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When There Is No Template: Writing on Pixar's Inside Out

Meg LeFauve · Wednesday, February 10th, 2016

My first day working at Pixar was simultaneously one of the most thrilling and scary days of my life. I had not written for animation before?—?I was walking into a process that I knew nothing about. I was intimidated by the great storytellers working at Pixar (in every department). How would I fit in or live up to that? And the story I would be working on was a film by Pete Docter?—?a true genius who had already made two of my favorite films?—?*Monsters, Inc.* and *Up*. Would I be able to contribute, to help him tell his story? And the greatest unknown of all?—?his story was about the emotions inside of a little girl's head?—?just what was the writing template for that?

And here's the thing?—?there wasn't a template. For any of it?—?for me working at Pixar, or fitting into that system (with all of those immensely talented people), or for the story we had to create?—?except in Pete's amazing head. It was all utterly new. What I learned at Pixar was to push into that unknown?—?and the fear that naturally accompanies it. That you don't need a template, or a verified, proven course. What you need is:

— The will to hang in, to try?—?and to try again. And again. And again. And again. Pete, as the creator, knew where the film was coming from for him personally, and he had his "ah ha" moments with the story, those elusive moments of clarity. (He talks about them on the DVD extras if you'd like to hear). For me, as a member of the team helping Pete to realize that clarity in the story, it wasn't a "singular" moment as much as a concentrated layering process. Pete and I, along with fellow collaborators Ronnie del Carmen (co-director) and Josh Cooley (story supervisor), constantly took the story apart and put it back together?—?each time, trying new things. Every scene and moment, even those we loved, had to earn its way back into the story. We kept pushing, solidifying the structure, deepening Joy's character journey, finding different story angles, ideas or moments. I now think of it as the "creative churn." And that churn takes focus and effort.

— You need to find a way to accept failure. To be okay making mistakes, or better, to welcome it, because that means you are out on that edge. It's hard not to be "right" and perfect and brilliant! But no one always is and playing it safe only gets you safe stories, not thrilling, original ones.

— You need to seek out notes and other people's perspective on your story. Sounds easy but, man, it can be hard, right? To go from the surety of "that is it" back down into the darkness of the unknown. But it's so crucial to get feedback, to know what people are understanding and feeling as they experience the story?—?and what they are not. You get to see the story "fresh" through their eyes. I will admit that sometimes I really didn't want to get one more note! But each time we received feedback the film got better. And better.

— You need to find a way to get comfortable with your own vulnerability. At the very least, to recognize that this is where truly great stories come from.

— You need to let yourself play. Even when you are under pressure, of time or expectation, you

must find a way to play. The analyzer/ protector part of your brain doesn't write. (Sorry fear, you gotta take a seat for a bit.) The spontaneous, curious adventure hunter does. Find a way to go on your gut instinct and see where it takes you. Then after that, when it's on up in cards or on the page, bring in the analyzer. Before that it's all about the fun of "What can happen next? Who can she be? What could she do?" Some of my very favorite memories are the spitball sessions when we made each other laugh and wonder and rethink.

— You need the support of a team and you need to support the team. Being able to work with Ronnie del Carmen, Josh Cooley, and the producer Jonas Rivera, was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Not only was I able to witness their incredible level of expertise, but we had fun and made each other laugh through the rough spots. Another one of the best parts of writing for Pixar was working with the incredible story board artists. Their level of artistry, craft and storytelling taught me every day. I felt privileged and honored to be part of their team. So if you're slogging it out alone, find your community?—?to support you and for you to support. That energy exchange keeps you fresh and hones your skill.

I look back on that first day at Pixar, and what I know now is that the combination of fear and thrill that I felt on that day (and on many days after) is the fertile ground of creativity. Because it means you are pushing beyond any plan or expectation?—?to the edge of the story where it can all crack open. At Pixar, I was given the opportunity to work on a team, to help Pete write his story, and in doing that, I was able to push myself past any template?—?to the edge of what I knew I could do and be. And isn't that what the hero's journey is all about?

Top image from Inside Out, courtesy Pixar/Walt Disney Pictures.

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