Cultural Daily

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The Secret Sauce for Writing Success

Karen Lacey · Tuesday, August 4th, 2020

How does one choose a writing class when teachers and courses are everywhere? A quick Google search for “creative writing classes” yields more than 1.7 billion choices, each of which promises the secret sauce to blockbuster success. A strategy, a technique, a new take on the three-act structure, how about character wheels to ensure the appropriate amount of contrast and conflict within protagonists, antagonists, secondary and tertiary characters alike—take your pick. Courses and workshops span one-hour specials to advanced degrees. This all adds up, but none completely fill the gap, none alone are the secret sauce.

Bestselling books notwithstanding, I didn’t become a real writer until I worked with Donald Freed. Donald has successfully taught writers for more than sixty years, and his students consistently achieve worldwide acclaim. These days, his Saturday seminar takes place at his Los Angeles home, where writers gather in Donald’s living room to read their work and delve into the unconscious with his guidance. International students work by phone, and most students gather in the South of France for two weeks each summer to redefine the intensive writing workshop experience.

Every Saturday for more than a year, right up until the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered our doors, I drove five, six, seven hours to and from the Freed’s home for the Saturday seminar. I sat with kind and wizened writers as Donald relentlessly plunged the depths of the unconscious powers within our stories.
Donald’s technique isn’t secret, not is it complexly laden with diagrams and Power Points. Rather, it boils down to one small word—if.

It took me nearly six months for the first pennies to drop. The “magic if,” he calls it, when used in conjunction with a character’s unconscious childhood intention, allows access to the Truth. Not the facts. Facts are easy. Facts are the plot. Boom, done. The Truth lies beneath a character’s Why. To paraphrase Faulkner, the difference between truth and facts is truth casts a shadow. Truth is that element beyond words that we strive for. When a writer approaches their work from this shadowy path, new worlds appear. They achieve a level of authenticity which leaves them in awe of what they’re capable of.

Freed first explores the concept of the magic if in his book *Freud and Stanislavski: New directions in the performing arts* (Vantage Press 1964). The critical element is to go back to that four-year-old self of your subject, whether fictional or real, and understand the childhood wounding that led to the survival adaptation with which that individual deals with the world. To explain this

intention, Donald tells his own story, and how his intention in life is “to wear long pants.” As a young boy, Donald remembers watching a train conductor sitting on the sill of the open engine doorway eating his lunch. In the boy Donald’s mind, there was nothing more perfect than being a train conductor and eating your lunch. That conductor was wearing long pants.

The goals changed, as did the specific words, until theatre and literature became his long pants of life.

My own earliest memory is lying in my bed with my ear to the wall, listening to my mother read to my two older brothers. When she finally came to my room, I would ask her to read to me, please please please. But she would tell me she was too tired, she’d read to me another night. But another night never came.

After working with Donald, I realized that all my life I have been trying to be worthy of being read to. This has no doubt influenced my career choice as a writer and helping other writers succeed. In an abstract way, I am read to now for my living.

When authors know their characters in this way, they can filter every thought, action, and reaction through the lens of that childhood intention. To do this, we have not just a word, but an entire sentence to work with: *If I were [character], and my intention in life were to [childhood wounding-based intention], and I were in this situation [describe here], what would I feel like doing, and what would I actually do?*

Broken down into its individual parts, it looks like this: The character means any and every character, from the waiter with the bit part to your lead protagonist. Their intention is the survival tool through which, at a young age, they learned to see the world. The situation is the accumulated events over their lifetime, but more particularly within the recent past, that got them to the scene they are in right now. Freed has his students stop here and go deep, thinking of and feeling this situation in such depth that they relive it. And now, using the four-year-old’s eyes, what would they do if they could do anything in the world? Would they fly away? Would they sing at the top of their lungs? Dig a hole to hide? Strangle their stalker? Ninety-nine percent of the time, this wish cannot be fulfilled. It’s impossible, because what they can actually do is based on the constrictions of society. But the body reacts, and that character will have a physical response—not mental or word-related.

Physical.

Before I learned this sauce, no matter how successful what I’d written had been, I was a mere waterbug skimming the surface, missing the juice in the narrative depths below. The plot is facts, the narrative is Truth. The magic if leads to the narrative.

When I first started reading my novel at the seminar, Donald would stop me after one or two sentences to identify the missing potential: those waterbug swan dives into the wordless power we write for. One day, I arrived at the seminar with a scene including a character named Hank. In the bit I read, Hank states, “It’s a piece of shit,” while referring to a carburetor. Innocent enough, right? Not for Donald and his uncanny sense of where to drill for oil. He had me screech to a stop—in front of the entire class, no less—and asked me what Hank’s intention in life was (I had no idea). What was his past, his family, his birthday, and more? I knew nothing about my precious, cardboard character. I just needed him to fulfill a role, to murder a kindle of kittens. Hank and his piece of shit carburetor seemed good enough.

I went home obsessed with Hank. I went through Donald's process of understanding Hank through his childhood wounding, what his survival tools had become, and what lay beneath the word "shit." It turns out Hank was no Hank, he was Hubble. His mother was an alcoholic who got pregnant via one blurry boyfriend or another. But she kept the child, albeit unwanted, as she couldn't get sober enough to do anything else about it. Later, as she held her weak and wrinkled son, the TV spouted the success of the Hubble Space Telescope, and she figured Hubble was as good a name as any. Then she reached for her current boyfriend's outstretched bottle.

Hubble was a timid child, smaller than other kids and unable to piece together life the way adults could. At night, he lay in bed listening to the voices, sometimes laughing, sometimes fighting, always ignoring him. One day he found a dog. It was small and dirty and lost, and Hubble loved that dog. He fed it as he could from his own food, and brushed it as best he could, and let it sleep with him, and he talked to that dog as he could with no other person alive. He told it everything, his dreams, his fears, what had made him laugh (very little) and what made him cry (most everything). But no adult was there to show Hubble how to care for his dog, how to look after it and keep it safe from passing cars in the road. One day his dog was hit and killed, and that slammed closed the last door in poor Hubble's heart. He spent the rest of his life avoiding loving anything that could be taken from him—which was everything.

The word "shit" was what alerted Donald to the untapped potential of that character. The phrase "piece of shit" was Hubble's entire world view, his way of surviving, his way of keeping himself safe. Guided by my unconscious, I had written those words without knowing what they meant. It was only after understanding that young boy's wounds and unconscious survival tool through his intention, that he became real: that he became the Truth. The word "if" led me there to greater depth and truth in my writing. This in turn will resonate with readers at conscious and unconscious levels. In a nutshell, it makes your writing more memorable because readers feel it more.

Donald has been affiliated with the University of Southern California (Department of Professional Writing), University of California at Los Angeles (Philosophy Department), St. Mary's College, and California State Universities at Northridge and Long Beach, The University of Leeds, and the York Royal Theatre.

Photo: Donald Freed Seminar in action.

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