# SESSION 9: STORY LINE: WHAT NEXT, WHAT IF?

## Part 1: Writing Lesson:

## *POINTERS ABOUT PLOT*

*"And the beginning will always be the same; it is almost a geometrical problem: 'I have such a man, such a woman, in such surroundings. What can happen to them to oblige them to go to their limit?' That's the question. It will be sometimes a very simple incident, anything that will change their lives. Then I write my novel chapter by chapter."*

– George Simenot

'Then I write my novel chapter by chapter' is a deceptively simple statement for what can be a drawn-out and difficult journey. And a journey is absolutely what you are up for when you begin to write a novel. You can't rush this process. There are a serious number of words in a novel, and when you buy your ticket, you're going to be stopping all stations in your efforts to engage with your characters and events in a meaningful way. If you don't, your novel won't satisfy the reader.

Another element to the journey is this: if you begin with the conclusion already decided, your story may strike the reader as thin or didactic. Embarking on the journey with a premise rather than a conclusion means that you will be open to

unexpected developments, insights and 'real-time problems' to solve, which will make your material much richer.

Australian author Kate Grenville says in her fiction writing manual, *The Writing Book*[1], that, like a joke, the plot is not the critical thing, it is *how* the plot – or joke – is told that makes it either enthralling or simply fall flat: 'What transforms a plot into a piece of powerful writing is design: not the events themselves but how the events unfold.' The same concept can be stunning in the hands of one writer, and fall in a heap in the hands of another, so it's not the idea itself that makes a story a powerful experience for the reader, it's how the story is told. (Hmm… that 'HOW' word again…)

Another essential factor is a sense of urgency – either the issue is time-sensitive or so important that it must occur or there will be some unacceptable consequence.

**SO, WHAT *IS* PLOT?**

E. M. Forster draws out the distinction between a story and a plot in his book, *Aspects of the Novel.* 'The king died and the queen died' are simply two events; that, he says, is story. But 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is plot, because now one event is *leading* to the other; there is causality, effect, motivation…

[1] *The Writing Book* by Kate Grenville, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 143

**Story** is therefore a chronicle of events: 'this happened, then this, then this…' The reader's or listener's question is 'what happened next?' Story merely calls for curiosity.

**Plot** might also appear to be a sequence of events, but we now have cause and effect relationships that prompt the question, '*Why* does this happen?' Plot sends us back and forwards through the storyline looking for motivation and attempting to predict what is going to happen. We think more deeply.

## TO PLOT OR NOT TO PLOT…

I'm often asked during writing workshops if one has to have the plot all planned out from the start or if one can just start writing, and there is simply no right answer, no formula, no rules. Successful writers swear by both approaches.

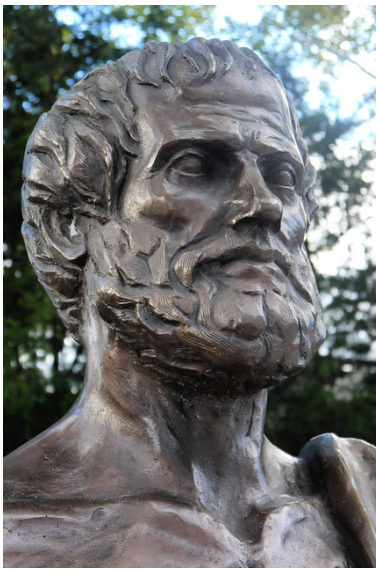
As Grenville says, 'If you start with a plot, the danger is that it can become a tyrant: in order to stick to the plot, the writer might be forced to distort the characters or ignore interesting ideas that might emerge during the writing.' On the other hand, if you start off without a plot, the danger is that your story might begin to meander meaninglessly… Some of the greatest stories do not have plots. Grenville says of these stories, 'Virtually nothing at all happens yet there is a powerful sense of character or place or mood or ideas. In such a story, a heavy plot would overwhelm the material.'[2]

However, supposing that one does want to lead with the plot? What are the elements of a good one? How does one fashion the plot?

[2] ibid. p. 144

## BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES AND ENDINGS

No doubt you have a vague memory of this English lesson. But why it was important may be eluding you now. I mean, surely it's common sense that a story will have a beginning, a middle, and an end?



This lesson emerges from the dramatic theories of Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher/playwright who pointed out that dramatic action must honour three unities: the **unity of action** (a play should have one main action that it follows with no or few subplots), the **unity of place** (a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place) and the **unity of time** (the action in a play should take place over no more than 24 hours). Clearly, we have dispensed with these three unities, as our plays and novels today cover vast territories, multiple stories and skip backwards and forwards in time; however, a story must obey its own laws of probability: the unfolding events must observe some sort of logic, action must be driven by relevant motivation, and the conclusion must be related to the opening premise and, usually, tie loose ends together and provide a sense of completion.

In the **Beginning** of any story there must be presented a problem that has to be resolved; the Beginning must reveal your character's want/need/intent/desire. Let's take the example I used recently at a primary school writing workshop: Tommy wants a football.

The **Middle** is naturally where the character pursues his goal and runs into all the obstacles and challenges that are going to prevent him from succeeding. These can occur in the form of other people or of oneself (one's 'fatal flaw'/character weakness) or other factors such as the weather (eg. Katie wants to get to her grandmother's 80th birthday but a blizzard is in the way. How will she get there?). Aristotle called these obstacles 'reversals' because they alter the path that the character is on, thus building tension.

In Tommy's case, let's say that he goes to his dad to ask for a footy and Dad says 'Sure! We'll go out and buy one right now'. This scenario offers nothing of dramatic value. Dad's response instantly resolves any tension that Tommy might have been experiencing. There is no character growth potential here for Tommy (or his dad), no conflict, no drama, nothing to engage the reader or listener or audience.

But supposing that Dad says no. Now Tommy faces a challenge: he can give up on his desire or work at persuading his father or find another way to acquire the football. Now we have a whole plethora of dramatic possibilities and the potential for vast character growth. Naturally if he just gives up and that's the end of the story, the dramatic tension fizzles out immediately, and so does our interest. But if he takes on the challenge of persuading his father, or if he goes looking for a job to earn money to buy his own footy, or if he resorts to crime and steals someone else's, we now have some tension, a more gripping scenario, and the possibility that he will grow in the process. (We haven't even looked at Dad's side of the story yet.)

The most important character development occurs in the moment when the character learns/grows/understands something and change occurs in the key relationships. The events that occur are not nearly as important as how the

character reacts/responds to those events, and the insights or growth that then arise. The value in a piece of writing is, therefore, in what the reader can take from it, what the reader learns.

In the literature of the past, miracles sometimes occurred to help resolve the tension and get rid of obstacles, but we no longer have tolerance for contrived endings. We want the characters to sort out their own problems rather than be rescued by an angel or a sign conveniently dropping on the baddie's head.

The **Ending** is usually where all the loose ends are tied up and everything makes sense and is complete, however contemporary writing doesn't always stick to the neat ending anymore; it often prefers to echo real life, in which nothing is neat and tidy. 'Real life', as author Ronald B. Tobias says, in *Twenty Master Plots and How to Build Them,* 'is too ragged and rarely comes to the kind of conclusion that [Somerset] Maugham preferred, with 'no legitimate room for questioning'.'[3] Real life is messy; there are no convenient endings, until that final exit. And even then, the people around us must pick up and carry on.

My grandmother was an author. (Her books, *Journey Without End* and *The End of the Journey*, are about her experiences during the Holocaust and in migrating to Australia.) Nana belonged to various Writer's groups, and so had friends who took an interest in me and my scribblings. I will always remember one of her dear friends, author Amy Bunker, drawing out the structure of a story on a piece of lined paper, showing me how the story must build until it reached this high point here, the climax, and then resolve quite soon after…

[3] ibid. p. 14

**To summarise the essential basics of plot, we have:**

**1. Desire.** A 'want' or intent that is sufficiently important to drive the action of our short story or novel or play or film.

**2. Tension.** The sort of tension that arises when our desires our thwarted.

**3. Continued resistance, ever-heightening tension.** Make the opposition increase and the tension will naturally grow. Perhaps your character's efforts to make things better only make them worse. If the opposing positions are equally strong, your plot will engage and move the reader, by comparison with one convincing position and an opposing weak position.

**4. Recognition.** The character finally understands something and makes some sort of change; he or she grows in response to the obstacles. Perhaps an event occurs that forces the character to recognise his/her fatal flaw and determine to overcome it.

**5. Resolution.** The logical outcome in which all is exposed and clarified (unless you're being contemporary!).

**WHAT SORT OF STORY SHALL I WRITE?**

In ancient Greece plays were usually re-enactments of pre-existing legends and stories. The audience didn't go to the theatre to be faced with something unexpected that would surprise them, but to discover how *this* playwright had interpreted a well-known story. Even today, when most of the books we read and the films we see are 'original', age-old themes and archetypal stories continue to recur.

Tobias, in his wonderful book, *Twenty Master Plots and How to Build Them*, makes the point that, over time, efforts have been made to identify how many plots actually exist in the world. It seems as if there is an infinite number of plots, however some students of literature claim that there is a finite number of plots that have multiple *variations*. Numerous authors have attempted to identify that finite number – apparently Rudyard Kipling settled on sixty-nine. Tobias works with twenty of 'the most basic plots', twenty being an arbitrary number.

To give you an idea, his **20 Master Plots** are:

1. Quest

2. Adventure

3. Pursuit

4. Rescue

5. Escape

6. Revenge

7. The Riddle

8. Rivalry

9. Underdog

10. Temptation

11. Metamorphosis

12. Transformation

13. Maturation

14. Love

15. Forbidden Love

16. Sacrifice

17. Discovery

18. Wretched Excess

19 & 20. Ascension and Descension.

If you are planning to tackle a novel or other piece of writing in which plot figures significantly, I highly recommend that you get hold of his book and read it!

Another book that has made a big impact on me when it comes to understanding structure/plot, the story arc and character development is *The*

*Writer's Journey – Mythic Structure for Writers* by Christian Vogler. I read this book when exploring screen writing for *The Mastery Club*, and just loved it. *The Writer's Journey* unpacks the various stages of **the Hero's Journey** that are inherent within the structure of any good book or film. Mythologist Joseph Campbell is famous for his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he observes that the legends of vastly different cultures across the planet and across time share this archetypal story of the Hero's Journey. You will probably recognise the markers in your own life.

**The stages are:**

1. The world at rest (ordinary life)
2. The call to adventure (the challenge/desire)
3. Refusal of the call (resistance)
4. Meeting with the Mentor (guidance for the journey ahead)
5. Crossing the first threshold
6. Tests, allies, enemies
7. Approach to the inmost cave (ie the hero's treasure)
8. The Ordeal (you have to be tested to be worthy of treasure)
9. Reward (success!)
10. The Road Back (it ain't going to be that easy)
11. Resurrection (true success)
12. Return with the Elixir (back to the original world but now changed, enlightened, stronger, with something to contribute).

This book also explores the various character archetypes that exist, as discussed in the session on Character.

Does this mean that you have to 'choose' one of the master plots above? No; at least, not consciously. You write the story that is bubbling away inside you, and chances are that it will fall into one of those patterns. The value in knowing about these patterns is that (i) if your story is in trouble, you can refer to the pattern/blueprint for some insights regarding how to tighten and improve your storyline, and perhaps even how to find the 'track' if it is quite lost; or (ii) if you don't have a particular idea, you can decide to deliberately set yourself the task of writing something that will fit one of those master plots. It's excellent training, in any field of endeavour, to model on a master – in this case, a masterful model…

But don't feel cramped. As far as structure is concerned, the fact is that almost anything can work. You can have a story that occurs in one room over the period of a day or a story that roams across centuries and has a vast cast of characters; you can tell your story in chronological order or through flashbacks or journal entries or begin with the ending and then flip back to the start, or even tell the whole thing backwards. You can present multiple stories in parallel or have a story within a story. You can tell your story through the voice of one specific character or through several narrators each sharing their point of view, or the old 'fly-on-the-wall/God-like narrator who knows and sees everything. A story's possibilities are as unlimited as your imagination. In fact, that might be a good writing exercise in itself…

EXERCISE: **Perspectives**

Write a short story that occurs in one day, one place and in chronological order. Re-write the same story over a longer time period and in many places. Re-write it again flashing back and forth and then again completely backwards etc. etc.

**WHEN PLOT GETS STUCK**

Chances are it's the old Editor intervening too soon – or turning into a Critic – that is the real problem. But there are practical ways around it that sit alongside the old principle of 'trust and acceptance'. If you find that you have hit a wall and are no longer sure which way to take your story, set yourself the task of coming up with six to ten possible next steps. Be wild and reckless – 'he can die', 'she can die', he can go overseas', 'she can have an affair', 'he can get food poisoning', 'she can accidentally wash her favourite white top with her son's red socks'…

The idea is to go for quantity, not quality, but in the process of coming up with an abundance of possibilities, you'll intuitively know which of the ideas you've just generated are actually sound and which are not. You'll cast some of them aside immediately, others will draw your attention, and it's likely that one or two will stand out. Trust the one with the strongest call and go with it. (NB Another writer might be drawn to one of the options you cast aside, and that's because they would be following *their* intuitive sense of deeper meaning, not because they have found 'the right' direction for the story. In the end, each writer who is 'trusting their Creator/inner voice' will choose the idea that is most meaningful to them, at some level, and hence the story that they can write most powerfully.) The process of generating an abundance of ideas also helps to free up your flow, of course.

In Block's words: "When things flag a bit, do something dramatic. Put a bear in a canoe or bring in a bearded, turbaned Sikh with a gun in his hand."[4] He confesses that there have been times when he has randomly introduced a Sikh while having absolutely no idea what that character's purpose was in the grander scheme of his novel, or how it would come out now that he was part of the action.

I recently told a primary school class during a Book Week writing workshop at their school that one of the things I most love about writing is that it sends me on an adventure. It's a mystery! I have x pieces of information, x 'clues', and I must do some detective work to find out how all those pieces fit together. And I don't write mystery novels, so that sense of adventure is not limited to those genre writers. It's present for anyone who starts off with a bit of an idea and isn't exactly sure where it's going. The set of story parameters my father gave me as a child, when I was restless to write but didn't have an idea, provided me with that sort of mystery-solving adventure. I remember rushing away, alight, electric with ideas and possibilities, to see what story I could weave from the bits and piece he gave me!

**QUESTIONS – THE QUEST**

Writers tend to enjoy language, and something that has always interested me is the roots of words – such as 'heal' and 'whole' and 'holy'. Recently I was reminded that

[4] Ibid. p. 171

'question' has the word 'quest' in it, and isn't that spot-on? When we ask a question, we are on a quest to find the answer; when we write a story, we are on a quest to discover meaning, and the way we do it is inevitably via questions: Who are my characters? What do they want? Why does that matter to them? What is in the way? How will they achieve their goals? When will they achieve their goals?

Carmel Bird, in *Not Now Jack, I'm Writing A Novel*, describes the process of working in the library by the window one day, then looking out and seeing a man sitting in a red car. A woman approached and spoke to him. Immediately Bird found herself wondering, who is she? What is their relationship? and her questions (and the answers that emerged) resulted in a story. Any writer worth their salt is insatiably curious and a natural sticky-beak and eavesdropper.

Kate Grenville takes the writer through a process of 'building from bits'.[5] She suggests that you write a description of something you have experienced and then look at your piece of work from the point of view of sequence (is it best told chronologically or another way?), secrets (is there some information that could be withheld to give the story more impact?), and focus (what is the main idea you wish to communicate? The same story idea could be rewritten from different viewpoints etc.).

*My machine makes rainbows – eight approaches to creative writing in the primary school*[6] describes something called the ABC Method of building a story, that revolves entirely around questions. The first step is to list the letters of the alphabet vertically down the left-hand side of your page. Then make associations to each of

[5] ibid. p 161
[6] Reed Education, ed. R.D.Walshe,

those letters, writing a verb in the 'ing' (continuous present form) beside each letter, for example, 'asking' Fred to marry her, 'baking' a cake, 'calming' a hysterical child.

Step 2 is to choose which of those 24 ideas interests you. Then proceed by asking questions. Supposing you have chosen 'F' – Flying high.

Your first question might be: WHAT is flying high? It could be a kite, a plane, a bird, a rocket, an arrow. Let's say you decide it's a kite.

Then you ask yourself WHO is flying it? A little boy, an old man, soldier, a light-house keeper? It's a little boy.

The next question will naturally be WHY is he flying the kite? Having fun? Trying out the kite? Sending a message? Trying for a record?

Let's say it's this: "A boy is flying a kite high and hoping that someone will see a message on it." Now we are drawn to ask, what kind of message? Is the boy in trouble? Is he playing a joke on a friend? Is he a Chinese boy taking part in a festival?

He's in trouble. Okay, what kind of trouble is he in? Has he lost his brother in hilly country? Is he himself lost? Was his boat wrecked? And if we choose the latter, is help going to come? Who will come? How long will they take? Will it be a fisherman, a speedboat driver, a helicopter pilot, a hermit on the island?

Allow yourself 15-20 minutes to build up the outline of your story and then start writing, giving your Creator first go and then – but you know all that now.

EXERCISE: **The ABC Story Adventure**

Have a go.

EXERCISE: **Modeling on Masters**

Read a great novel and note all the plot progressions: What is the character's want/intent? What are the obstacles in the way? How is the dramatic tension built? What are the complications? When do they occur in the process? How is the situation resolved?

**PLOTTING THE SHORT STORY**

The basics of plot apply to short stories as well as novels, even though a short story usually focuses on a single incident rather than a whole life or a series of events, and is much more likely to stick with the three classical unities of time, place and theme than today's novel. We want to see the characters facing and overcoming conflict with other people, with themselves, and/or with their circumstances.

Some years ago I was a short-listing reader for a short story competition, and the experience was very enlightening. I had long heard about writers submitting messy stories to publishers and competitions but I didn't believe anyone could be so careless… until I received my stack of manuscripts and started reading. The business of sorting the wheat from the chaff was done quite quickly because the writers who really cared about writing demonstrated it: their submissions were neat, properly laid out, with correct spelling and grammar; it was usually possible to tell the quality of a story within the first few paragraphs. These stories were original, beautifully written, and moving, I was intrigued and affected, finding myself either smiling or tearful, and the endings were satisfying.

On the other hand, the stories that were placed in my 'reject' pile, which was considerably larger, suffered from a whole range of sins: some of them were startlingly messy, with scribblings and even arrows or cut-and-pasted corrections.

There were riddled with poor grammar, commas where there should have been full stops, its instead of it's (and vice versa), and other crimes against the English language. Stories that did not fit a category had been submitted – such as children's stories to an adult competition. They were slow to unfold, confused, clichéd or they just rambled. Sometimes they were clearly excerpts from someone's travel diary or long complaints about life or someone's pain about personal abuse – pieces of writing that did not fulfil the criteria of a 'story' at all. Sometimes they were the very epitome of impact, such as a story rife with hardcore sex and violence, but by the end my response was 'so what?' The story might have been meaningful to the writer, but as the reader, I didn't get it. And there was the old problem of telling instead of showing.

Having seen the worst that can be submitted, I know that if you are willing to learn and apply yourself to this art, it will not be difficult to rise above the mediocre.

**OPENINGS**

We are drawing to the end of this book, and we mustn't finish without talking about the importance of openings. The first sentences of a story perform a very important function. They often determine if your book is going to be read or cast aside! How many of you are 'book-tasters'? You read that opening para and if it doesn't grab you, *toss*…

That first paragraph (or session, depending on the size of the work) has to pose the Queen of Questions. It has to hook the reader, send her on a quest to find answers. You want a reader who can't put the book down. Here are some opening lines that set up a question in the reader's mind that must be answered:

*"Finally I became convinced that I had to find Sheik Zabbalawi."*

Who is the 'I'? Who is the Sheik? Why must the narrator find him? What has happened to cause this?

*"The time has come for you to be useful," said my mother-in-law to me.*

Useful in what way? And why now? What is going to happen?!

*I found myself suddenly the subject of a lawsuit.*

Why? What is going to happen?

*"I'm not sure I want to go through with this," Lisa said suddenly, the first words she'd spoken in nearly an hour." – Family Ties* by Michael Scott

Go through what? Why hasn't she spoken in nearly an hour? What is going to happen?

Albert Camus's book, *The Outsider*, apparently has one of the most famous opening paragraphs in modern European literature:

*"Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be quite sure. The telegram from the Home says: Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday."*

His pondering draws the reader in to wonder about his relationship with his mother.

The following sentence convinced agent Nicole Aragi to pluck Anil Suri's manuscript from a pile in her office:

*"Not wanting to arouse Vishnu in case he hadn't died yet, Mrs Asrani tiptoed down to the third step above the landing on which he lived, tea kettle in hand."*

Delicious. 'Died *yet*? Why was she expecting him to die? Has she poisoned him? And if so, why? And what is she going to do with the tea kettle?

The blurb on the back of a book fulfils the same function, and when it's powerfully written, or well-excerpted from the book, it will definitely hook that poor hapless reader. The following blurb from Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, did so for me:

*"What have you brought me, Hester? What have you brought me from the shop?"*

*"I've brought Katherine, Father, I've brought Katherine, but she's for me."*

Openings, by their tone and style, signal the genre of the book, i.e. whether it is a romance, a mystery or thriller, a science fiction, an adventure/action or crime story, a drama or a comedy.

EXERCISE**: Opening Paragraphs**

Write arresting openings for at least three different genres.

My students and I have been wonderfully entertained by the opening paragraphs other students read to us at this point, and as they finish reading, we often exclaim, 'Oh you'll have to finish that one! I want to know what's going to happen!" I'm still wondering about the groom who lifted his fiancée's veil at the altar only to find that it was her twin sister. Powerful hook. Great set of questions. Write the book, Koti!

**NAME THAT BABY**

Titles are another interesting challenge. I've got a book at home called *Name Your Baby*, which I sometimes use when looking for a name for a character.

*Unfortunately,* no such book exists for an author looking for a title for their book-baby. *Fortunately,* most titles 'come with' the idea. Or at least, I usually find that the title either precedes or quickly follows my idea or the writing of it. Once, when I found myself drowning in a series of disastrous titles, I called in the cavalry – my dear writer-friend Jenny – and she sent me 20 brilliant possibilities in the twinkling of an eye. ('Twinkling' is an inside joke – I couldn't resist it.)

## SESSION 9: STORYLINE: WHAT IF, WHAT NEXT?

### Part 2: Life Story Work

### *WHERE HAVE YOU COME FROM AND*

### *WHERE ARE YOU GOING?*

*"Time present and time past*

*Are both perhaps present in time future*

*And time future contained in time past."*

*– T.S. Eliot*

## MY STORY

'Where have you come from?' is a question that can take us on quite a quest.

Indigenous peoples, and those who have spent generations working on the land, see themselves as belonging to the land – the earth as their mother, while town-dwellers tend to be somewhat oblivious to it and see the land/earth as something that is just 'there for us'. Even if we are moved by the beauty of nature and able to feel the deep-rooted stillness in a tree or feel cleansed by the moving vitality of the ocean, we lack the sensitivity to nature's rhythms that an indigenous person has.

I love nature with a passion. The first thing I look for in a new house is how much greenery I can see from the windows, and if there a good reserve nearby where I can walk my dog. But I am the product of centuries of 'civilisation' and I

wouldn't know how to survive in the wilderness or how to read the weather or how to figure out which animals are nearby… I often wonder how it would feel to have that extra close connection, that sense of belonging to land, of 'knowing it'. For the most part, we town-dwellers have become disconnected from this 'mother' and we don't even give the earth a moment's thought when faced with the question 'where have you come from?'

Most people probably look to their ancestry to answer that question, and perhaps you have invested time in studying your family history. Perhaps you've tracked down ancestors and discovered fame and/or crime in your roots. I haven't yet made a deep exploration of my past. I'm also not drawn to go searching out my past lives, if that theory proves to be true (and it does make sense to me). It seems to me that there is quite enough to deal with in the present and it's also clear to me that if the past is still affecting me, it is doing so *in the present*, and the answers, and way forwards, are here, not there.

Nonetheless, learning about the past is very interesting. I was intrigued to discover, for instance, that my father's surname was not the family's original name. His family's original surname, del Reyes, meant 'of the kings'. It was changed hundreds of years ago in Morocco by authorities that didn't like their subjects having names with royal implications, so the family was given the surname 'Bentata', meaning 'son of a slave'. It's funny, but I never liked Bentata. Without knowing about the family history regarding that name, I changed my surname by deed poll when I was 21 to 'Grace', a name I chose for myself that expressed some of the values I wanted to grow into.

Searching family history is an interesting endeavour, especially if you discover patterns repeating themselves through history. How is it that generation after generation makes similar choices? Are our choices programmed into our genes, setting our destiny? Or is something else at work? It often seems that we are destined to a particular physical illness – 'dad and grandad both died of a heart attack so I must be careful'… But perhaps what is really inherited is not the disease so much as the lifestyle, and lifestyle *is* the number one cause of disease.

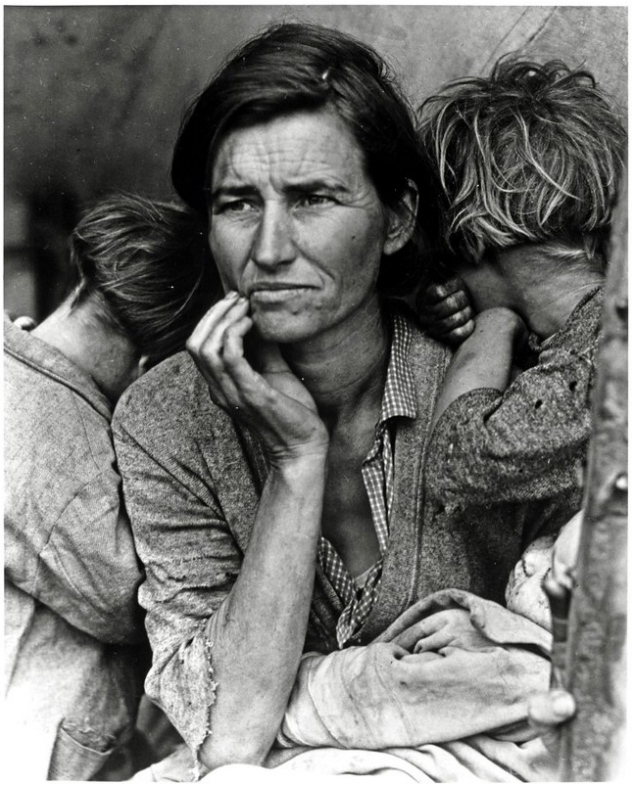
What about our emotional health?

During the years when I was a struggling young mother, a dear friend of ours was battling with what it meant to him to be a father. He had decided quite young that he was not going to have children as he had been deeply hurt by his own father's fathering; however, as his wife's biological clock started ticking more loudly, she began to long for children of her own, and he chose to face the issue very honestly and look into himself. His mantra became: 'know *why* you are *who* you are', and the more he spoke about this with me, the more my own frustrations and hurts bubbled and seethed. Memories that had been sniffing at my heels suddenly took a great bite out of me. I still remember sitting in the sandpit with him at our country home one day, howling, while my partner took our toddler out of earshot to the other end of the house. Later I wrote an article about that experience, 'Separating the Person from the Pattern'.[7]

Harville Hendrix is the author of a brilliant book called *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*[8], which is about our tendency to recreate our parents' relationships and patterns, in order to heal ourselves. If our father abandoned us as

[7] First published in Living Now 1992.
[8] Schwartz & Wilkinson, 1988.

a child, there is a good chance that we will attract a husband who abandons us, partly because we established a belief that 'the men we care about leave us' and partly so that we can 'feel and heal' the part that was hurt when we were young. Hendrix shows how our current frustrations originated in unmet childhood needs, and how we are unwittingly trying to resolve them with childhood tactics, and he provides answers and a model for restoring love where it has begun to erode.



Both Harville Hendrix and Dr John Demartini encourage us to own our 'disowned parts', which can be negative or positive character traits that we reject for various reasons, but which we need to own and accept in order to heal/become whole. One of the disowned parts I am still working to reintegrate is my connection to 'divine intelligence/wisdom'. I've honed my ability to trust my intuitive voice when writing, but not always when 'living', where I can sometimes be plagued by doubts. I suspect this has its roots in childhood memories about my mother meditating and being supremely confident of her connection to divine wisdom. I seem to have decided that she was connected and I was not, and I'm still building trust in my own link to that wisdom.

*The Mastery Club,* my novel for young people, is narrated by a twelve-year-old girl called Natalie who thinks her own life is a bit boring and so frequently loses

herself in stories about magic and fantasy. She dreams of being able to do 'real magic', like the wizards she reads about, particularly the sort of magic that will help others. Into her life comes Nina, a green-haired girl who has been brought up to live as a conscious creator. Her parents have been studying universal laws since she was a toddler, and Nina has absorbed all their guidance and is strongly rooted in that way of living and of perceiving what happens in her life. She represents Natalie's disowned parts – the parts that function as a responsible agent, the creator in her own life. Nina also represents *my* disowned parts – she is an inspiration to the Natalie-in-me.

Soon after my book was published, I became aware that people around me were looking to me to demonstrate mastery in my own life, and I ran in the opposite direction, panting, 'I'm a writer, not a master!' Much as I wanted to be the latter, I couldn't see that quality in me at all. I was forced to engage with the issue, and wrote an article called 'Instant Mastery – Just Add Water' in which I untangled some of the conflicting ideas I had about this issue.

**WHERE ARE YOU GOING?**

It has become increasingly clear to me that our sense of identity is critical when it comes to determining our next steps and, especially, our 'destiny'. Like the friend who chose to face the question 'know why you are who you are' before moving into fatherhood, new and larger possibilities are unlikely to proceed from a well-established, limited self-image. As the Bible says, you can't put old wine into new skins; in the words of Nina, in *The Mastery Club*, 'you have to become a new person… The old you won't get the goal – the new you will.'

Prior to my book being published, in my perception of myself, I was a 'small-time writer' – just the odd story and article here and there. I finally came to the conclusion that there wasn't enough interest in my writing for me to become very successful, so I put writing aside, kept it as a hobby, and got on with more Serious Options. For a long time, my belief, the idea I kept affirming to myself, was 'nobody wants what I have to offer' and my identity was 'I'm a hobby writer'. Nonetheless, when feedback to my manuscript from first readers was resoundingly positive, D and I bit off the publish-my-book adventure, and as the positive feedback rolled in and the books rolled out, I began to change my self-perception. I began to think of myself as a successful author. I began to entertain bigger possibilities for myself. This new identity drove a whole new set of expectations. I began to expect good things to happen in my life, greater opportunities than I had ever experienced before. And as those things came to pass, I realised that our identity is the x-factor when it comes to creating our lives the way we want them. If we see ourselves a certain way, we can only allow into our reality/world the experiences that fit with/are a match with that identity. It really won't matter what we affirm to ourselves if our affirmation is in conflict with our core identity.

Identity is the "I AM" statement. If you agree with the mystics, with the age-old spiritual teachings that tell us that the name of God is 'I Am That I Am', then you know that whatever comes after the I AM has the power of Creation behind it. Say 'I am rich, I am poor, I am creative, I am stupid' – and whatever you choose to identify with will become your reality if you hold to it deeply and faithfully enough. Where the rubber hits the road on this idea is that nothing can come into your life unless

you, at some level, identify with it. That goes for the 'nice' stuff and the 'nasty' stuff, and by 'identify', I mean arriving at a sense of 'oneness' with that idea. It's 'you'.

**SOURCE AND DESTINY**

Mystics talk about our 'Source', the point of infinite love and intelligence that created us and is our True Self, our true identity. Everything we experience on earth is considered to be 'maya', or illusion. They tell us that our true seeing is veiled and that we only see shadows and appearances. There is clearly some truth in that, for it is scientific fact that we don't see the true nature of solids, for instance. They appear to be solid to our physical eyes, but in fact they are swirling whirling vortices of energy. Everything is energy vibrating at different frequencies, but we don't see that dimension with our physical eyes. We just see the appearance, the 'maya', the illusion, the dream. It seems that we are doing our earth lives for the adventure of life, for the journey, the experience but, the mystics teach, paradoxically, we have never left our True Source and at some point we will return to that consciousness and see everything again as it truly is.

*A Course in Miracles* is a fascinating set of books that explore this idea that nothing is as it appears, that *we* give everything all the meaning it has for us. The Introduction reads like this:

*"This is a course in miracles. It is a required course. Only the time you take it is voluntary. Free will does not mean that you can establish the curriculum. It means only that you can elect what you want to take at a given time. The course does not aim at teaching the meaning of love, for that is beyond what can be taught. It does aim, however, at removing the blocks to the awareness of love's presence, which is*

*your natural inheritance. The opposite of love is fear, but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite.*

*"This course can therefore be summed up very simply in this way:*

***Nothing real can be threatened.***

***Nothing unreal exists.***

*"Herein lies the peace of God."*

That Introduction set up such compelling questions in my mind, that I was irresistibly drawn on the quest of exploring that material.

*"I am now going upstairs to invent the story of my life."*

*– Russell Baker*

## YOUR STORY

If you approach your life from the perspective of the question 'what next?' you will almost inevitably remain an observer as your life goes on 'happening to you'. But if you approach your life from the perspective of the question 'what if?', then you have the potential to consciously co-create your life the way you want to; to live by design.

What is your dream? your vision? your mission? the purpose of your life? Perhaps you know and perhaps you think you don't. If the latter, then answer this question: What do you love to do? What enlivens you? What makes your heart sing? What are the 'what ifs' deep inside you? What is the whisper in your ear? Even when I had quite given up on myself as a writer, the desire to write always remained a 'whisper in my ear', a nudge now and then reminding me of my inmost desire.

It is said that the tragedy when someone dies is not so much the death of the body as the death of the dreams; to die, as Wayne Dyer has said, 'with the music still inside you'. If we look around us to nature and life in its every form, then the purpose of life is clearly something to do with growing, with fulfilling potential. Each of us has a different nature and purpose. Like the cells in the human body, some of us are destined to be eye cells, some to be liver cells, some brain cells, some toe nail cells, but each serves an important purpose. We only discover how important our thumb or big toe is when we hurt it and don't have its full use. Sometimes we

undervalue ourselves, but we don't have the right to minimise our importance because, as Buckminster Fuller realised, we can't see the whole.

Take some time to dream big.

*"I don't want to get to the end of my life and find that I lived just the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well." - Diane Ackerman*

EXERCISE: **What if???**

Listen to your faintest whispers, your deepest dreams. Honour them by writing them down…

EXERCISE: **Disowned Parts**

Take a look at the various characters you are drawn to in the books you read. Any clues re disowned parts, experiences you would like to have, parts of yourself you are denying? We've already talked about virtual themes. Is there a persistent character you are drawn to who is expressing a part of yourself you aren't owning up to? It might be a wise man or a tramp, an adventurer or a tart…

EXERCISE: **Living to the Limit**

Recall the George Simenot quote that began this session: '*And the beginning will always be the same; it is almost a geometrical problem: 'I have such a man, such a woman, in such surroundings. What can happen to them to oblige them to go to their limit?' That's the question. It will be sometimes a very simple incident, anything that will change their lives. Then I write my novel chapter by chapter.'*

Now, what has happened to *you* to oblige you to go to your limit? What has changed your life? Write about that.

EXERCISE: **Plotting your Life**

Look at your life as if it is a film script or a novel.

**1) Who is the protagonist and what is his/her desire/intent/need?** You, of course, but *who are you?* Write a brief character description – 'a housewife in her 40s with three kids and a yearning to inspire the world'… 'a salesman on the point of having an affair…' And what do you *want*?

**2) Who or what is your antagonist?** Who or what is against you? How are they thwarting you? What are the obstacles, the resistance you are encountering? How are you dealing with them?

**3) How have your actions thus far 'made everything worse?'** What are the weaknesses that keep undermining you? What enemies have you made?

**4) Have you committed to your great desire?** Have you reached a point of no return, made a decision that set you upon a one-way track? At what point did you commit and how did this make things better or worse?

**5) What are your gains, growths, achievements, insights?** What allies have you made? What have you learnt, conquered, achieved, gained?

EXERCISE: **Mythic Journey and Archetypes**

Perhaps the language of myth sits better with you. In that case, take a look at your life through the lens of myth and see if you can apply the happenings in your life to the structure described on page 8. What is your Treasure? Who is your Mentor? Who is the Villain in your Life? Who are your Allies?

Or if these plots of your life are too vast, take a look at yesterday's dramatic tension:

EXERCISE: **Yesterday's Dramatic Tension**

Track the same things: what did you want, what got in your way, how did you respond, what was the outcome?

EXERCISE: **Bring in a Sikh**

If your own life seems to be getting stuck in old ruts and familiar patterns, if it's all beginning to feel same old, same old, then bring in a Sikh! Give yourself a new experience that will turn your world upside down, or at least give it a little shake-up.

As Goldberg says, *'Go to the woods alone for three days. Extend your boundaries. If you are terrified of horses, buy one and make friends with it.'* At the very least, go to the beach, whatever the weather, and walk into the wind, or if the city is not comfortable for you, go there and rub shoulders with the startling variety in humanity that always seems to be out for the day in the city. Or take one item from your list of 100 things you would like to do, and do it.

NLP teaches a procedure called 'Changing Personal History'. Since everything is just perception, just our interpretation, at any moment we can rewrite our past, we can re-make the meanings we have created thus far. Instead of interpreting the teasing of other children at school as signs of their cruelty and our inability to fit in, perhaps we can see their cruelty as fear, and recast our aloneness as a time in which we came to know ourselves or discovered our creativity or an unexpected friend or the beauty of nature…

EXERCISE: **New beginnings**

Write a new beginning for your life. You can do this in one of two ways:

**1) Write your actual experienced beginning but reinterpreting it to be richer and more nourishing of you than you perhaps have done so far…** (Perhaps an abusive parent taught you that you know how to protect yourself, how to withdraw in times of attack and vulnerability, and how to keep hurtfulness out.)

**2) Or write a new beginning for your life as of now.** If your life had a new beginning starting now, in this next moment, what would happen? How would you travel through your life? What would you attract?

The song, 'You're the Voice', was made famous by John Farnham. The lyrics are by Andy Qunta, Chris Thompson, Maggie Ryder and Keith Reid, and they begin:

*"We have*

*The chance to turn the pages over*

*We can write what we want to write…"*