names and change enough details to protect their privacy – and yourself from potential litigation! Years ago, I won a competition with a short story called ‘Thy Mother, Thy Boarder and Thee’. The mother in the story was mine, but she thought the story was very funny and was able to laugh at

herself, so that was all right.; our neighbour, however, was rather unsettled when she read it and joked that she would have to be careful around me in case she turned up in one of my stories... And years ago, another friend commented that a play I had written which he attended was 'a bit close to home'. I hadn't actually thought about him at all when writing it – at least, not consciously – but there's always the chance that the people around us will see themselves in our writing even if we never put 'em there. Consciously...

As you know, my partner (and children) are also fair game. Fortunately he had the sort of largesse of character that made him able to cope with direct feedback without flinching. He took it in the spirit in which it is intended and is willing to learn from feedback. This is one of the qualities I really love/d about him. Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of the runaway bestseller *Eat, Pray, Love*, officially thanks her new husband for his tolerance at the end of the sequel, *Committed*<sup>12</sup>:

*'He is a private person by nature, but unfortunately his privacy ended the day he met me. (He is now known to an awful lot of strangers around the world as 'that Brazilian guy from Eat, Pray, Love.')* In my defence I have to say that I did give him an early chance to dodge all this exposure. Back when we were first courting, there came an awkward moment when I had to confess that I was a writer, and what that meant for him. If he stayed with me, I warned, he would eventually end up revealed in my books and in my stories. There was no way of getting around it; that's simply how it goes. His best chance, I made clear, would be to leave right then, while there was still time to escape with dignity and discretion intact.

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<sup>12</sup> *Committed, A sceptic makes peace with marriage*, by Elizabeth Gilbert, Bloomsbury, 2010, p. 285

*'Despite all my warnings, though, he stayed. And he stays with me still. I believe this has been a great act of love and compassion on his part.'*<sup>13</sup>

Hear, hear. As for my children, they have so far mostly been spared, apart from articles about them as babies or young children – and a children's story about their escapades that we all still find hysterically funny because of the memories it brings back. Oh, and my short story, 'The Prince Who Would Not Grow', is a fictional exploration of some of the issues I was tussling with as a young parent...

One last point about honesty. It dispels taboos. Periodically when someone around me is deeply and vulnerably honest, I can put to rest another myth I might have been operating under. At my daughters' puberty rite of passage, I said that one



of my reasons for bringing them together with a group of older women was so that they could hear our stories, warts and all, and normalise any concerns they might have been experiencing about menstruation or their changing bodies, and also

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<sup>13</sup> No longer... They parted ways.

develop a realistic set of expectations about potential boyfriends. Any subject that is shrouded in secrecy is a potential minefield. I love the openness that honesty fosters. I believe that when we write honestly, we are doing humankind a service.

In the domain of relationships, honesty is also usually the best policy. In the late '80s I attended a course called The Loving Relationships Training, of which the slogan was 'Tell the Truth and Get to the Love Faster', and in my relationship there was no doubt that telling the truth was always healing and always enhanced our relationship – so long as we were both willing to hang in there through the uncomfortable stage that was often unleashed. Yes, the honesty process can make for a bumpy journey, but it is so very worth it.

When we refrain from telling the truth it's usually because we want to protect the other person, and sometimes that is the wisest thing to do, but often it's a dead end for the relationship's passage into deeper intimacy. Telling your partner that the best sex you ever had was with a boyfriend ten years ago may be unpleasant, but if he is open to responding, "Really? Tell me more..." you might find yourself poised on the brink of outrageous new possibilities in your current sex life. Not telling someone something in order to protect them also denies them the opportunity to choose their own response (even if that means "well in that case, it's over!"), which is effectively denying them the opportunity to grow. To me, telling the truth is honouring of both parties and provides the opportunity for true intimacy.

Remember that just as a literary critic's estimation of your work is just their opinion, someone's 'truth' is their perception of the situation and is being filtered through their life experiences; it's not necessarily 'The Truth'. Listening with a genuine desire to hear and understand and learn and grow is one side of successful

honesty; the other side is telling the truth with humility and tact and respect, and the willingness to hear the other's response to what we have just shared.

## **YOUR STORY**

You are unique. You are a genius. The more honest you are, the more powerful your writing and your relationships.

### **EXERCISE: Honesty**

Identify the places in your life where you are avoiding or evading the truth and do your best to communicate it as respectfully as you can. If you don't feel that it's appropriate to communicate with that person directly, write them an honest letter and then burn it.

### **EXERCISE: Genius**

Write your responses to the idea of genius – *you* as a genius. Supposing, for a moment, that you actually *are* a genius, where is that wisdom and exceptional power showing up in your life? Are you a business genius? A parenting genius? A sporting genius? A trivia genius? A genius in the kitchen? In the bedroom?

Credit where credit is due, okay?

### **EXERCISE: Uniqueness**

You are one of a kind. You know the old 'no two snowflakes are the same', 'no two fingerprints are the same'? You are original. There has never been anyone quite like you, and there never will be. Express your appreciation to yourself for your uniqueness...

Buckminster Fuller tells the story of a devastating time when his young daughter died and his life until that point had been a string of business failures. Bankrupt, discredited and jobless, he was about to commit suicide by walking into Lake Michigan when he stopped at the water's edge with the sudden realisation that perhaps he did not have the *right* to take his life. Perhaps he was an essential link in the chain of life on earth. Perhaps his experiences and insights were essential to the evolution of human consciousness.

He turned and walked back into his life. He spent the next two years completely silent, just listening and observing. And he became one of the world's most inspired inventors and authors. He was the person who coined the phrase 'Spaceship Earth', meaning that our resources here are finite and so there is no option to play a win/lose game on earth; it is either win/win or lose/lose. That's a pretty significant insight.

You might be cooking an idea of similar value. It might not come to your consciousness for some years – who knows? But for now, treat yourself with the respect and appreciation that a very wise, unique, and worthwhile being deserves. Treat yourself like the genius you are. Buy yourself some flowers, take a scented bath, sit in the sun – do something that expresses your appreciation of yourself.