

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a snow globe. The globe is tilted, and a thick stream of white snow is falling from the bottom. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a person's face and hair.

Motivation and inspiration for
emerging writers
A companion guide

Stories are just words

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Introduction

This is the story of what happens when a talented, mid-life activist, a ravishing serial entrepreneur, a beautiful war widow and a woman obsessed with Sherlock Holmes, decide to take a deep dive into where their creativity lives.

This was a brutal experiment that each woman was willing to undertake over a period of several months, in order to move forward on their writing journey and as emerging writers.

Originally sharing their work as part of an eclectic writer's group, they realised along the way that their creative path was one that all writers struggle with; no matter the genre or the writing they produce. From day one, it seemed that anything they could share with the writing community at large; could only be a good thing.

“Every writer wants to be read and this little exercise helped all of us take a deeper breath and put pen to paper in a more honest and heartfelt way...”

So here they are: Eight little words with big centres

FAITH

DESIRE

EXPLORATION

PASSION

FEAR

MOXIE

BRAVERY

INTEGRITY

And here's what they revealed...



Faith

Faith First

For any writer starting out, and perhaps even for those who are well seasoned, one of the hardest things to do is to turn your fear into faith. Fear of what; you might ask? Fear is subjective, but many writers will tell you that they're frightened of their creative powers, the process of letting the muse take over and the simple act of allowing their craft. In other words to *not* censor themselves. I believe writers need to understand their faith first and foremost; where it comes from and where it's leading them. So here's how I would describe my own faith...

When I think about faith it's a noun that becomes a verb. It's something that has wilfully presented itself to me in many guises, it's something that appears and disappears but never leaves. Faith, life and death are completely entwined in my consciousness as three essences that become one, that drive all things, my(self) and all selves.

Faith to me is a perfume I used to wear, it's melancholia and hopefulness all rolled into one, it's the human sadness that will not go away because we need it; to grow, to evolve and when I smell that perfume out of the blue, it reminds me that my faith has grown.

As a young woman, I once travelled across the world on a long flight. Next to me sat a boy, dark-eyed, handsome, eloquent, polite – we spoke for hours about deep things and the flight seemed to be over in minutes not hours. As we stood to leave the aircraft I asked him if he would like to meet up in the city of our arrival and he looked at me with such sadness and said 'I have loved speaking with you and you are a wonderful women, but we cannot meet – you see - you have no faith' (by that he was referring to religion) but I took it to mean something else and he was right – I had no faith. Not in myself, not in my ability to survive life and it stirred in me a great listening to the world. I tuned my thoughts towards those who had needed great faith and were willing to wait for it to appear.

Today we are often encouraged to 'jump and the parachute will open, the angels will catch you, wings will appear' and it's in the very jumping that faith is born – you don't get a guarantee and sometimes you don't even get the wings; you do fall to the floor, into the abyss, and pieces get broken. But the faith that takes root in you comes from your willingness to jump into the unknown, not because the outcome is positive or not.

Faith to me is not about an external God or validation from some other source that I can join or become a member of. It's already inside, it just needs watering and its power allows the manifestation of wonderful things - limitless, glorious, wonderful things that can be shared and can touch others. Like bees busying themselves, cross-pollinating the garden, the universe; strands of faith touch and set alight everyone who comes to know it, they weave us together, allowing compassion for others. Faith ultimately for me is like a knowing that can't be known, a flower that has died and now blooms on an invisible stem – it's perfume wafting towards me, waiting for me to look up.

Jayne Ryan

The Path of Faith

Faith. It is a beautiful word. To some it means confidence in one's ability to accomplish an end goal. To others it means believing in something that cannot be known. To others it means much more, something that transcends this world to connect with a dimension we cannot see. It is believing in something far greater than yourself.

In any case, faith is a conviction that does not waver. It is a surety that will not die; it is a fire that cannot be put out. It is believing in something so much that you will do anything to get to the point of "achievement," whatever that achievement might be. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

I remember when I first discovered I was a writer. At first I didn't tell anyone. I got up early to write, and I wrote when I came home from work until late into the night, but no one knew my secret life. I wrote so much my "k" key no longer had a "k" on it, but I left the people in my life "in the dark" with my new obsession. Then something changed. I had to say something even if the world thought I was a fruitcake. The fire kindling in my soul had to come out. If I didn't own what I was doing, I knew the dream in my mind would never come to pass.

I suppose you could say that this realization to own my work was the point when I came to "faith." That fire, that faith, led me to do some crazy things. I went into the office one day and sat down with my boss. I had done the math. If I cut my hours by five, which meant cutting my salary by almost 13 percent, I could barely scrape by. That would give me five more hours a week to write. Insane? Yes. But the fire in my soul wouldn't have it any other way. I would do anything to write even an hour more a day. My boss allowed my insanity and I became instantly poor.

You can't do that without faith. It was faith that drove me, and faith that led me down the path of sheer insanity. But I knew something the world did not. I knew I would get somewhere – eventually – because I loved writing so much that it just "had" to happen. There were no maybes. There were no "if onlys." In fact, if truth be told, there was really no insanity at all, but a rational thought and a fire of conviction. There was faith.

It is interesting to note that it wasn't really a faith in myself that drove me. It was faith in what I was writing. I had faith in the characters I had created and I had faith the characters had something to say to the world. This may be your point of faith as well. I knew the words on the page could not just sit forever in my computer. They had to come out. They had to be seen. It was almost as if they had a life of their own.

So my path began to form because of faith.

It is the writer's way – this path of faith. You have to take a step for the path to form. At times you may not see the path, but it is before you, forming as you take another step of faith. At other times you will see a good bit of the path and will plough ahead as if you knew exactly where you were going. Then there will be times when the path will be blocked with frustrations and obstacles. But here is the deal. It is your path, and you have to walk it.

This path will be different for all of us. You can't look at one writer and take their steps because their steps do not match your own. You can learn from their steps, grow from them, but you cannot use them. No two paths are alike because no two people are alike. But here at the Writer's Way, together, we can share our steps and help each other along the way "keep the faith."

So whether you are already on your path or are looking into the woods not knowing which direction you need to go, here is the first step you need to take – you need to admit you are a writer. You not only need to admit it, you need to say it – out loud.

Who are you?

"I am a writer."

It took me years to say it. It took me years to realize that my identity wasn't "I write," but my identity was "I am a writer." There is a big difference in the two, is there not? We can all write, but we can't all be writers.

You can be an accountant that writes on the side, or a doctor who dabbles in short stories, or a garbage collector who blogs about his day, but how do you introduce yourself? If your money comes from somewhere else (like mine did) you tend to introduce yourself by your "paying" job. But is that who you truly are? Is that your identity?

If you are reading this book, I think not. You are a writer.

You have to have faith in your own identity. You have to own it, even if the world thinks you're an absolute fruitcake. It is who you are. It is your path. So today, take a leap of faith, or another step of faith, and declare to the world your true intentions.

Who are you? Do you have the faith it takes to own the path?

I know you do.

Even if you don't see the path yet, take a step. I assure you, the path will form – by faith.

Nicole DiCenzo

Faith - The Inner Voice

A friend recently said to me, “It’s time to get a move on and do something about your writing. Have something to show for it. Stop wasting your time and get some results.”

I’m a failure in her eyes, but neither her opinion nor her words offended me. I did not defend myself or try to convince her otherwise. I realize it’s pointless to explain the writer’s journey to an outsider. So I just laughed, and said, “I get results every day, Linda.”

Depending on the current state of my fragile writer’s ego, comments like hers can crush my spirit and plunge me into the depths of despair. Arguably, naysayers have a point. After years of work, I have ‘nothing’ to show for it. As in - no Pulitzer/ Booker/ Nobel or any other Prize, no New York Times best-seller, no publishing credits, and no agent. It’s a good day if my queries garner an automatic email rejection rather than the ever-popular ‘crickets.’

But I disagree with critics like Linda. I know I’ve come a long, long way from where I started. My fellow writers will understand – what we do is a labor of love, beyond all reason and logic.

The question is, why? Why do we write, day in and day out, week after week, year after year, feverishly, anonymously, unheralded and unrecognized? What kind of masochist volunteers for this gut-wrenching, soul-baring process whose odds of success are higher than winning the lottery? Why engage in an occupation whose only guarantee is a broken heart?

For me, the answer is simple. Writing is my passion. It is the essence of me. Something deep inside tells me this is what I was meant to do. Although I have been writing all my life, it is only now that I’ve chosen to earn my living doing what I love. I believe I have something to say and stories to tell in a way no one else can express them. And by no longer letting life get in the way of my true calling, I’ve finally taken a leap of faith in myself.

That is not to say my resolve never wavers. It is a battle I wage almost daily. Yes, I struggle with grammar, syntax, plot and character development, but more often than not, my greatest challenge is holding on to my faith in myself, and the belief that I can make a difference with my words. Over time, my self-belief has grown stronger. I may lose a skirmish or two, but overall, I think I’m winning the war.

When I left my job to write full time, all I had was faith and hope. I had no appreciation of the modern publishing industry. I was naive enough to think good writing, sprinkled with a little good luck, was all it took. I focused only on my joy of being liberated from the nine-to-five, trusting that if others could make it, I could, too.

Quickly I realized it was not only agents, publishers and readers we writers needed to contend with and court, but also, there were countless other harbingers of doom lying in wait. Practically anyone who had ever picked up a book was lurking around the corner with an opinion they were eager to share.

In other words, stating you are a writer is like baiting a shark. There will be blood-letting, and if you're not careful, it could be yours. People have felt free to opine to me, variously, on my chances of success (dismal), my personal character (I'm a lazy, impractical dreamer), and my writing ability (No agent? You can't be any good), in addition to summing up and dismissing the whole of independent publishing (wannabe losers).

As a newbie, I let this get to me. Agony and soul-searching followed. I stopped writing. I scanned the job listings and went on interviews. I prepared myself for the commute and a return to business suits and office politics. I promised myself I'd resume writing before and after work, like in the old days. So why did my new practicality make me feel like a greater failure than after any bad critique or rejection I'd ever had? Again, the answer was simple: I had lost my faith in myself.

My way back came via a long-ago memory buried in the past, about a dog, a little girl, and the power of faith.

When I was ten years old, our dog Pepper ran away one day while our family was out. My parents searched the house and yard frantically, while my brother and sister cried inconsolably. I didn't join in the investigation or hysterics; beyond all reason, something inside told me there was no cause for alarm. The conviction I would see my dog again was so strong, it instantly diffused my fear. My family was aghast at my coldness. I was seemingly so unaffected and calm. When questioned, all I could say was what I believed, and what I knew to be true, without knowing how or why: "I'm not crying because I know she'll come back."

They demanded proof. All I could offer was faith.

Every day after school I ran home expecting her to be there. Weeks passed. My parents gave up the search. Still, my inner voice beseeched me to believe. It was only when my mother put away Pepper's bowl and bed that I began to doubt. Maybe everyone else was right, and my dog was lost forever. I was just a stupid little kid, with an impossible dream. I went outside and sat on the step, folded my head into my arms, and sobbed.

Suddenly, something soft and furry slammed against me, knocking me off the step and pinning me to the ground. Thin, filthy, and missing her collar, Pepper was as energetic as ever. We tussled on the grass, she licking my face, me yelling for my mother. It didn't matter where Pepper had been. Now she was home. And my inner voice whispered, "I told you so."

That incident was a defining moment of my childhood. I conjure up this story when shards of doubt prick at my brain, and I feel like that ten year-old, crying on the steps. Maybe my faith brought Pepper back; maybe not. Linda might chalk it up to coincidence or luck. But I choose to believe the power of faith, though it may defy all reason and logic, is real.

Fellow writers, believe in yourselves. Listen only to the urging of your inner voice, no matter how loud the cacophony of dissent may become. Dream. Believe. Have faith.

Karen Di Prima

Pilot Light

I sit in the car wash parking lot waiting for the gas man. I own this place, yet I understand almost nothing about its inner workings. Its couplings, its timers and sensors, its pneumatic whooshes and sighs. Its viscous pink soap that gets clogged in the pump and regularly spurts out a crazy confetti of magenta-colored foam blobs against the gray walls.

Mostly, I fail to understand how something that looks so sturdy and solid could at the same time be so determined to fall apart. And it seems whenever I take the initiative to improve my humble 1960s-era, cinderblock box of hoses, pipes, and suds, I discover some aggressive new entropy at work.

Last month it was the corroded gas line. I'd decided to fend off a January of busted pipes by asking the gas company to reconnect the pilot-lit wall heater. But once the gas man had arrived and inspected things, he'd shaken his head and given me a pitying look. Then, in the manner of a magician tapping his wand against a top hat, he'd given a hard, dramatic flick of his fingernail against a perfectly ordinary-looking length of blue-painted pipe. And at his one magic flick, about a foot of line simply ...disintegrated.

The metal pipe that connected meter to heater, it seemed, had long since oxidized into a poof of cinnamon-colored dust. Only the cracked eggshell of a paint job remained—fooling me into believing my “plumbing” could actually carry fuel to a flame. So, I'd called a plumber to outfit the place with a new pipe--and then a couple weeks later invited "Flick" the Gas Man (as I'd named him) to try once more to bring heat back to my hardworking little building.

Finally, a Washington Gas truck rumbles into the parking lot. Flick gets out, acknowledges me with a brief nod, and begins inspecting the new gas line I've had installed. Then he calls me over. "Would you just look at that?" he says, pointing his index finger gravely at the meter.

I look hard, failing to comprehend the problem. The meter looks fine. The pipe also looks fine. He points out to me, very patiently, that the plumber failed to actually connect the restored line to the meter.

Oooohhhhhh. Sure enough, there is no way gas could enter that line. "Whaddaya think I am?" he grumbles in a bland, bored sort of way. "Some kinda miracle worker?" He shakes his head again and looks down at the ground, apparently deep in thought. Then, before I can answer, he sighs, goes to his truck, grabs some bits of pipe and a few tools, and sets to work extending the pipe out to reach the meter.

I hold my breath. Why yes, I think. Incompetent plumber notwithstanding, I did believe you'd be a miracle worker, Sir. A local god of fire I could invoke, who'd pronounce, "Let there be heat" and who'd then flick a switch to end all burst pipes and cold inner chambers once and for all.

And...as it turns out, he is a miracle worker. Within five minutes, the line is connected, and Flick leads me into the interior of the car wash. The gas is finally flowing now, he says, and it's time to ignite the pilot. He lowers the match into the old wall heater, and I see the flame appear, small, steady, and blue. For the first time, the man looks me full in the eye and smiles.

"Never figured you'd be so happy to see a pilot light, didja, Ma'am?"

I smile back at him. "You know, I really am happy to see it. Thank you for connecting things."

"Now turn the dial," he prompts. "I ain't got all day."

I turn the round plastic dial—and I feel a rush of pure delight as the half-inch of fire suddenly expands and leaps to become a wall of contained flames. A blanket of warmth, softening and protecting this clunky, rigid hardworking structure.

"You could turn off the pilot until winter," he explains. "But I wouldn't recommend it. It don't use much fuel...and, well, it won't cost you much to just keep that flame burning."

"I'll keep it burning," I tell him. "I wouldn't dream of putting it out."

I think often of Flick over the next week--and about the thrill and the rightness I felt over the little flame he brought me. I am struggling to begin writing again--I mean, really writing. Expanding and contracting as restless word-children kick and turn and compete inside me.

This effort--this impossible-to-ignore need--comes after a time of letting pipes rust beneath smooth enamel. Of letting the heater go unconnected and unlit. I was so busy working, after all. So busy falling in love and planning a future. And then, so desperately busy un-planning a future when I realized my lover was too jealous ever to share me with my children...or close friends...or a blank sheet of paper and a pen. I mistook the brittle illusion of paint for solid pipe. I long now for the magic of invisible fuel flowing through a sound, certain conduit. And the assurance that as a result, my mysterious system of whooshing, sighing inner machinery will work again--its rhythms sure, regular, and uninterrupted.

And when that fuel is flowing to the tiny flame, order will beat back encroaching decay. Warmth will banish the winter deep-freeze. It will not just keep the words flowing--it'll keep my spirit hoping.

I'm a writer prone to joyful starts and dread-filled stops--even at the best of times. But, in ending my relationship, I'd endured a series of close-the-shop-down leaks and shatters. The kind where all that's left to do is place some big orange pylons in the bays and announce to the world, "Under repair." And maybe a tongue-in-cheek, "Pardon our dust."

I've faced this kind of brokenness before, and I know better now what to do. My faith in the act of writing--the redemptive goodness of writing--exists outside of broken heart or shitty circumstances. Once you've done your shaky best to fix the leaky lines and replace the shattered pipes, all that's left is to get the heat back on and...start coaxing the words again.

The truest words I write come from a deep knowledge that a pilot light is burning steadily inside me, ready to set things right--or at least a few things right, close to home. I didn't create or guide the fuel myself, and I sure didn't light the fire. In fact, I lack the wisdom even to spot where and how things ought to get connected.

The fierce little flame contains all that is necessary to make sense out of randomness, and to banish the chaos I know is pressing in relentlessly from outside.

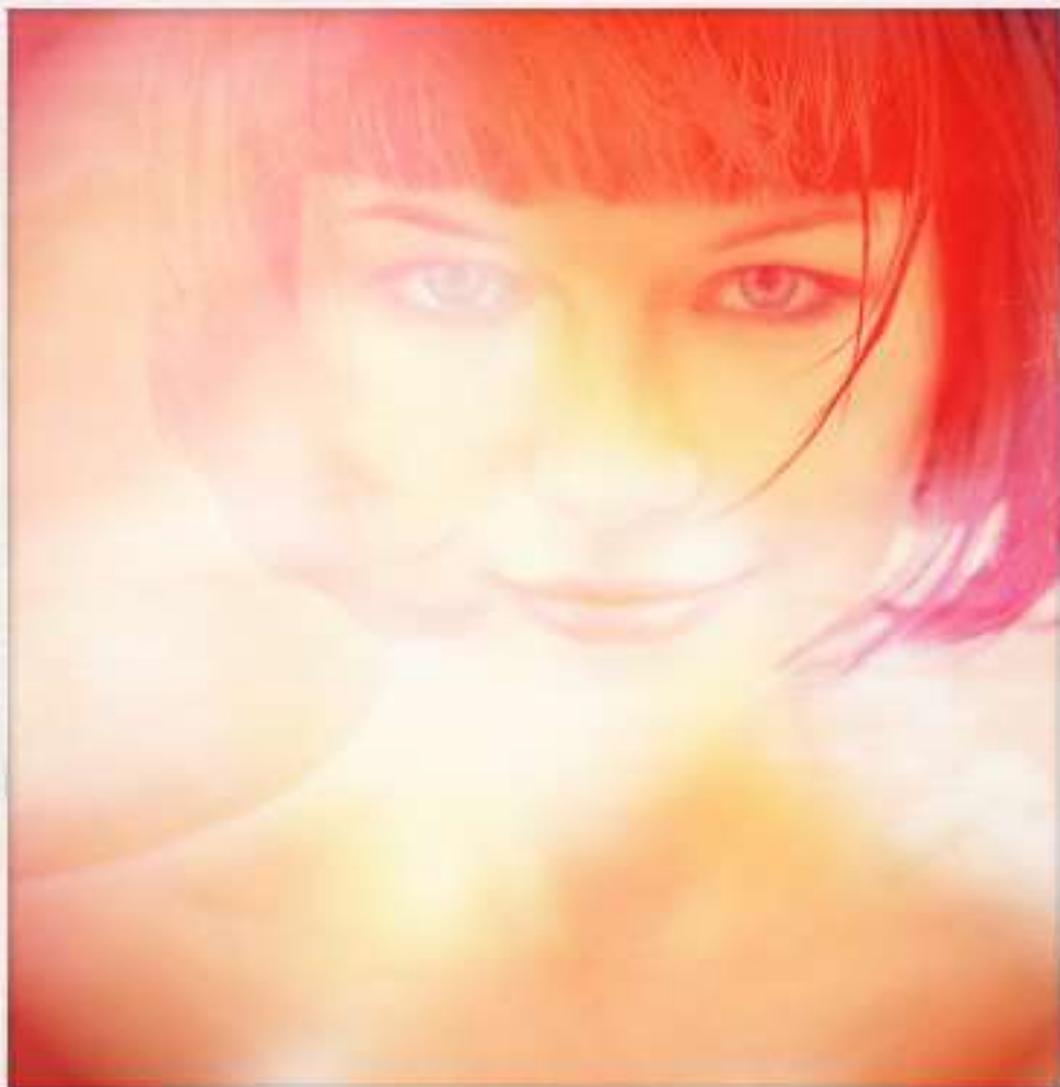
When I write, I feel a turning of the knob, a summoning of energy--and the fuel of thought and experience rushes through the lines. My still, lonesome light springs up and expands into a row of dancing flames. It is a preservative, controlled force within--one I recognize and love and am made alive by. A force I cannot fully explain.

When I write, the possibility of renewal becomes real and hot inside--even in the deadest of seasons. And, with that promise, even the gray parts of my life take on new lustre and lightness.

When I write, I feel the mad whooshes and exhales of my spirit. I accept the mystery--even embrace it--without needing to understand it or explain it to anyone else. "It's a strange setup being me, but it works," I think. And somehow, that stream of self-acceptance gives me peace and frees me to focus on all that is outside of strange old ME. I look up, I look around. I notice sunlight and shadows, enjoy strangers' smiles, ache inside over the endemic limp of an old woman pushing a shopping cart on the street. I get busy recording what I observe, tracing patterns, challenging myself to add bits of goodness and beauty to the world. I derive meaning, I make meaning, I share meaning.

Writing from the flame builds my conviction there is an order and an essential coherence to things. Even the most fragile things. A miraculous, steady-burning proto-fire, this faith that leads me is the possibility, the present hope, of intactness. And at the obedient turning of the knob, my words become a solidarity of flames, pushing heat and light into my world.

Maureen Hannan



Desire

The Scarlett O'Hara In Me

Something about the word “desire” makes people uncomfortable.

Desire smacks of forbidden fruit; desire tantalizes with overtones of sex, as in, “unhealthy” or “sinful” desires. Until I looked it up, I mistakenly believed desire was among the Seven Cardinal Sins. (As it turns out, desire is just a too-close-for-comfort relative of Envy, Greed, and Lust, but it never made it to the Top Seven Hit List.) We don't often use desire to describe something positive; we're more likely to translate, for example, “a noble desire” into the words “ambition” or “motivation.”

I blame my Catholic upbringing for teaching me that desire is a character flaw inherent in the human condition, against which we should resist diligently and valiantly. Desire is likewise a self-serving attribute; ergo, should I give in to my desires, I am not only weak-willed, but also selfish, too.

In chasing my own desires, however, I've come to believe there is nothing fundamentally undesirable about desire. Through desire, we attain our goals. Desire leads us to accept, embrace, and overcome obstacles. Desire hastens our feet along the path to success. Often, as writers, desire is all we have. It alone is our shield and sword, the ink in our pens, and our sole companion on the lonely road.

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to Scarlett O'Hara. If ever a literary character epitomized “desire” in all its permutations, it would be Scarlett. She herself is desired, but also, desire drives her behavior. Scarlett breaks the rules and confounds the stereotype of the submissive Southern belle. She is not above using her personal attributes to obtain what she wants. Let us not forget, however, that when tested, she exhibits courage, indomitable determination, and the ability to outwit every man in her universe. Some may call Scarlett selfish, brazen, deceptive, and manipulative. I prefer to characterize her as a person filled with desire, both good and bad, like all of us.

In “Gone with the Wind,” desire of the sexual variety hangs heavily, the way the Spanish moss drips from the trees surrounding the plantations. It's blatant from the first scene, when we are introduced to Scarlett surrounded by admirers at Twelve Oaks; it continues shortly thereafter in Scarlett's declaration of love to Ashley, followed by her vase-over-the-couch tantrum in the library; and culminates in Rhett's lustful glances at Scarlett, the object of his desire, throughout their tumultuous relationship. It appears, chastely, in Charles Hamilton's proposal, and let's face it, it's the reason Frank Kennedy overthrew Suellen to marry Scarlett. Finally, there is the unforgettably “wanton” desire Rhett reveals when he carries Scarlett kicking and screaming up the steps to bed (IMO more rape than romance).

The sexual element aside, I've always been struck by a loftier component of Scarlett's desire, the one at the heart and soul of our heroine – her desire to succeed against all odds. Having fled Atlanta with Melanie and her baby, abandoned by Rhett, and exhausted by her circumstances, Scarlett raises her fist in the air and declares, “As God is my witness, as God is my witness they're not going to beat me. I'm going to live through this and when it's all over, I'll never be hungry again. No, nor any of my folk. If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill. As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again!”

That's quite the ultimatum. Scarlett keeps her promise, including the lying, stealing, cheating, and killing parts. I wasn't a fan of Scarlett's dirty tricks, but I have to grudgingly admire her unwavering determination and resolve.

Some days, when my dreams are in flames around me and I am spent with miles and miles yet to go, it takes every scrap of strength I can muster not to lie down and expire on the dusty road. Desire, alone, drags me to my desk, in a symbolic fist-pump challenge to the gods of publishing.

Like Scarlett's, my desire is multi-layered. I write because I must, but my compulsion doesn't stop there. For me, writing is not the endpoint or the prize. My desire in writing, above all else, is to be read. I wish my sentences to be parsed and their meanings deconstructed by English teachers, my chapters discussed aloud in book clubs, and my themes dissected in esteemed literary circles. Through my writing, I seek approbation and credibility enough to merit my existence. Arrogantly, I want my words to live long after I'm gone.

I pursue my desire as tediously as Scarlett pursued Ashley, and my longing evidences in the physical as well as the emotional. Desire surfaces in the jealous bile that rises to my throat after reading a writer's rags-to-riches success story, or a “How I Got My Agent” blog post. Desire makes my head throb, my bones ache, and my stomach churn. My desire is as persistent as the sting of a paper cut, and as bloody.

Desire has plunged me into dark, unfamiliar waters, but it also buoys me in the waves. Time after time, my desire keeps me afloat. It is the reason I gasp for air rather than relinquish myself to drowning, as depleted as I often am. I am willing to risk everything for it, like Scarlett, but I will earn it honestly. It is within my grasp as I flail in the water, shrouded within the dense misty fog.

Despite everything, naked and afraid, I persist. No, they are not going to beat me.

Karen DiPrima

Grail-Seeking (and Other Immoderate Activities)

What is it you want most?

When I ask that, what I mean to say is, “What is it you want so much that it’s the first thing you think about when you wake up in the morning? The last thing you think about when you go to sleep? What is the unfinished business that gnaws at you when you’re stuck in traffic or forced to wait in a long line—because, after all, time’s a wasting. And all the while, your holy grail is waiting to be found and possessed.

What, then, is your burning quest? I’m not talking about “as a writer” or “as an aspiring Booker Prize winner” or anything so confined.

I’m talking about you as the restless pilgrim journeying toward your heart’s most cherished desire. You as the noble knight-errant, setting out to find the healing elixir for your world. Whatever your first answer is to the “what do you want most” question, don’t settle for it. Dig a little deeper. If you’re like me, your first answer will be like a handsome cowboy at the rodeo. Sure, all eyes are on that cowboy—but it’s the busting, twisting, untamed bronco he’s sitting on that’s really running the show.

If you tell me money is what you’re after, my guess is, money is really nothing more than a key to the outer gate. And inside that gate is a bejewelled golden cup that looks an awful lot like sparkling freedom...or magnificent time...or glorious independence.

If you tell me “getting published” is your chief desire, your personal magic elixir, I suspect that it would take all of 30 seconds to get to the nonstop yearning that drives you toward that goal. Wanting to be heard. Lusting after fame. Chasing immortality. Prostrating yourself, and forgetting all else, before the seductive sirens of power and prestige.

It’s what we human beings do, after all. We exist as a mad tangle of overwhelming, competing desires. Writers are no different from anyone else in that regard. Except that the demands of writing (chiefly the demands of lucidity) enforce an exacting sort of mental and emotional discipline. For any writer with aspirations of doing more than introducing data tables, the normal tangled human ball of desires cries out to be examined, smoothed out, unknotted, and rewound.

Coherence requires that runaway inner yearnings and obsessions be owned, sorted, and understood. Once understood, they may be put to work as fiction or, in nonfiction (ahem), as literary license. The yearning for love may be expressed through a voice as incoherent as Faulkner’s Benji...or the lust for power become as lucid-but-twisted as Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert.

What is storytelling after all, but a transformation of unsatisfied, untameable desire into a linear movement toward satisfaction? What is a novel but a desire timeline peopled by three-dimensional guides and helpers, dragons and desperadoes—each with powerful quests of their own going on?

Here's what I know (as much from being a great reader as from being a still-forming writer). Writing anything true about the human experience begins with coming to terms with the extremes of your own heart.

And writing truthfully about your own experience demands even more than a coming to terms: It demands that you give free rein (if only temporarily) to the rage, dread, and love that propel you along on your quest. Frodo, Sam, and Smaug did not spring from Tolkien's celebration of moderation. Simone de Beauvoir did not write *The Second Sex* because she shied away from the excesses of her equality-lust.

I grew up in a family culture suspicious of extremes and excesses of any kind. "Moderation in all things" was my father's mantra. A good and decent family--big on personal responsibility, keeping a quick wit about you, and cleaning up your own messes.

Work ethic, check. Priority of education, check. Sticking to ethical principles, check.

But terms like "burning desire"? Well, goodness gracious. Is such melodrama really necessary?

Sentiments that involved words like "passion" were best shed and left at the doorstep like muddy galoshes. Consuming passion? Heavens, please take it outside—it'll leave footprints all over the linoleum.

I've learned that there is wisdom in my father's mantra of moderation. As a collection of gentle disciplines though, not as an amputation of excess. For a passionate soul, letting desire run amok, dashing from one extreme to another, results in some hefty collateral damage. Grownups who engage in such self-indulgent nonsense will most likely inflict nasty wounds upon those who depend on them to make their world stable and safe.

And, more than likely, indulging your extremes will lead you into addictions, debt, and a steady stream of lawyer bills. But the solution (with apologies to all Buddha-followers) is not to banish extremes of desire—it is, as I see it, to build balancing mechanisms into daily life. Create some habit-grounded baseline that you can fall back on when all that's needed is "normal." And creating normal does take substantial time and effort. Making a boss or clients happy, showing up at soccer practices, packing lunches, getting sleep, eschewing the McDonald's drive-through in favor of chopping up vegetables, that sort of thing.

In the time that's left after vegetables are chopped and timesheets are filled out, what does the writer do with the ferocity of desire?

Ah, but that's where the fun really comes in.

Let's face it. No one gets to entertain themselves more with their personal pilgrimage than we who mold words into fictional stories (or recast episodes of our own lives). The furies that drive us can become real Furies who ride on the wind and enact terrible justice and vengeance. The mermaids who sing to us can spirit us away to underwater kingdoms—and then deliver us back home with knowledge of hidden worlds.

The people who betray us or rob us can become the villains of our next story. The maddening shapeshifters of our lives can be forced to stop melting into puddles and sliding away under doors—at least for long enough to hand over their secrets and give an account of what they've been up to.

Best of all, in my opinion? Desire, both realized and frustrated, forms the spine of each writer's ever-developing memoir. That declaration of extremes, that insistence on having the last word, that waits inside of each writer.

What drive will you unleash in all its blazing excess upon the world? What glorious grail will grace your book cover? (Hint: Grails, after all, tend to be immoderate sorts of objects.)

Maureen Hannan

Oh the thrill of it all! 🎵

Desire is out there on the edge, just the other side of love.

I am an ever-faithful fan, longing for the unobtainable prize, keeping vigil over the dreaming music and my object of desire.

Destroyed by a line from his song, a note from his voice so long-loved, it's the echo of the sound that's been with me forever, a sensibility that I hold close to my heart, as soft as cashmere.

He can't leave because there's nowhere to go. He's just a dream, but stronger than life and he's mine to chase.

He is me because I am him, our sweat beads from the same waterfall, all the shine of his eyes and hair are mine, every step is my step, we are entwined in a mist of understanding, we are each other, and for all that - everyone; which is why we smile at strangers and hold our hands out to each other when we pass in our dreams.

My desire for him is diaphanous, hopeful, forever patterned by some shining grey bliss – but for all that - just out of reach.

Except... these are silly dreams. Or are they?

I only know that my heart is the heart of a writer and is full of desire and silly dreams. Everything comes from this place of freedom and fantasy; it sows the breadcrumb trail. There is nothing else I need to do. A writer has no choice but to follow the signs and to burn it up - you have no purpose but to burn.

Words come tumbling from the heat, what's not said between the lines is gold, you have to keep running, keep following the underwater current, keep moving towards the resolution even if it means all desire will be stopped dead in its tracks; when there is - *'no more time for us'*.

It's your job, you are the keeper, you have this affinity for a reason, don't waste it! It's not yours to waste. You aren't done till you are burned out, burned up – that's the point. Writers are fuel – get to it!

This is a messy business. You can't get away with a neat writer's life. It doesn't work that way - not if you actually have something to say.

The beat will keep you on track – desire is a 'one two three' - 'one two three' – then a Whoa! where did that move come from? So Tango, go with the flow, the passion, the rhythm, and keep your toes pointed towards humanity.... That's your job.

'And out of the blue love came rushing in – out of the sky came the sun – out of left field came a lovely day – out of the blue no more pain'

The dream is nearly at an end, desire is now the saxophone that won't let go, the last 'Bravo', the tall dark singer lets his band drink the last of the audience's glory because of his love for the music, his desire to commune. His desire; unknown to us, but of our making.

So show us your desire and what is of your making!

** Lyrics courtesy of 'Country Life' 1974 - Roxy Music*

Jayne Ryan

Hope Deferred Leads to Desire Fulfilled

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life.¹”

I have lived in darkness for so long that it has become a familiar friend. Although light is in me because I am a child of God, the darkness has been my constant companion since my husband came back in three urns. Hope was something I carried with me – a light of some future day of reunion and joy, but desire was a word I did not know anymore. Hope was not desire and desire was not hope. They were separated by a chasm of loss and ashes.

I went to a breakfast about five months ago and the guest speaker said, “You can live without just surviving.” Those words hit me between the eyes like a box of bricks. I have been surviving for eight years; I have not been living. My friends call me the “daytime vampire,” because I do not come out at night. It is funny and tragic at the same time. The ashes caused me to change in a way that would protect my heart. Night involves couples and couples I cannot bear to watch. Night involves going places by myself, and that is something that just brings the ashes to mind. So I survived by locking my door at eight and writing with a glass of wine in hand.

And I was happy, or so I thought, until desire entered my life again.

Like a deprived monster that has been cooped up too long, it came in an instant and my world exploded into a thousand different pieces – just like the ashes had eight years before.

Desire became hope again. Like a marriage of darkness to light, my worlds began to blur. The darkness shifted. The light inside me began to see things in a new way. But as a wise man once said, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick . . .”

Desire can lead to emptiness if the desire does not come to pass in a reasonable amount of time. Hearts ache. Hearts bleed. Hearts can shatter into the thousands of pieces we have already picked up a dozen different times in our lives. Then, it seems, it becomes almost harmful to hope, to continue to hold on to your desire. It seems suicidal really. Why put yourself through the pain again? Why give yourself this hope? Why continue to hold on to something if the end of the matter is surely only sorrow?

Then you give up. “Hope deferred makes the heart sick . . .”

I was at this “giving up stage” this morning. I was done. I was at my wits end. If I desired anymore, the pieces of my heart were not going to be able to be found. I would be broken – again. I didn’t want to be broken again. The thought of brokenness sent me into a fit of tears. I can’t imagine walking into the dark abyss I first walked in eight years ago. The darkness of survival is by no means the darkness of tragedy. In loss, in grief, in hopelessness, the darkness is not only dark – it is a void so wide and vast only God himself can find you. It is like sinking into a black hole, feeling yourself being stretched and torn and completely knowing it will never end. It is horror and sorrow and pain all wrapped up into one. This morning I thought, “I cannot go back. I cannot submit to that reality again. I must not.”

I looked up. There, on my windowsill, was a little statue a friend of mine had given me when the ashes had first arrived at my home. The statue was of a little child holding up a wire like a balloon. What did the wire spell at the end?

Hope.

My eyes overflowed with tears. Although my soul was tired, my heart was ashamed. I knew this truth. I cannot lose hope because, “hope does not disappoint.”²

I can live without just surviving, and living involves hope. Living is hope. If you are breathing you are hoping for something – for an end – for a moment – for a touch.

Desires can be fulfilled. It may not be today. It may not be tomorrow, but “desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”

Desire fulfilled is living. It is the hope of a life made new. It is the hope of dreams come to life.

Don't. Lose. Hope.

Writing involves setbacks. It involves hopes being deferred and desires being left unfulfilled. It involves seeing others around you achieve more than yourself. It involves unhealthy desire when you look at other writers and compare their achievements with your own. It involves jealousy and longing, envy and at times even despair, but remember, their path is their path and your path is yours. The important thing is to move further down your path each and every day. The darkness may be around you, but you have a light inside you. You have that flame of desire in your soul that can light your way to the next step of “desire fulfilled.”

Your hope has a purpose. Your desire has a meaning. It is something you have to keep burning in your soul, no matter what setbacks come your way, no matter how long your hope is deferred, no matter how much you toss and turn at night, no matter what – you can't let go of the hope you possess.

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”³

There is a way, and the way will not form unless your desire is aflame.

Hold – unswervingly – to your hope.

And live your dreams in time.

1 Proverbs 13:12 2 Romans 5:5 3 Hebrews 10:23

Nicole DiCenzo



Exploration

Limitless Horizons

It's Sunday, and as usual, our family piles into our trusty Pontiac for an afternoon drive. We kids arrange ourselves in birth order in the back seat, and again I'm reminded of my plight as the middle child. My sister gets a window, even though she never looks up from her book. My brother gets a window, even though after five minutes of forward motion he'll fall asleep, drooling on my shoulder. Meanwhile, I'm stuffed between them, my knees to my ears because of that bump on the floor in front of me.

When I start to pay attention to where we're going, a tiny flicker of excitement distracts me from my stiffening limbs. The road we're traveling is familiar. It leads to that one, special place. As the landmarks flit by at 50 miles per hour, little fireworks erupt in my chest. Just the sparklers of the overture - not the big, loud finale rockets. I won't light the big ones yet. I'm still in grade school, but already I know everything can change in seconds. One errant word from any of us in the back seat and my father will turn left instead of right at the end of the bridge. Left takes us back home. If we turn right, every rotation of the wheels means I'm closer to striking the match.

We turn right, and I crane my neck to look through the windshield at the road ahead. My father winks at me in the rear view mirror. Our destination is not just my special place; it's his, too.

We're getting closer. A grimy, fuel-fumed aroma drifts in through the open windows, like party balloons bouncing across the seats. My sister wrinkles her nose. Closer still, I see the merry ribbon of multicolored taxis hovering at the curb. Now I can distinguish the faces of people, dressed in their Sunday best, hustling and bustling on the concrete with their suitcases. We're going slowly enough for me to read the labels over the doors, and just in time I clamber over my brother, ignoring his sleepy protests, and stick my head out of the window as we pass my favorite, PAN AM.

Dad parks. I scramble out of my seat and grab his hand. The two of us trot into the terminal and head straight for the big windows at the departure gates, leaving the others to catch up. Sparks catch beneath the Roman candles; the gunpowder hisses and sizzles. Dad loops his arm around my shoulders and points skyward at the criss-cross of jumbo jets, mail transports and private planes overhead. I rest my cheek against the cool glass, waiting. The door of the airliner nearest to me closes; the plane taxis down the runway and in a burst of glory becomes airborne. Then and only then, the pyrotechnics explode full force. As we head back to the car I snatch a last wistful look over my shoulder at the terminal. One day it'll be me strolling nonchalantly across the tarmac toward the airplane steps on my way to new lands, new people, and new adventures.

Many years and miles later, I've capitulated to my wanderlust. These days, I brave the TSA security checkpoints to travel as often as I can, but as a writer, I don't really need to pack a bag to go anywhere I choose. Writing has transported me around the world. It has hurtled me backward in time and thrust me into realms of the future, all from the comfort of my chair.

Writing provides a permit to explore, to study, and to learn. In the name of “background,” I am free to exhaustively research any topic to ferret out obscure details. The direction and duration of my voyage is entirely up to me. I decide the start and end points, and if I choose to venture down a side road to investigate a quirky local attraction, I can.

In recent weeks, I’ve mentally rummaged through a historic building in New York State and explored the prevailing architectural trends in America at the turn of the century. I’ve tracked down the origins of a 250 year-old company in Michigan and discovered for the past 75 years they have misspelled the founder’s name. I’ve pored over centuries-old news accounts to uncover a banking scandal perpetrated decades ago by a principal in a multimillion-dollar Midwest company. I’ve steeped myself in Chinese culture and societal mores to write about good guanxi. I’ve delved into the glamorous world of thoroughbred horse racing to write about equine law, and scrutinized international trade agreements to describe America’s system of imports/exports with Mexico and Canada.

As writers, our facility with words provides entrée to scientists and celebrities, politicians and housewives, and those with every other occupation under the sun. Writers are intrepid explorers. We have license to poke and prod, to seek out answers that satiate our desire for knowledge (or even our prurient curiosity). And the most astonishing thing about all of this is that we get paid to do it.

Writing is one of the few things in my life that evokes the excitement I felt as a girl watching the planes at the airport. Every time I embark on a new assignment, or delve into a new chapter of one of my books, it’s as if I’m settling into a first class seat on a jumbo jet, filled with anticipation for the escapades ahead. Often I don’t know where I’m going, but that hardly matters. Who knows what I’ll find at the end of the journey, or the discoveries I’ll uncover along the way?

Karen DiPrima

Only the Intrepid Need Apply

When I think of the 'kit' a writer needs in order to carve out a career with their words, I have in my mind's eye the intrepid explorer, driving forever forward into the blizzard; his huge back-pack weighing him down as he traverses the snow. He is without doubt risking his life, but he has a well thought-out plan, he has clothing and tents specially designed for adverse conditions and he has his trusty Sherpas, or his colleagues, and he has some way of reaching out or radio-ing back to base, if it all goes wrong. He is prepared, even though he 'knows not' what he will find.

When I first started out, exploring my own writing life, I stumbled across other writers and creative types, and I looked to them for some kind of signal or sign that I was on the right track. There were some flashlights in the darkness, leading me this way and that, but ultimately I realised that there is no right or wrong path, just you the writer, the empty page and the journey, which you must take alone.

So, I've learnt these things:

To be intrepid

The dictionary says this means to be 'invulnerable to fear or intimidation' and oh how this comes in all shapes and sizes!

To take risks

I'm a risk taker by nature and have learned to live with the fall-out when it does go wrong, to find the upside, to pick myself up and start all over again but this is not just a writerly skill, as we all know... this is life asking you to give it everything you have.

To wait patiently for what's right for you

If you are being paid to write, then it's fairly likely that you're good at writing all sorts of things, and that there is a client at the end of the work who is expecting a certain tone or type of language-use. If you are a novelist or a genre writer, then again you may feel that your work is in some way prescriptive to that end. And whilst I would always encourage any writer - to 'just get started' I have learnt that there is something that will be particular to your writing, writing that only you could have written, writing that in some way is your personality in words (or the muse' personality) and that if you are patient enough, you will find that voice and it will be more powerful than all the others. It will move others in a way that matters.

To explore my craft inside and outside of itself

This one is more difficult because not only does it mean delving deeply into the word-smithery of things, but it also means letting the 'craft itself' bleed out of its own skin and become something more, something new - something that will move new generations and be born of itself.

To stay true to the path even when it's in darkness

Where there is truth there is light, where there is light there is beauty and where there is beauty your path will illuminate the path others have to tread - So stay true and never waver from your own truth.

To just 'feel' your way forward

That inner radar, the gut feeling, the intuition - feel around in your kit bag for those things, they will sustain you, they will serve you, they are your soul's compass - ignore them at your peril.

To share your journey

If you are alone in your garret, your ivory tower, your cubicle and no one reads your work - the work is not yet done. We're here to co-create and to learn from others. So share your 'real' journey and everything else will fall into place.

To help others with their obstacles

Sometimes our fellow writers are fully blinkered and lost for ways to get their writing out, to have it read and to get the feedback they crave. If you know someone is struggling, reach out and offer your suggestions - they can only say 'no' or it may prompt them towards their own answer.

To haul others to the top when their ropes break (or even when they don't)

One writer's success is everyone's success. We can all share in the beloved word finding a home and striking a chord. And if you're the one who has been successful, haul everyone else up to their next best step, give as much as you can, after all we are all one in humanity, and language will probably be the only thing that saves us in the end.

To 'see' with your other senses – and when those fail, find or make some new ones

Anything we write now, at this point is like the sparrow's footprint in the snow. It makes a dent in the universe, but as humanity evolves we will need new language, new senses, new ways of seeing, new systems and new ways of describing them; in order to raise our consciousness and make life bearable for all the souls on this planet. So if you look down and the footprints are fading, warming in the thin sun... think of some new ways to see and explore your world.

And to finish, a small poem...

Arctic maid

Snow descending

Twist your braid

Connect the new lands

Trek the brightness

Darkness, bending

Bring fresh winds

Explore with both hands

Jayne Ryan

Wise Guides and Open Gates

I've always been good at serendipity.

When I go exploring, I go in a random zigzag. I'll walk a new city at dusk on the day I arrive. Block after block, falling into step with the commuters and pretending I have 'Somewhere Important and Serious' to go. At the height of the rush I find a metro station and take a train in the opposite direction of where the tired, head-down people are going. I hop off at whatever midtown stop seems to be pulling the happy hour yuppies off the train.

Next task: Find an antique-looking Irish bar with at least one shamrock emblazoned on the window (the universal symbol of welcome, as far as I'm concerned), and strike up conversation with the resident garrulous bartender. (There's always one, you know.)

Two hours later, the keys to the city are mine...but each time in a different way.

Once, I found myself in Baltimore researching an article. My interviews would not begin until the next morning, so I had time to kill. I looked for my Irish pub. Sure enough, there was Mick O'Sheas on North Charles Street (gilt-edged shamrock in window duly noted and appreciated). I grabbed an empty barstool, ordered a draft, and started asking the bartender questions about the historic buildings in the surrounding Baltimore neighborhood. He told me a little about Mick O'Sheas, then said, "Well, you'll be wanting to talk to Jerry. He knows all about the neighborhood."

Jerry, it turned out, was the local visionary/real-estate-magnate who'd renovated all the buildings on the block. And, serendipitously enough, Jerry was sitting just a few stools down. A giant, white-bearded Santa Claus of a man. I began asking Jerry questions, and in reply I got one story after another (in a booming voice that invited participation from everyone at the bar) of the history of the buildings on that stretch of North Charles Street.

Before the evening was over, I'd gotten a walking tour of the city block from the jovial developer and his partner. And then an invitation to come up to their penthouse apartment next door for a brandy.

"Baltimore isn't what you thought it was, is it?" Jerry asked me as he walked me through the marble-gleaming lobby back out to the street.

He stopped, studied my expression, and waited for my answer--and I realized that this magnate cared an awful lot about what a lowly freelance journalist thought of his neighborhood. Of his city. For me, the exploration that evening wasn't just an impromptu 19th-century architecture lesson. It was a peek into the ethos of a place in transition—through the eyes of one of its change-makers.

The next morning I interviewed a very different kind of change-maker in the city. A 25-year-old, competitive skateboarder; working with inner city youth to raise funds for a skate park. Did it matter to my finished article that I'd gotten an architectural history walkabout the evening before? Well...not in a direct way. But the exploration enriched me and helped me.

It added a layer to my reporting. Gave me a fuller appreciation of the renaissance the city was experiencing--or at least that little corners of the city were experiencing. It also showed me a glimpse of the intense pride of the people who were leading that rebirth (whether a 70-year-old developer or a 20-something skateboarder).

I believe those bits of texture—these intangibles of setting and personality—matter a lot in writing. And they don't come from simply showing up for the scheduled interviews. Or from visiting an archive.

That sense of exploration is a lifestyle, not merely a way to approach an isolated writing gig. Writing and exploration go hand in hand. We explore, because in the backs of our minds, there is that little voice that urges, “Keep walking. There may be material waiting down that unfamiliar street.”

When I was on a vacation in London, I found myself a cozy nook in a Notting Hill cafe, where I observed patrons coming and going and listened to the buzz of conversation around me. After I'd been sitting there awhile, I noticed a woman with an overstuffed laptop bag plop herself down in the opposite corner. She began unpacking all kinds of things from that bulging bag. A MacBook, a wirebound notebook, a camera, and a mighty stack of brochures and business cards. Finally, she set a placard on the table that announced, “Hello. Writers meet here!”

I couldn't resist.

I strolled over to her and asked, “Any writers at all? Or only a few particular writers?” She laughed and introduced herself. It turned out she was a prolific food blogger working on getting her first cookbook published. She had formed a meetup group through an online community, and this was to be their first meeting in person.

“Why not join us?” she invited me.

Why not indeed? That afternoon, I met a table full of aspiring foodie-writers and left with a full three-day itinerary of London culinary explorations.

A good friend said to me once, “Seems like you just show up, and suddenly an exploration occurs.” It's a nice way to think about things—but the truth of the matter is, I don't “just show up” for my serendipities. I pursue them. Make room for them. Position myself for them.

This is about courting the stuff stories are made of.

I'm a shy person. I prefer to keep my curiosity within my comfort zone—by which I mean to say, I prefer to be an invisible eavesdropper listening and jotting observations away in my moleskine. When I was in the fifth grade, I read the book *Harriet the Spy*. Harriet was a little voyeur who showed up with her notebook when no one realized she was there—and wrote about people (much to their eventual chagrin). Of course, Harriet seemed most wonderful to 10-year-old me—and fully worthy of my adulation.

I began carrying my own little notebook around and making furtive scribbles about my sadistic gym teacher...and the cool girls who ruled recess. Of course, this antisocial behavior did nothing to improve my social status. Nor did it make me a writer. It did make me feel a bit mysterious and in-the-know, I suppose—but I didn't exactly learn anything I hadn't known before.

Exploration, in my experience, never happens in a Harriet-the-Spy way. In the nearly 40 years I've spent learning to be a journalist and writer-for-hire, I've learned that true exploration requires my energetic engagement. It requires my readiness to ask questions—and then my willingness to listen carefully, notebook in hand, to the answers. It takes some observation of where the people are heading (both literally and metaphorically)--and a pair of good walking shoes. (A metro fare card handy in a back pocket is useful too.)

Here's the biggest lesson I learned as a journalist: You may not be able to predict where your research will take you--and you may not even have a full plan. That doesn't matter.

Exploration is a mindset, not an itinerary.

In the end, exploration for the writer is a kind of glorious self-forgetting. It's a deliberate step outside of your own self-consciousness—at least for long enough to seek out a tour guide. Or many tour guides. And to be poised, ready, and waiting when one of those guides takes out a key...and suddenly the gates swing wide open in front of you.

Maureen Hannan

Exploring the Deepest Piece of Your Soul

Ren hovered in the air, feeling the love flowing through him. He reached for it, yearned for it. He was buoyant. He was light. He was love.

“Now try pain.”

Zorc’s words came from far away. Ren opened his eyes and released love, letting his legs sink to the ground. Ren was unsure why Zorc wanted him to find pain. He had mastered pain days ago, but he didn’t question the wizard. Ren rested on his knees and leaned forward, forming a ball, focusing on the ache inside him. Pain was an inward emotion, not open like love. Pain was in the upper chest. Love was deeper and lower, almost where the soul should be. The pain tore through him, searing his mind.

“Look now. Hold it and look.”

Ren lifted his head and stared in stark amazement. Standing, he turned full circle, holding his pain, breathing it. Everything around him bent in his direction: the trees, the grass, and the air. Even his friends had their heels implanted in the soil, muscles straining as they resisted being pulled toward him. Only Zorc sat untouched, somehow blocking his pull.

“Hate,” the wizard demanded.

Ren was already in hate’s stance, standing straight. All he had to do was bow his head and clench his fists. He found hate immediately, on the surface of the chest. He felt himself rising from the ground, hovering above it, his hate forcing itself out of his hands, lifting him.

“Look.”

Ren raised his head. Now everything blew away from him. He suddenly understood why the three worked together. Hate blew out, pain blew in, and love was the balance.

He pulled on each with quick surety, forming all inside him at once. He let each emotion roar through him, tumbling over the others, caressing the others, learning the others, until they churned to a stop and formed an impenetrable whole.

He was above the elements, looking down on them but together with them. He felt each one, but he felt them like a whisper. He could see their intensity, but he kept their fervor from him. He found the calm. He was the calm. He was the synergy, the union, the pinnacle.

All was back to normal. The grass didn’t bend, the trees didn’t shake, and the air was tranquil, but he was far from normal. He looked through wizard’s eyes.¹

As a writer, the emotions you carry will pour over on the page. The characters you create will carry those emotions throughout the story. At times, you will tap the keys so quickly you will have a sense of another presence inside you, urging you to unleash the force of your emotions in order to paint a potential masterpiece. You will feel like you are flying. You will feel like nothing can stop you. Your pulse will quicken. Your lips will lift into a victorious grin.

The exploration of your inner core will be a fire that if not unleashed will threaten to burn you alive. Thoughts will pour from you as if they were a meteor shower hurling down from deepest space. You may not know the next word in your conscious, but it comes from a secret place inside, spilling out from your innermost parts onto the page. It is in those times, in the exploration of the deepest place inside your heart, that you will come alive.

Then there are other times that you will open up your project and stare at a blank page for hours. It will feel like all the words you so desperately evoked, or all the characters you lovingly birthed, are a foreign object. You know they are a part of you, but you can't imagine their next step. It will feel like they are all blowing away from you, almost forever out of reach. You may tap the keys, but only a few words are vomited up. And of course, vomit can by no means be kept. These are the times you will sigh in frustration or beat your head against the wall. These are the days you will absolutely abhor, but you need to understand, the only reason the words aren't coming is because the exploration of your inner core is not complete. There is more in there, more you need to understand, and more you need to pull from. You will get there, but it may take a few days or a few years.

I was at this point with my third fantasy book for some time – years in fact – as I had to grow myself and learn the lessons that my characters also had to learn. Now, I feel a new part of me coming out, a new piece of me I can instill into my characters, and new lessons that I have learned that need to be unleashed onto the page. Although the blank page is frustrating, this is one of the most important pieces in a writer's world – the inner exploration of songs yet sung. Without these blank pages and self-exploration, the words of tomorrow will never become a great symphony.

Then, at other times, there is a calm, an inner tranquillity. The words may not spill, but they come. They may not spread like fire through your veins, but they are a slow and steady machine gun, not quite tumbling over each other, but causing a steady drone that will impact the page so dramatically, and your life so vividly, that you know you are right where you need to be.

A writer's life will bring a combination of these three. Each one needs to be cherished. The meteor shower will come, but only after the blank page. The bullets will multiply, but only after the meteor shower. It is the ebb and flow of life's circumstances that create an environment of new birth and new life. It is the full dissection of your own personality that will lead you down a path of self-discovery. It is reading new ideas and expanding knowledge that will cause the fire that burns inside your veins to ignite another meteor shower.

It is all about discovering who you are and who you want to become. It is a beautiful process, and one you need to cherish. Writing involves every emotion. Your love, hate, and pain will at times be so strong only one of those emotions will pour out to fill the page with passion, rage, or grief. Other times they will be combined into one – into the calm of the writer’s life – and they will emerge onto the page with all of their raw and reckless beauty.

This is the writer’s way.

“Love, Hate, and Pain merged with Choice, Chance, and Fate can embrace the light, can embrace the dark, heed us well, our writer.”²

1 Faith of the Dragon Tamer www.colepain.com

2 Quest of the Dragon Tamer www.colepain.com

Nicole DiCenzo



Passion

Heeding the Quiet Call

I used to think passion was a throbbing, pulsating, urgent quality reserved for special people with extraordinary gifts. Passion was the maniacal compulsion of Mozart, Van Gogh and Edison, and other geniuses who slaved feverishly into the night at their art, their craft, or their idea. Passion defined them. Passion made them great.

Especially, passion was the preserve of men whose eccentricities were excused and their fanaticism justified because they changed the world.

I witnessed passion aplenty from the men in my Italian family, who were never nonchalant about anything. Their passion was genetic and unavoidable. Joy, anger, and pain resided side-by-side in their collective souls and psyches. They expressed emotions physically. Like lightning strikes, the electricity pumped full-stop into arms and hands while words spilled simultaneously from their mouths.

On any given Sunday, the hum of male passion at Nana's house was detected as soon as you turned the corner onto her street. Scores of my aunts, uncles and cousins swelled her abode the way housewives swarmed Gimbol's revolving door during a white sale.

Inside, pandemonium reigned. Already in progress were debates about the Phillies' latest trade, the price of gas, and this morning's sermon on the Prodigal Son. Each empty bottle of wine ratcheted up the emphasis in the men's voices. As families arrived, the men were handed a glass and drawn into conversations. The women donned aprons and headed to the kitchen.

The jumble of English words strung together with Italian phrases, rose and fell like musical notes. Among the deeper bass tones, an occasional woman's trill could be distinguished, but their higher pitches rarely intertwined with the men's voices on the same topic. I concluded recipes and family gossip did not engender the same emotions (and therefore were less important) than sports or economics, or that women didn't have the lung capacity to express their views equally with the men.

When I asked my mother why the men were so loud and why the women didn't join their discussions, she shrugged and said, "Men are passionate about certain things."

"Then what are women passionate about?" I asked.

"Women are not 'passionate'," she sniffed, "Unless they are Marilyn Monroe."

Her insinuation lingered in the air like the stench of stale perfume. I tucked passion away into an inaccessible place and erased it from my lexicon.

For much of my adult life, my driving motivation as a working mother of four involved catching up with the laundry or sleeping undisturbed for a few hours straight. I loved to write, but calling it a "passion" never occurred to me. My hobby did not compare to the inclinations of intellects, and did not qualify as passion of the Marilyn variety.

Besides, ordinary life got in the way. I was defined by the cleanliness of my house or the speed with which dinner was put on the table at night, not to mention the demands of my job. Nothing I cooked or cleaned or emailed would ever classify as a work of art. My life was about finishing the task at hand as quickly as possible and moving on to the next overdue assignment.

Yet I always found time to write. I couldn't remember when writing was not an integral part of me.

I started composing stories as soon as I could talk. Because I couldn't write or read yet, I told my stories out loud. My family became my captive audience.

At night I'd whisper to my sister in the bed next to me, "Marta, listen to this. I just made it up. Once upon a time . . ."

"Shut up, I'm trying to sleep."

"No, really, listen, it's good! Once upon a time . . ."

"I'm gonna tell Mom. Mo-om! She's doing it again!"

Undeterred by my sister's lack of taste, I seized the opportunity to share my yarns with a wider audience. There was no escaping my voice as I droned on during every waking hour. In the car, I babbled away for mile after mile, but my efforts to entertain were similarly received.

"Once upon a time there was a princess in a castle and her name was Suzie. She was – Ouch! Stop hitting me! Princess Suzie had a mean – no, very mean – no, awful – stepsister and –"

"Mo-om, do something! Can't you tape her mouth shut?" Marta cried.

My mother sighed. "Keep your stories to yourself, Karen."

"But, Mom, I –"

"I said keep your stories to yourself. No one wants to hear them. You are not Shakespeare. Don't make me tell you again."

I didn't know who Shakespeare was. But her scathing critique had the desired effect. I did as I was told until I learned how to write years later.

Grade-school me recorded adventures on lined paper; high-school me poured out my wounded heart into Mead Composition Books. The adult me wrote when happy, depressed, lonely, or confused. It happened during traffic jams, while waiting in doctor's offices, or after the kids were in bed. I closed my office door to surreptitiously perfect story arcs. For years, I volunteered as the editor of two monthly newsletters and loved contributing articles to these publications.

Still, as I defined it, this was not passion.

It was only a few years ago, in formulating my response to the question “Why do you write?” for a workshop application, that I began to discern the pattern, the constant that had seen me through childhood boredom, teenaged angst and every adult crisis du jour. Writing distracted and soothed me, it never failed me, and it was what I always turned to, no matter how busy I was, or the emotional chaos enveloping me.

Only at that moment did I realize passion need not be shouted and white-heated. That you are allowed to be passionate about something, even if you’re not a child prodigy or a New York Times bestselling author.

That my quiet efforts to improve and learn, despite everything happening around me, constituted passion.

Especially, I realized I could be passionate without shame.

For many of us, writing is what makes us tick and keeps us sane. Sometimes we writers plod along without fanfare or support, working quietly and determinedly whenever and wherever we can. Our passion cements us to our seats and keeps us coming back. It’s the reason we survive the heartache and bewilderment of rejections, bad critiques or slow sales.

Passion is why we continue to write, no matter what.

Passion is the common ground we share with the likes of predecessor virtuosos and masterminds, and Marilyn, and yes, even Shakespeare.

Passion cannot be denied us. There is fervor, maybe even a bit of fanaticism, in us.

Our passion is justified. Passion is the how and the why we can change the world.

Karen DiPrima

Passion's Flight

He stirred something inside her she couldn't define. It wasn't lust because she had yet to look at his body. She hadn't even had time to study his face. Still, the feelings inside her rose up like a tempest, too insistent to ignore. It wasn't love either, because in love you needed to know the other's soul and explore the deep inner recesses of the heart, yet all he had done was turn around and look into her eyes. As he continued to hold her gaze, her entire body shivered. It felt like she had been hit with lightning, and the electric current was continuing to twirl around every molecule that made her. His dark eyes didn't turn away, and she saw in them the same passion she sensed in her own spirit. That was the word – passion. It was something that was not of this world, something that could only come from above, a force that would pull them together like magnets no matter what stood between them. In the next instant she knew if she did not look away he would destroy her every defense as soon as he spoke her name.

Passion

It is real, and it is deadly. It can ignite in an instant and continue to burn indefinitely. It will consume your thoughts and your time. It can take control of your life. It is a force so great it will pull you to where at times you do not want to go, but go you will, because if you have passion it is a train without a brake. It cannot be quenched, stilled, or refused. If you try to deny it, it will devour you from the inside out.

'She parted the curtain and looked out on the hoard of faces. How many did this auditorium hold? Three hundred thousand? Four? She didn't remember the exact number. What did it matter? If there were only two people gracing the seats she would still be nervous. Her pulse quickened and sweat beaded up on her brow. In minutes she would be out in front of them. All eyes would be on her. She heard her name being announced over the sound system. She closed her eyes, sent a silent prayer to heaven, and stepped from her refuge behind the curtain. The applause instantly greeted her, drumming in her ears with a deafening roar. She continued to put one foot in front of the other as she walked to centre stage. They thought she was confident; she was not. She was terrified, but she would do what she came to do. She always did. It was her passion – the words she was about to speak. Nothing could take away their power. She faced the audience, and when she opened her mouth, the flame blazed hot, and within moments, her prior nervousness was gone as her passion ignited to flame. Nothing could stop her, nothing would dare, or it would burn everyone around her alive.'

Passion is not only deadly, it is also life changing. It will take control of the personality you thought you had and ignite something totally unexpected. You know you have found your passion when something inside you explodes to life when it is touched upon in conversation. You can't stop talking about it even if you wanted to. It is like a cancer eating away at you, constantly on your mind. It is a blanket of heat on a hot summer day. It is a winning lottery ticket in your pocket. Passion demands to be heard.

‘She didn’t want to open it. It sat on the kitchen counter all night while she ate dinner and watched a movie she had no recollection of seeing. She went to bed trying to ignore the itch in her mind, urging her to get the inevitable over with. She tossed and turned all night, knowing that eventually she would have to grow a few, tear open the envelope, and open the thirty-fifth rejection of her manuscript. What was it they said about Stephen King? He had been rejected over forty times. Maybe there was still hope. Maybe this one wasn’t a rejection. Maybe this one was her break. She rose from bed while it was still dark. She couldn’t wait any longer. She was being foolish. She ran into the kitchen, grabbed the letter, and with one swift motion sliced through the seal and ripped the letter from its folds. She scanned the print. Her heart fell. They hadn’t even commented on the content of her book; they hadn’t even thought her worthy enough to mention the title. It was a form letter, thanking her kindly and signed with a rubber stamp. “Loser,” it seemed to be saying. The tears came instantly, falling on the page with quick, hollow slaps.

She sank to her knees. She was so tired of trying. She knew she had something good, if only someone would listen. There was no sense trying anymore. She was done. She would quit writing and give up on her dream of becoming an author. She would go back to her old self and never again create characters she knew like life-long friends. Then something stirred deep inside. Her eyes found her small desk in the corner. Her jaw clinched. “Never” she whispered through gritted teeth. “They will never take my passion.” She rose to her feet and ran to the corkboard beside her desk. She tacked the latest rejection letter over the other thirty-four. She would laugh at every one of them in time. In time, she would have the final word. She dropped to her chair and began to bring another character to life. She would be damned if the entire publishing world rejected her. It was time to fly.’

True passion cannot be quenched. It cannot be ignored. True passion will change you. It will demand to be heard. True passion will never stop. It will never be refused. As a writer, passion will dominate you, it will transform you, and it will grow you, but don’t stifle it and never – never – never give up.

Writer – it is time to fly.

Nic DiCenzo

Passionate Days

‘Passion is like a restless wind - that turns into freedom’. (*Pasion – Sarah Brightman*)

Every creative process begins and ends with passion.

The universe continues to expand with passionate explosions, we are born out of a passionate embrace, we are passionately missed when we say our final goodbyes, and in between, passion runs through us all ‘like a restless wind’.

A writer’s words are born out of a passion to get something onto the page, a passion for the characters and the story or message that we must give birth to... but it is here I digress, and prefer to put our daily passions under the microscope.

Walk with me quietly through the day of a passionate writer – it might go something like this!

Waking

The thin line between dreaming and waking vibrates like a violin string - the mind’s light comes out from the shadows and illuminates the waking world.

The characters from dreamland yawn and take themselves to bed - the ‘real’ stretch and head towards the waft of toast and the jarring of coffee.

Early Morning

The kitchen window frames the autumnal mist of centuries and a blue-tipped bird enters the peripheral world...the writer’s world - where feathers are made of tiny black diamonds and birds breath exhales the vocabulary of old souls.

The morning walk is taken by three friends - master and hounds. The trek gets harder – slower; they look to each other for reassurance. Yes this is the path! This is the one! Wild eyes flashing, spit mingling with the soft melting dew - they have reached the summit - this task completes them. Their sore limbs and paws await their washing.

Breaking

The mindfulness of the midday meal - the wanting of sustenance in varying degrees by the household. The chink of glass; light reflecting on silver. Fruit and cheese; bread broken apart and shared with greedy fingers - dogs waiting patiently at table.

And all the time ... the writer noticing, absorbing, rearranging facts and fractals, and listening to the tunes played by vague delight and burgeoning frustration.

Working

The tickling clouds pass above, as the writer turns to her work. The crows mock in the chat-chat woods, and the room warms as her heart begins to tell its story - now is the time to dig in - to take the muse' offering and mould it into the world's words; to remove the veil for others to see.

By soft afternoon the writer's eyes drop from the page - she is in need of energy, and takes her camera out to the world. Some pass her on the street as grotesques, queer in their own skin; others with unrealised beauty sitting just below the surface. She sketches them all in her mind's eye, and stops to take a picture of a reclining rose.

Light Fading

Evening is now dropping its filmy curtain and nothing seems clear - all is betwixt and between. It's time for small drugs and mendicants to appear and match the day's trials. All the day's stories will be revealed by loved ones. In their own words ...memory bends and takes its place at the table.

The writer's mind is now full. She can take no more in - only breathe out her life...create the language that will take her and the others home.

Night

Night comes terrifying, screaming its warnings to heed the path - distraction won't be tolerated on this night's journey.

'Keep up - keep up - no no that's the wrong way - follow me - why can't you just follow me and be done?'

The sleepy dreamer writes her dreams on the blackboard of night, and she can hear a small swooshing noise as the moon washes down the stars, ready for her to read by - this noise can barely be heard but the dreamer knows its name - passion.

Jayne Ryan

Casting Gold

I turned 49 this week. On my birthday, my two youngest children, who are 15 and 17, took me to their favorite trail for a shared jog through woods and fields. It was one of those burnished early-November afternoons when the air isn't quite crisp, but it's "crispening" (as a friend of mine once described it).

The wooded part of the trail smelled like dry leaves and old tree stumps, and the open fields were full of the fragrance of hay. We ran slowly together along the winding three-mile path, pointing out all of its peculiarities to one another. The huge, green-dimpled fruits of osage orange trees lay scattered, smashed and pulpy along the trail. A graceful receiving line of perfectly symmetrical trees greeted us in an open field, as out of place as white-gloved blue-bloods at a Kentucky barbecue. Their arched boughs touched exactly in the middle. (Why were they there in that spot? Who had planted them and trained their branches?)

A little further on, as we rounded a bend, the pastoral scenery was interrupted by the view of a smokestack-studded behemoth of white concrete. "Oh, there's the spaghetti factory!" my daughter said with a laugh and a shake of her head. "Isn't it strange that anyone would put a spaghetti factory right here?" Each oddity of that trail, enjoyed, laughed at, or puzzled over, came wrapped in thick, gold birthday paper. A present from my children, because they know I collect trails the way some people collect spoons or salt shakers.

My heart beats and aches and overflows with love for these children who know me. The people I have poured my love and energy into understand something vital about me as a fellow human. And I'm far enough along in my own journey now to know full well that the cosmos comes with no guarantees that children will ever understand anything about their parents. My children recognize that the best thing to give their mother is not a thing at all. It's the shared experience of a beautiful, meandering—and-slightly-weird--place.

And that is how passion operates in my life—and in my writing. It catches me all slantwise and lovely and eccentric, on a trail or at a kitchen counter, reminding me, "This is what you've given yourself to. Pretty extraordinary, huh?" And at those moments, I cannot contain myself. Love is molten metal spilling out of the center of me. Running through my veins, looking for a place to cool, so it can find shape and permanence. Hot gold, overflowing into word-molds.

I have stayed in one place for such a long time now in my 25-year mothering odyssey. A location where I am as out of place as that colossal spaghetti factory sitting on a rustic trail. I groan sometimes, thinking of all the places a writer "ought" to be by the time she is 49 years old. I meet new people who ask, "But why do you live there?" And sometimes I feel my appetite for adventure shrivel a little at the edges, as I consider the unremitting dullness of the place where I live. This place that draws others for its safety and its sameness. This place I've chosen to stay/parent/be-a-responsible-adult in. A self-satisfied sort of place that has become more alien and uninspiring to me with each passing year.

“We must act out passion before we can feel it,” Jean-Paul Sartre wrote.

For 25 years, I have acted out my passion day by day, caring for four babies, raising and loving my children, running places with my children, and then quelling my restlessness to stay in this place with my youngest children. First, the decision was a financial one. Bigger family, bigger house, further drive. Then, it stopped being a decision at all--and became simply an ongoing commitment to stability. Finally, remaining became a necessity, born of divorce. When my youngest leaves home, I will too. But not a moment before.

My two eldest children are in their early and mid-twenties now—each of them thriving and finding themselves in a great world city. My two younger ones are teenagers, immersed in school, sports, and friendships. The work of parenting is dwindling, and the doors of a different sort of creative life are opening up. And as I move into these last couple of years of having children with me full-time (and living in this Prozac of a place whose pleasant, perfect cul de sacs never embraced me) I think often about the moments when my life as a mother has met my life as a writer.

Writing has been a constant companion in the acting-out of my life’s passion. A passion for four people I never imagined I could love with such a steady, fierce devotion. But writing has also been a half-neglected stepchild who had to wait, quiet and patient, for spaces of time in between suburban carpools, soccer fields, and piano lessons. And who then had to be put to work in the pursuit of income. (And there’s no surer way to lose the dazzle and the fun of words than to spend each day crafting something serviceable out of others’ threadbare sentences.)

Whether I was chronicling my journey or hiring myself out, writing fed me while I served my passion. It allowed me to live an examined life—even when life was going too fast to invite much examination. Writing steadied my heart and mind and moved me forward when passion was more a daily decision than a feeling.

During the toughest years, I was often too numb with busyness or anxious with worry and sadness to feel awe or joy. But even in the midst of a crumbling marriage or long stretches without enough sleep, I’d once in a while experience a moment when my children’s “becoming” got real and the beauty of it knocked me over. An 11-year-old amateur photographer, capturing in a moment of black and white the spirit of her giggling, round-faced five-year-old sister. A letter full of wonder and appreciation from a firstborn just gone away to college. A quavering song pouring from the heart of a four-year-old in a pink princess dress when she thought no one was listening. A fantasy novella written by a 14-year-old in between homework assignments. A surprising nugget of wisdom offered from a seven-year-old at bedtime.

Or, on this birthday, the breathless, knock-me-over moment when the air is fresh and the leaves are coppery and crunchy. Two half-grown-up kids are rosy and full of laughter, and a spaghetti factory sits absurdly on my own personal birthday trail. That's when passion, long held and long acted on, makes my heart burst with a violent lava of joy. How else can the long-acted-upon and suddenly uncontrollable be preserved and celebrated--but through molds made of words?

Maureen Hannan



Fear

The Devil You Know

She arrives at the hospital before most of her co-workers have stumbled from their beds. These hours of quiet before dawn's light are hers to use as she wishes, and she relishes them. Soon enough, duty and demands will consume her, but in the young day, she is alone and free.

She takes precautions alighting from the car and navigating to the entrance of the research building, wary of the possibilities in the shadows. She lingers in the lobby, for she knows her foolishness. There is invitation in her consistency, assent in her reliability. He, too, has purpose in these early morning hours.

She squares her shoulders, and steps resolutely into the elevator. Her routine is inviolate. She has accepted what she must, but she will not relinquish this. She will not allow him to steal from her the opening of each new day, the precious minutes where hope and comfort still exist.

The elevator opens. The bell shatters in its clarity. She hesitates; her limbs have lost all sensation. From this moment until she leaves at night, numbness replaces feeling. She scurries down the corridor in darkness, ghostly footsteps echoing across the tile.

He is paid to heal. Destruction is a component of the process. He inflicts injury, studies it, and applies his knowledge to repair abnormalities deep in the folds of a patient's brain. He excises tumors, resects aneurysms, and untangles seizure-causing synapses. He tests his theories on pink-eyed rats, teasing them through mazes, and analyzing their responses to pleasure and pain. He separates baby monkeys from their mothers, recording the failure of the offspring to thrive and the post-partum panic of the females into data sets informative of the human condition. His primate work alone has advanced medical science by leaps and bounds. The end justifies the means.

He sits in blackness in his office at the head of the hallway, waiting. He presses the button on his watch to illuminate the dial, and begins the countdown. The sweep hand has not finished a full rotation when he hears the ding of the elevator, and he smiles. Despite her protestations, she continues to play the game. He clasps his hands behind his head, eyes closed, chin to the ceiling, contemplating the rabbits trembling in their cages when he comes near.

When enough time has passed, he rises. Anticipation has tightened the thin fabric of the surgical scrubs below his waist. He exits the office, closing the door softly. Cloth booties muffle his stride. A thin beam of light beneath the closed door at the end of the hall summons his steps.

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Fear, I think, is a writer's stock-in-trade. It is perched on the blank page. It is between the lines in the reams of paper filled with words no one has read. It is the dust on the boxes of the books bearing our name languishing in the garage. It is the email we hesitate to open because its message has the power of life and death over us.

Deep in our souls, and no matter our accomplishments, we expect one day to be tapped on the shoulder and escorted out of the exclusive club we've sneaked our way into, the party we've crashed. Our confidence resides in the fact that, probably when we least expect it, the monster beneath the bed will pounce, obliterating us for once and for all.

There was a time when I thought I'd conquered fear. After all, when you've lost everything that matters, what is left to be afraid of? I became the walking, talking illustration of "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I'd survived the worst and lived to tell the tale. I feared nothing. I grew an impenetrable shell to protect myself. I didn't realize what shielded me from pain prevented me from feeling anything at all.

Over time, it became a miserable way to live. I experienced no sorrow, but no joy, either. Nothing made my heart pump or my pulse race. I would not allow it because the risk was too high. Finally, there came the day I wanted to feel, but couldn't. I had suppressed my emotions too deeply. It was then I realized I hadn't conquered fear. It had conquered me.

Everyone has fears. Everyone is afraid. Our mandate as writers is to draw from that common well, to infuse our experiences of love, hate, anger and desperation into our words, to safeguard or heal others as we illuminate the path for ourselves.

Karen DiPrima

At Some Point You Have to “Let It Go”

Your writing will never be perfect. You will make mistakes. Your mistakes will be noticed. Some people will dislike you. Others will hate you. Get over it.

As it is popular to say these days, “Let it go.”

It is hard to do, I know. I have lived with fear for so long it has molded to my skin to look just like me. I have tried to shed it, but it remains, lurking just below the surface of my chest, tightening its blackened fingers on my heart and telling me that nothing is ever going to go my way.

Fear will say you aren’t supposed to be a writer. Fear will insist you will never make it. Fear will claim that your work is far from perfect and shouldn’t get out there. Fear will shout to your spirit that your work will never be bought. Or worse, yet, that your work is wrong. Fear will tickle your mind, telling you that publishers will never look at you. Fear will tell you that you will always be where you are, and that you should let go of your dreams.

Fear will say, “Who are you kidding? What is so special about you?”

At times fear will taunt you daily, sitting on your shoulder like the devil, whispering in your ear three words over and over.

“Not good enough.”

I don’t like fear. In fact, I am on a mission to be rid of it. If I could flip off fear I would, and seeing that I am a Jesus freak, that is saying a lot.

Let me tell you about a secret weapon. It is a secret weapon we all have, but most of the time we don’t use it. It is there, buried deep inside, but we rarely bring it to life. It is something opposite of fear, but not necessarily a word we would choose as fear’s antonym. It is a beautiful word, and it is one we need to take to heart.

Trust

This word will mean different things to different people. If you are of the religious sort, trust evokes a strong belief in something more than yourself. It involves a supernatural force in which you entrust every piece of your life. Some would call this a cop-out, but for those of us walking this road, it is far from one. In order to trust an outside source we have to “let go” of any inward power we ourselves possess. It involves “being still” and not trying to achieve anything on our own volition. It is at times – terrifying – until you refocus your thoughts on the trustworthiness of this outside source.

For those of us who do not have this belief, and even for those that do, trust also involves trusting ourselves. The “letting go” involves releasing ourselves to be ourselves and to not please those around us, or even try to impress those around us, but to be true to who we are as complex, beautiful, fantastic people.

Trust involves freeing ourselves from our past and living in the present. It involves breaking out of the “trendy” to see the world around us as we wish to see it, not in some vein of disillusionment, but in full knowledge of the truth of our identity. Trust involves speaking our voices without shame or guilt and celebrating the fact that some voices will not identify with us. Trust involves knowing the voice we have is a gift. Trust understands that if we try to model our voice for the ones who hate us, we are condemning those who love us, and we are even condemning ourselves.

There will be times when you will look at something you have completed and fear to push “go,” be it a blog, a query letter, a short story, or a novel. Our fear whispers in our ears, “Not good enough.” Ever had one of those days? I have. Many times.

The answer? Trust yourself and trust your inner beliefs. You know the point where you have done enough. If you look at something a million times, there will be a million changes, but if you continue to look at it a million times no-one else will ever see it. At some point in the writing process you have to let it go. Will there be mistakes? Yep. Live with it. Better to get it out there than for it to never be seen. As a writer, I am sure you have read some pretty popular stuff where you cringe and shutter because you see a misspelled word or bad grammar. Let me tell you something; mistakes are in everything you read. You have to realize you are not perfect. Neither is any writer out there. Mistakes will happen. Let it go.

Will there be critics? Yep. Sure will. Will some people hate you? Yep, sure will. There is one popular author on the bestseller list right now whose writing I can’t stand. I won’t mention any names, but when I picked up her book I about lost my mind. There were so many abstract flowery concepts that I absolutely abhorred it. Let me say that again – I abhorred it. I will never pick up another book this writer writes because she’s all “the rainbows reflecting on the bubbles rising from my bathtub went into the distant ether and morphed into masterful raindrops of emotions in the heavenly spaces of my soul.”

Can I say “shoot me in the head?” Yes, “abhorred” is actually not a strong enough word. I went out of my mind reading the first page. But other people absolutely love her. They drool over this book. They breathe it in like it is the finest bouquet of wine they have ever inhaled. I am saying all that to say this: if this writer had given me her book I would have told her to give up on her dreams, but then all her fans would have missed out on the “rainbow bubble” experience.

So when you know you have done your best – let it go. Get it out there in any way you can. Trust the forces you believe in. Trust yourself. If you don’t, your life will be filled with fear, and fear robs you of life. You can’t live well in the moment if you are continually focused on your fear.

You can’t live at all unless you discover your own voice, critics be damned. It is time to release the bubbles.

Let it go – and keep writing.

Nicole DiCenzo

Stage Fright

I'll never forget the first time it happened to me—that flat-out certainty that I'd have nothing worthwhile to say. The raw fear that when the deadline arrived, I'd deliver a miserable crew of anaemic, half-starved, thought-refugees posing, sweaty-palmed, as robust sentences.

I was in college, in an honors program led by a professor who'd just published a bestselling reference book on writing. It was a snappy little style guide, along the lines of Strunk and White. But what this book really was, I discovered (since it was also the syllabus for his writing seminar) was a compendium of four decades of professorial pet peeves. Our textbook was the soon-to-retire scholar's howl against bad writing—a manifesto couched in mild, example-studded admonitions. And it sprang from a long career of reading undergraduates' essays and research papers. He was a general in the war against fuzzy thinking, illogic, redundancy, and egregious usage violations.

He was a slight man, with a grey goatee and a quick smile. He didn't look scary. But every time I got an essay back, I felt his wrath against my literary offenses.

- Sentences begun with “there is” or “there are.” (“Turns your thoughts into wet noodles,” was his comment.)
- Passive voice. (“Makes the wet noodles look good.”)
- Random tangents. (No comments. Only a large, imposing question mark covering these.)
- Sins against logic. (My specialty, apparently, considering the ever-present exclamation point following the one-word “Logic!” reminder)

He was right, of course, to teach us rules of active voice, strong subject-verb beginnings, and, well, simply making sense. They are rules I have taught to students myself—and I'll always be grateful for the professor who turned me into a relentless editor. But for 19-year-old, emerging-writer me, the twitching red pen of Professor Harold Kolb, Jr. (as I imagined it), unleashed sheer, white-knuckled panic.

It's a panic I came to know well over the years—especially at those times when I've tentatively re-entered writing after seasons of focusing on other kinds of goals. I'd stare at my computer screen and find my thinking had gone a bit fuzzy—and then I'd instantly start flashing back to those emphatic red-ink shouts of “Logic!”

Then, once the first draft was down on paper, Professor Kolb's voice would speak to me in a careful, measured tone reflecting both bewilderment and disappointment. Half-glasses on nose, brow wrinkled, paper held out as far as his arm can hold it, as I squirmed in my seat.

“Cluttered paragraphs I'm seeing here. What exactly was your point?”

After a few heart-in-my-throat experiences of earning Professor Kolb's praise, my white-noise paralysis changed to an adrenaline-infused inner chatter. When he assigned a paper or project, I would start to debate with myself.

"Will I pull it off?"

"I have before....but shit, I don't know. It'll be interesting to see whether I wind up with anything decent."

"Well, come on now, just start writing down ideas....You'll get there."

In the end, I always did produce something I could feel okay about—an essay or bit of research that represented a step up from whatever I'd done before. (Once I stopped committing my cardinal sins against voice, usage, and sheer logic, that is.) However, no matter how many A papers I racked up over the two years Professor Kolb mentored me, I never entirely shook the dread I felt when I entered one of his due dates into my planner.

"Will this be the moment I learn I have nothing at all worth saying?"

Whoosh of fear, trickle of dread. Followed by series of deep breaths. Followed by creative procrastination manoeuvres. Followed by earnest, pen-chewing attempts to rise to challenge.]

Twenty-five years after those first experiences with writer-terror, I got my first job writing full-time for a print publication. It was in a field I knew absolutely nothing about—public parks. Well, that's not entirely true. I knew about parks from taking four children to many of them. Pushing lots of swings, pushing strollers down myriad winding paths. But what qualified me to write for the people managing all those parks? Nothing whatsoever.

Plus, I was part of a three-person editorial staff pushing out a 90-page issue each month.

And, at the exact moment I was hired, state and regional park directors across the Gulf Coast region were dealing with the devastation that was just reaching their shores after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. And it was my job to find them, interview them, and get their stories into final-draft form. Immediately.

As I quickly discovered, public officials dealing with unprecedented manmade disasters generally don't want to talk much to journalists. And if they do, they want some assurance that their tale will be told well, showing them and their tireless staffs as the good guys that they truly are.

My first week on the job, I left a series of voice mails. None of my phone calls were returned.

Weekend of panic. Many deep breathing exercises. Followed by a Monday-morning attempt to get a notoriously shy Gulf-coast regional park director on the phone.]

Miraculously, he picked up the phone. Even more miraculously, I got him to talk to me. About his fears, his hatred of the politics and news frenzy surrounding the mess, his respect for British Petroleum. (After all, they were the folks he was working alongside in his part of the cleanup. And he had neither the time nor the inclination to dwell on blame.)

Just one snapshot within a larger story. A hopeful, purposeful picture within a collage of devastation, death, and oil-coated ugliness. It was worth telling—though I knew it would appear only as a sidebar to the bigger story.

I did what (I would come to learn) I do best. Listened to the man, let my human curiosity guide my questions, and took good notes.

Nothing magical. I simply shifted my focus from my self-centered inadequacy fears to the story itself. And to one man—one Herculean effort—that added dimension to that story.

When the story came out, that small piece didn't rock anyone's world or garner much notice. But for me, it represented a major shift in thinking. A shift that has affected much more than my journalism or my copywriting. It's a change in focus that has colored every part of my life. It's led me into new business ventures and deepened friendships. It's stripped me of every excuse not to travel, and it's pushed me again and again into conversations with strangers.

When fear turns me inward, I simply turn myself over to curiosity.

Many years ago, I read the 80s self-help cult classic, *A Course in Miracles*. I don't remember getting much out of the book then. It was all just a bit woo-woo for me at that time, I suppose. But I recently downloaded it to my Kindle and gave it a fresh read. One refrain stood out: The most fundamental choice in front of each of us is the choice between love and fear.

Fear-driven selfishness and withdrawal into one's own world come at a cost. When you're burrowing down inside, churning, agonizing, figuring out how you'll fight some imminent threat to your ego, you're missing out on feelings and experiences much grander and finer.

"Perfect love casts out fear," the authors wrote, echoing words from the Christian scriptures. Then this little diamond of truth, which I promptly captured in the pages of my journal:

"You believe in what you value. If you are afraid, you are valuing wrongly."

I thought about my experiences as a writer, my struggles with pride and the fear of being shown in some public way as inadequate. As unintelligent. As worthless.

And then I thought about how quickly those fears dissipated when I simply allowed myself to feel curiosity. To give in—with my whole mind, pen, and notebook—to fascination. To be captivated by a person, a place, an idea, or a movement.

Would it be too big a stretch to call that love? I don't think so. It feels warm and radiant and right. And it leads to a holiday of self-forgetting, just a little bit like falling in love.

Whatever you want to call it, though—this feeling of deep engagement that is not fear—I know one thing for sure. It produces much nicer writing than panic ever did.

Maureen Hannan

Jumping Into the Fear Stream

Many writers are encouraged to use a stream of consciousness device in order to write without overthinking, and to help them uncover words without censoring themselves.

The term 'Stream of Consciousness' was coined by philosopher and psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits ... it is nothing joined; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life.

I thought I'd try this with the word FEAR and see what happens?

Each of the 8 words we have used in this book can be used in this way and may just be the jumping off point for your greatest work!

Fear is a flavour, a bitter bouquet, a stumble over yourself when yourself hasn't quite finished getting dressed.

Fear is a hole that has the ability to pulsate; we're taught holes are empty but they are not.

My deepest fear is that the things I feel and connect to aren't there at all.

My deepest fear is that they are.

Either way I'm screwed for this life but I'm not sure fear cares or that I do either.

I died to my fear some time ago and a new universe popped open – a strange universe but stranger still; one that is filled with beauty and wonder and things not of this world.

So now as a writer I find fear 'in absentia', her crimes not yet punished - but fear lurks – I know she's waiting for me and is putting little dishes in front of me for me to try.

For entree perhaps - the death of a loved one?

Main course – disease and discomfort

Desert – what about the never-knowing of so many things, of being a mother, of being a playboy bunny, or a nun, or of being a success – whatever that means.

She's calling last drinks now –she suggests – 'the harrowing absence of paper or something to write on, or blindness perhaps' – that would be her grand finale – taking me down with nowhere to go, or rather nowhere to see.

But still – these are just life things – and we get on with, and get over, life things.

Fear is not being able to scribe my last words in the dust, or in blood – that would be nice – somewhere unexpected – a cave in Italy somewhere or laying down in a field with corn ears spelling out my last words.

Fear is breathing down my neck but she won't get me

She's breathing down yours as well, but in the end she is just a line and you have to jump, skip or hop over her and stand your ground – the ground will shift but it's yours for the shifting – ask her to move over, tell her to shove off –

After all she is also afraid of you and your words.

Jayne Ryan



Moxie

No Guts, No Glory

This is a story about kindness, courage, and the first time I heard the word “moxie,” but mostly, it’s about Billy Baxter, a boy from the neighborhood where I grew up, and the mystery in his backyard that explained everything.

Ours was a community of cookie-cutter houses, populated primarily with young Catholic families. Most were members of nearby Our Lady of Sorrows Church, and almost all of the neighborhood children attended the parish school. We played together, walked to school together, and because several of us were in the same class at the same time, did homework together.

All of us except for Billy Baxter.

At twelve, Billy was the oldest boy in the neighborhood, and our resident bully. Billy's younger sisters went to Our Lady with the rest of us, but he attended public school. It was rumored he had been kicked out of a prior Catholic school for fighting, and these allegations were corroborated by Billy’s physical appearance. I can still see him swaggering down the street, his hands in his pockets, a smirk plastered across his mouth, sporting a black eye or purple bruises on his jaw. The sight of him was enough to set the girls to shrieking and send the boys scattering. Billy’s street cred was such that even the neighborhood's other minor hooligans and bully wannabes like Dennis O’Leary and the Trombetta twins dared not challenge him.

The Baxters kept to themselves. Whereas other mothers shared recipes, and other fathers exchanged pleasantries after mowing their lawns, Mr. Baxter never acknowledged his neighbors, and Mrs. Baxter and her daughters rarely left the house. Mrs. Baxter always wore sunglasses, even in the rain. Billy, alone, was sociable, in a blustering kind of way. It seemed as if every time we looked up, there was Billy on the sidewalk, taunting us, throwing pebbles to get our attention, and saying he wouldn't play our stupid games even if we asked him to.

Although most mothers had banned Billy from their yards, my mother had a soft spot for him, and encouraged us to include him. She gave Billy an extra cookie when she was passing out treats, and when handing him a glass of water, she’d smile and inquire after his mother. Sometimes she’d mention him at the dinner table, but her conversations with my father about Billy seemed conducted in code.

“I saw Billy Baxter this afternoon. He said his mother is feeling better.”

My father grimaced. “And Billy?” he asked.

“Nothing new. Nothing I could see.”

“That kid,” my father said through tightened lips, “That kid has moxie.”

At age eight I was already a collector of words. “What does that mean?” I asked, rolling the word over on my tongue, and murmuring “Moxie, moxie, moxie.”

He stabbed his fork into his potatoes and shook his head. “Spunk. Nerve. That kid has guts, plain and simple.”

His statement startled me and my siblings into silence. Of all the character traits admired and striven for in our house, “guts” was among the most highly prized. In my mind, “guts” was a nebulous combination of bravery, courage and the “inner strength” the nuns at school constantly harped about in connection with telling the truth and doing the right thing despite influences from others. I believed having guts was something you grew into, like high-heeled shoes. Hearing “guts” applied to a child, especially a boy like Billy Baxter, confused me.

My sister chimed in on the topic of Billy. “Mom, we let Billy play school with us today and he ruined it – again! I was the teacher and he kept making fun of me. When I told him he answered a question wrong, he yelled at me, and Nancy and Susie started to cry and went home, and then nobody wanted to play school anymore. Billy’s mean. I hate him.”

“Don’t say you hate him. Be kind. If you are nice to him, he’ll be nice back to you,” my mother said.

“I was nice to him. I was! But he ---“

"Billy's mean," my little brother echoed.

“That’s enough. Finish your dinner,” my father said.

My sister muttered into her plate. “I don’t care. I still hate him.”

My mother sighed. “That poor boy. That family has had –“

My father cleared his throat. My mother changed the subject.

The Baxter house was the only one in the neighborhood with a fenced-in backyard, where they kept their dog. The fence was constructed of tall wooden planks hammered together so tightly there were no cracks to see through into the yard inside, and its gate was heavily locked. Along the outside of the fence, the Baxters had planted rows of thick, thorny bushes, and trees that had grown so large they surpassed the height of the slats. The exterior jungle distinguished their house from the others in our neatly manicured neighborhood, and was an item of conversation used to illustrate Billy’s character and behavior. “No wonder he’s a wild child, just look at their house!” was a familiar refrain.

On the few occasions we’d mustered the courage to creep close to the fence, we heard the dog’s chains rattling as it roamed about. From the size of the lock on the gate and the noise of what sounded like heavy chains, we’d concluded the animal was huge, even monstrous. Because we never saw the Baxters walking it or playing with it, speculation about the dog’s breed and temperament ran rampant.

I decided to find out about the dog for myself. My chance came one day when I saw the entire Baxter family, including Mr. and Mrs., Billy, and the two girls, get in their car and drive away. When their car turned the corner, I strolled up the sidewalk and made for the Baxter's fence.

I avoided the gate and plunged as quietly as I could into the underbrush. The chains rattled, but what set my heart to pumping was a garbled moaning, almost human-like, coming from inside the yard. Thinking the dog was injured or in trouble, I desperately inched farther down the fence line, until I reached a plank that was slightly askew. I stood on tiptoe and jammed my face against the wood.

The yard was an expanse of tightly packed dirt. A thick ring protruded from the center of the yard, with a length of chain attached. My eyes followed the chain. What I saw made me blink in disbelief. A creature stood in profile on the dirt, gutturally whimpering. His wrists were shackled, and his ankles were bound also, but with enough span in the restraints to allow him to shuffle from spot to spot. He cocked his head in my direction, and I gasped. My outburst made him turn completely around, and with a sudden roar, he rushed the fence, and I found myself eyeball-to-eyeball with a distorted version of Billy's face, mouth gaping open, crooked teeth in a misshapen jaw bared in either a snarl or a smile, close enough for me to see the beginnings of stubble across his cheeks.

I screamed and fell backward into the bushes and then scrambled out of there as fast as I could, the creature's other-worldly sounds ringing in my ears. I barged across my front door, blubbing, "Mom, mom! It's not a dog in Billy's back yard – it's a boy! They have a boy chained up in the yard!"

My mother listened intently and tried to calm me as she tended to my scratches. She made me repeat the details several times while she scrubbed my elbows and knees ferociously. When she was finished, she gritted her teeth and said something that finally staunch my tears, "Karen, sometimes I think you have more guts than brains." Thoughts of the boy in chains flew from my mind as I pondered the relative merits of bravery versus intelligence.

That night, my parents paid a visit to the Baxters. I saw Billy one more time, a few weeks later, when he climbed into the front seat of a moving van beside his father. The new owners of Billy's house kept the fence but removed the lock on the gate and trimmed the bushes. Dennis O'Leary and the Trombetta brothers took over Billy's turf. Order was restored.

I don't know what happened to the Baxters but I understand them now. I recognize the terrible secrets Billy masked with bravado and attention-seeking. I realize the significance of the family's isolation and Mrs. Baxter's sunglasses. I have a theory about the boy in the backyard. I agree with my father that if anybody had guts, it was Billy.

Some of their troubles became those of my own later in life. Like Billy, I found a way to cope with them, and eventually, I overcame them. But they are always there, simmering in my memory. As a writer, I use them, draw on them, and deliberately recall them, until sometimes the pot of emotions is boiling over and difficult to bear.

That is the curse and the blessing of writers, and why our craft is not for the faint-hearted. We weave bits of ourselves, including our secrets, truths, lies and misdeeds, into our writing for the world to see. Many of us believe our best work evolves after revisiting the worst parts of our lives and examining the aspects of ourselves that make us blush and squirm.

Those of us who bare our souls on paper and then offer up our work to public scrutiny can take comfort in the fact that, as writers, we have the courage to go where others fear to tread; the guts to invite our feelings in, and allow them to fester; and the moxie to bravely endure it all to write from a place of authenticity and honesty.

Karen DiPrima

Crazy Good or Twirling Hair - Your Choice

E.E. Cummings said, "To be nobody but yourself in a world that's doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else is to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop."

If you can keep yourself pure in a world gone mad with cookie cutter voices then you have what I refer to as moxie. I had moxie once. I let it go, not knowing what I was giving up. I lost it because I thought I would be happier if I pleased a person rather than being true to myself. I was told my laugh was too loud, my clothes were too wild, and my knowledge of etiquette was too little. I wanted to please this newfound love so I tamed down my wardrobe, stifled my laughter, and learned a thing or two about how forks are placed. Five years later I didn't even recognize myself. When I look back at pictures of the "after" verses the pictures of the "before" it is a dramatic visual. The before was without restraint, donned with tight cheetah pants, a leather jacket and tall black boots. My smile was wide and my eyes shone with the excitement of life. The after was reserved, wearing tidy blouses and pleated pants, small belts and conservative flats. My smile was tight and my eyes were filled with hesitation.

I don't know how I didn't recognize this de-moxification of my inner core. I don't really know how I survived this de-moxification for so long. When I finally broke free, true freedom evaded me. I had lived with criticism for so long that I couldn't bust out my cheetah pants and loud laughter without feeling somewhat inadequate. When my old self came back, my cheeks would flair with shame. I didn't know myself anymore, and I didn't know how to get my old self back.

Then I met my husband. He loved me for me and I was able to grow under his tender hands. Then two notifying officers knocked on my door, telling me my husband was never coming home. This took the moxie I had regained and shredded it like silk through a taffy grinder. If half of you disappears in a heartbeat, nothing about you is the same and you have to re-discover your true identity.

Moxie. When you have it, you don't worry about what others are saying about you because you are confident in who you are. When you have moxie you can approach every difficult circumstance you face with boldness because you are speaking the truth you feel is right. Moxie is what everyone needs without the attitude. If you have it, people will love you because you put on no pretences. You are who you claim to be. They may not like what you say, but there will be a degree of acceptance and even respect for who you are.

I took a self-defense class the other day. The instructor walks in looking like she had zero experience on the moxie scale. Her hair was shaved on both sides with a slight poof on top. Her tight fitting canvas pants had pockets lining each side with flaps jetting out as if they were trying to fly away. She wore an unfashionable jacket and a long sleeve T-shirt that was already showing signs of sweat stains under the armpits.

When she smiled her teeth went all the way around her head, and she had a belly chuckle that was at times a little annoying. I soon found out that my first assessment was wrong. This girl had moxie – and lots of it.

She lifted her nose high as she surveyed the small group. “What do you like about yourself?” she said loudly. She pointed at the first girl sitting to her left. “Three seconds. What do you like about yourself?” She went around the room. The girls stuttered. They fidgeted. They said things like, “I like my family,” or “I like it that I am trustworthy,” or as I so cleverly said, “I like to write.” But this didn’t cut the mustard with Ms. Canvas Pants. This lady tore into us, “You like your family? What does that have to do with you? You think you’re trustworthy? What do your friends have to say about that? You like to write? You a good writer? What do other people think? You probably suck.”

“What do you like about yourself?” she said again. She cupped her breasts and gave them a shake. “I like them. They are big and beautiful.” She opens her mouth wide and smiles, even going so far as to lick her lips. She hops to the side and sticks out her gluteus maximus. “I like my ass. Sometimes when I’m naked, I have to tell myself to stop looking. It is embarrassing!” She shows us more teeth and gives that annoying chuckle as she shakes her ass again. “What do you like about yourself?”

This went on for a good portion of the class. What was she trying to do? Give us confidence in our own skin, because those that prey on us look for the unconfident; they look for those plagued by insecurity. Predators study ticks and look for a weakened soul, beat down by the world or even themselves. There was one young lady in our class that started twirling her hair as soon as she sat down. She sat beside me during this “what do you like about yourself” exercise. She never once stopped twirling her hair. After a good hour Ms. Canvas Pants said, “I knew the minute I came into this room whom I would target.” She starts walking forward. She looks down at Twirling Hair and then she jumps forward in a feigned attack.

What you think about yourself matters, not only to the physical predators, but also to your inner soul. Moxie matters. The inner dialogue you have with yourself affects your outer self. It will reveal to others pieces of your soul. The page will reflect that as well. We all have our own Moxie and we need to fan it to flame, because if we do not do that, the world will never know the true YOU.

There is a Yiddish saying that says, “All of us are crazy good in one way or another.”

We are crazy good – all of us – and that “good” that defines us is our Moxie. This Moxie is what we need to stand out from everybody else – even if it is with a shaved head and canvas pants. The question is, will we be bold enough to fan it to flame?

Nicole DiCenzo

Unacceptable! Or You Got Moxie?

What is this word Moxie? Such a strange word...

In London when a Canadian woman opened a Moxie club; no-one came. When she opened a women's business club many people came. And so I've discovered -

{ 1 } Moxie originated as a patent medicine called "Moxie Nerve Food, which was created around 1876 by Dr. Augustin Thompson in Lowell, Massachusetts. Thompson claimed that it contained an extract from a rare, unnamed South American plant.

Moxie, he claimed, was especially effective against "paralysis, softening of the brain, nervousness, and insomnia."

Through extensive advertising, the neologism "moxie" has entered popular American usage with the meaning "courage, daring, or spirit, as in "This guy's got moxie!"

So when I think about courage, or being daring or stopping the 'softening of the brain', moxie spirits me away to the 1920's – to the suffragettes, to the flapper girls – to the women who 'flaunted their disdain for what was then considered acceptable behaviour'.

This new woman, the flapper, used her dress code and behaviour to mould a path for women of the future. It was a leaping off; a 'no going back'.

If you are a writer, chances are that you will be leaping off - you will have something to say that you think 'other people' will think of as unacceptable. Writers by definition (if they are worth their salt) should be discussing the unacceptable.

So I'd like to share something I once wrote that an editor told me was 'unacceptable'... What do you think?

Ode to lost souls

I didn't know it at the time but the best years had already passed. They were grid-locked in my memory. They belonged to me and no-one else, from another time. I had tried to no avail, to re-create some of their magic and innocence throughout my life.

Only my memories and dreams shone; jewel-like in the pit of my mind. All waking hours were dull and repetitious. I longed for sleep and the ability to let my mind wander through its strange labyrinths, turning corners where worlds and long-ago's, were left for dead.

One night I dreamt that I lived a day in the life of a deranged mind, a mind full of strange longings and confusion. A mind that was, as if looking through a net; only partly clear, partly lit.

The dream house I lived in was normal in every way, except under its guilty facade lay a mouldering mist. It got into everything and contaminated everyone who passed by.

And that was it; the moment when I realised and understood the physical, tactile nature of emotional sickness. How feelings can be purged, changed, mutated in a blinding single moment.

Nothing ever the same again. The mind's perception tracing new circuits through the brain like hot solder; burning and etching new feelings to be remembered and acted upon.

I felt the weight of humans perishing.

Burned out, forever gone to dust, the wind unwinding in absolute silence and darkness?

And one question remained inside this new mind - Where was the map for the dark souls who didn't know where love lived? Which path could they follow to become humanely beautiful?

What have I learned from all this? - that sometimes when we struggle with a piece of writing, we don't start from darkness, it brings us to darkness, and our first instinct is to recoil, to run from something that repels us, something that we think doesn't reflect who we believe ourselves to be.

But it's having the balls or the moxie to see where it takes us that informs our writing. It makes us more compassionate writers to our readers, and allows the muse or the mind's eye to write what it needs to, instead of allowing the logical brain to construct our sentences.

Which leads me to the most difficult and important part of being a writer -

Don't censor yourself!

{1} Reference Wikipedia

Jayne Ryan



Bravery

Get out of the boat

Have you ever been on an angry sea? I don't mean where it is a little windy and your boat is rocking gently in the breeze, I mean an angry sea where massive waves are hitting your boat and threatening to capsize it. For grins, let's just imagine it together. You are in a small boat. The wind is howling so loudly you can barely hear your own voice. Your hair is whipping violently, slashing your eyes and causing them to tear. Sprays of water are surging over the protective hull, soaking you to the core. All you can do is hold onto the side of the craft and pray that the storm will be over soon.

Then you see something on the water. What is it? It is a person, and they are walking your way. On the water! So what do you do?

You get out of the boat. I mean, that is the obvious answer. You just hop overboard and go for a leisurely stroll on the angry waves. Right?

Not so much, unless you want to die.

There is a story in scripture about this very thing. Jesus is walking toward the disciples' boat as it is being "tossed" by the sea. That word "tossed" in the original language means "to torture, to vex with grievous pains, or to torment."¹

The boat was being tormented. The disciples were vexed. It felt like God was trying to torture them with the angry waves.

Yet one of the disciples gets out of the boat. Peter starts to walk toward Jesus. The waves are threatening to topple him as they surge around his body, soaking his inner being with ice. But Jesus is in the distance, so Peter continues to put one foot in front of the other. He keeps his eye on his goal and his heart on the promise of Jesus' invitation to join him on the sea of uncertainty.

Then, in a moment of weakness, Peter takes his eyes off the goal. He looks at the waves and not at Jesus. He hears the wind and not Jesus' voice. He feels the angry sea's spray. And he sinks.

What do most people remember about this story? Peter sinks. He doesn't make it. He fails. But I want to point something out to you. There are 11 other people in the boat. No one else volunteered to get out on the sea of uncertainty – no one.

This story amazes me and encourages me in my walk as a writer. Sometimes you are on a calm sea, sometimes you are on an angry one, but you know what? You are out of the boat. You are walking on the water. You are taking a risk. You are putting yourself out there, and there is something profoundly beautiful in that.

There are a lot of other people in the boat who will never know the thrill of the sea. I want you to stand where you are and look back. See them? It doesn't matter if you are only one step away from the boat, or a thousand leagues in the distance. They are watching you.

It doesn't matter if you are standing tall as the waves slap your skin, or if you are sinking into the dark depths of uncertainty. They are watching you. Why?

You have given all of yourself to your "goal" and you are taking a risk. Not many people in the boat could do that.

It took me a long time to say that I was a writer, but when I published my first book I started introducing myself as one. At times the reply I got back was, "I'm going to write a book someday." This was the exact moment when my eyes started to bleed, fire came out of my nose, and I punched them in the throat.

If you are not out of the boat, do not tell me you can get out of the boat until you sink your feet into the waves of uncertainty. Am I speaking to anyone? I would not go up to a heart surgeon and say, "One day I am going to do a triple bypass."

If another person says that they are going to write a book someday I am going to reply, "So get out of the damn boat."

They will love me, I am sure.

But making people love me is not my goal. My goal is to be true to my moxie and walk on the water. My goal is to turn back and wave at all those other people in the boat, even if they are yelling through the wind how awesome their books will be.

At times the winds will be terrifying. At times the waves might be a little too much. At times I might sink, but I know in my heart I will never drown. Because at my core, in my inner soul, there is a spark of bravery that urges me – no commands me – to walk on the water.

If you are still in the boat, it is time to get out. Yes, there will be fear, but I want you to take that fear and channel it into determination. I want you to take a step and look back at the boat, smile, and wave goodbye.

Once you are in the waves, you will never want to get back into the boat. The boat has boundaries; the ocean does not. Although it is an endless sea of uncertainty, it is also an endless sea of possibility.

Your adventure awaits.

1 – biblestudytools.co

Nic DiCenzo

Thirty Minutes of Wonderful

Ask a child for the definition of bravery and he or she may cite the courage of an anonymous stranger who rushes into a burning building to rescue an infant, or the valor of a soldier who carries his wounded comrade to safety away from enemy lines. Unquestionably, those who risk their lives for the sake of others are heroes. But I believe people exist among us who exhibit quiet courage every day of their lives, and although their deeds may be unheralded, they are heroes just the same.

My sister belongs in that category. Although she died before her time, I think she left this world with few regrets. She savored every moment and made everything she did count for something. To me, she is the ultimate example of a life lived bravely, courageously, and without compromise.

When she was in her mid-twenties, my sister was diagnosed with Lupus and given five years to live. I wanted to wrap her in cotton and place her on a shelf in a jewelled box to keep her safe and with me forever. But she would have none of that. Like Shelby in *Steel Magnolias*, her philosophy was “I’d rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special.” She rejected the diagnosis and ignored the medical advice. No disease and no doctor would keep her from living the life she wanted or deter her from pursuing her dreams.

I thought she was foolhardy and selfish. I was angry, with her and with God, unable to accept why she was dealt such an unlucky hand while others less deserving drew kings and aces.

But she herself wasted no time on anger; she was too busy living. Her love of children was the driving force in her life, and her two ambitions were to be a mother and a teacher. Despite everything, she determined to have them both.

When she announced her second pregnancy, I felt a profound foreboding. I will never forget the urgent phone call one night months later, and the white-knuckled, silent drive to the hospital, or the sight of my sister in the ICU bed, a mere shadow under the sheets, enveloped in a spaghetti of tubes and wires, the room hushed except for the beeping of the monitors. I will never forget the dire expressions of the staff, and the doctor’s strained voice when he suggested we gather the family to say goodbye. Hours later, she rallied, against all odds and to the doctor’s amazement. I was relieved but not surprised. In my heart I knew my sister’s love of her daughter, and the things left undone, gave her the will to overcome.

It seemed nothing my sister accomplished ever came easily, including her ambition of becoming a teacher. It took her ten years to complete her degree, and her journey was arduous. She had to drop out due to illness in the middle of a semester, or needed to retake courses because she’d been in the hospital and missed the final exam, or had been too ill to submit a paper. Every setback increased her determination. One of her proudest moments is engraved on her headstone: an image of her in cap and gown, holding her diploma. She graduated *summa cum laude*.

She exhausted herself for her students, and revelled in her profession. Her dedication translated into weekends in bed or in the hospital, and summers devoted to recoveries instead of vacations. At her funeral, the church was filled to overflowing with dozens of the doctors and nurses who had treated her over the years, and hundreds of her students whose lives she had touched. I think it was then I realized how well and how bravely she had lived. She left behind a legacy in the ongoing lives of countless children, the two she had borne and the many she had taught.

When I sit down to write, especially on the days I am uninspired or afraid, I try to channel my sister. I push aside my anger; try not to waste time wondering why someone with so much to give was allotted a shorter measure than others. Instead, I try to summon up the gratitude I know she felt for being able to do what she loved. When my fingers hesitate at the keys, I see her at the head of her classroom, a sea of bright faces before her, waiting for her to begin.

And so, each day I will return to fight the good fight. I won't allow rejections to crush my spirit. I will keep trying. I will throw caution to the winds and become foolhardy. I will continue to learn, to try new techniques, to adjust my perspective and view life from a new lens. As timid as I am, and as difficult as it is, I will offer myself up time and again, no matter how often I fail. I will savor every moment. I will work as hard as I can to infuse my words with significance and meaning. I will make what I do count for something.

I, too, will be brave.

Karen DiPrima

Only the Brave

Sometimes we hear stories of incredible bravery.

- The man jumping into a raging river to save his dog.
- The woman who puts herself in danger to save her child.
- The patient waiting for major surgery or treatment - not knowing the outcome, again...

But as a writer, we don't have to act in a moment of panic or without thinking - we have the luxury of time and choice, as to whether we are brave on the page (or not).

My own bravery list or I should say *test*, goes something like this:

Crossing a word out because I think people will react badly or judge me in a way I don't want to be perceived – and then uncrossing it and putting it back in (small brave)

Shying away from concepts because my 'blinkers' are well and truly working that day – thinking only I would understand a particular concept – that the readers won't get it - and then trusting that we all share our humanity and the muse will be sorely pissed at my arrogance – See note 1 – go back and try again (slightly bigger brave)

Allowing anti-flow to enter the room – this takes all sorts of guises – second guessing every word, allowing distractions to break in, not setting the room up for bravery in the first place. (common sense)

Patting the dog – looking at her for inspiration – writing down what she's thinking ☺ (soulfully brave)

Looking at my bookshelf and seeing my heroes/heroines – Plath, Murdoch, Nin, Hughes, Jung, Tolle, Drabble, Kundera, Rumi – who am I to think I have a right to the page!

See note 1 – go back and try again (depressingly brave)

Killing my darlings (heroic!)

Allowing the writing to show up the way IT wants to (the only worthwhile type of brave)

So writers, get your pens out! Look at your own list and ask yourself how brave am I with my writing and how much room is there to grow?

Jayne Ryan



Integrity

To Thine Own Self Be True

From the time I was little I remember being told human beings are like snowflakes. Each of us is crafted individually by our Maker, and endowed with diverse talents and skills. Our abilities are given according to a divine design, meant to complement and balance those of others in the noblest of endeavors – the betterment of mankind. I was taught that, because each of us is perfect in our own way, it is important to be true to yourself, for only then are you able to utilize your unique gifts for their intended purpose.

As a child, I loved the analogy, and tested its veracity by scrutinizing the evidence on my frozen mitts during a winter storm. Seeing the uniqueness of snowflakes made me feel special, too. I couldn't wait to discover all the other distinguishing aspects of me, the things that would set me apart and, I believed, would someday allow me to contribute to humanity.

To be told just be yourself was exhilarating. It implied I was good enough, just as I was. It loosened the mantle of guilt I wore around my shoulders like a sweater in my deeply religious home. But it made me question, too. Whenever the lesson about the sinful nature of man arose in the homily on Sunday or in religion class, I thought about the snowflakes, and wondered. How can we be perfect and evil at the same time? The answer, God doesn't make mistakes, didn't answer my question. It left me with more.

It became clear that the moral of the story about snowflakes contained a mixed message. Sometimes our uniqueness was celebrated, but most often, it was not. Being different had dire consequences no matter what your age or stage in life. In the workplace, in school, and at church, the missives I heard louder than any other were: be like everyone else, get along with others, don't rock the boat. In other words, don't be different. Conform. Go against the rules and you'll be dragged off to the principal's office, or grounded by your parents for weeks. Spouting radical ideas on the job could warrant a bad performance review or termination. Skip Mass, don't fulfil your Easter duty, or eat meat on Fridays and you'll be excommunicated (and earn a permanent place in Hell).

Growing up, I did my best to be true to myself while teetering on the tightrope of conformity. I learned it was good to be myself when I excelled in school, but not when I played with trucks and soldiers. I understood what was acceptable and what was not and adroitly learned to hide the parts of me that countered the standards of a middle class, respectable Catholic girl. I became adept at being less me and more the person others expected me to be.

Unlike the other, perfectly formed snowflakes, I was flawed. I was the lopsided one whose point melted the instant it hit your glove. It wasn't God's fault (He doesn't make mistakes), but being different no longer translated into being "good-special," for me. I was "bad-special" and abnormal. It didn't take a genius to see the world was made for traditional couples, families of four, and the average somebody named Joe. And it was easy to see how being different could be dangerous. In a very dark place inside of me, I realized being different was the stuff of which suicides are made.

As hard as it was to pretend, I was terrified of what would happen if I lived my differences. So I did the expected, normal thing. I married and had children, in the hope I would become just like everyone else if I acted that way. Over the years I suppressed my oddness so well, when it all came crashing down, I was as surprised as everyone else.

I went deep inside myself for answers, and discovered the truth of something I had known all along: God doesn't make mistakes. I was not flawed or broken; my behavior was. My sin was in acting without integrity. I had lacked the bravery to be true to myself and my convictions, no matter how difficult it was to admit to them and stay the course. When I stopped pretending and apologizing, when I stayed true to the person I knew myself to be, finally, I became happy. But most importantly, I think, my self-acceptance provided a glimpse of the purpose for which I was made, perfect/imperfect snowflake that I am.

The answer I've come up with is that although I will never fit in, there is still a place for me as an outsider. My purpose is to observe and reflect on the behavior of others, and to write about those things, to bring comfort, raise the truth, or offer perspective. I can deal with that.

Writers, too, are a breed unto themselves. Some of us recognized at an early age we had a different perspective on the world. Some of us may have been informed, with varying degrees of kindness and sensitivity by classmates, parents or teachers, we weren't like the other kids.

Being misunderstood is our *modus operandi*; we live and breathe trying to fit in while standing out in the world of publishing. In order for our words to be read, we might be willing to chip away at our integrity, by changing our writing style, altering our voice, or deviating from the subjects that matter to us.

I know I have been guilty of this. I justify it by urging myself to be smart, to give the marketplace what it wants, to stray from difficult subjects or to buffer intensity with lightheartedness. Don't make your reader squirm. Life is difficult enough, what readers want is an escape. Try humor – remember, many a truth is spoken in jest. Otherwise, what is the point of working so hard?

And then I come around to the realization learned from my own experience. There is only one road to happiness: Be yourself, whoever that is. Write your truth, whatever it is, without apology or excuse. Like individual snowflakes, you are designed to be different. Who you are is good enough. In fact, it is more – it is perfect.

Karen DiPrima

False Skirt-Makers

It was 1988. I was seventeen walking down a rainy street as my mother took my picture. I had to make a packet about myself, describing my accomplishments and goals. Where exactly I had to send the packet, I do not remember, but I know I felt like a million bucks.

I can still see the picture. My skirt billowed slightly in the wind, one hand was in my long blonde hair, my mouth was slightly open, and my eyes were intent on the camera. I can still see the tag we put at the bottom of the picture, explaining that I had designed the skirt myself. I looked good, and I felt good. Confident? You got them apples right. Sure of who I wanted to be? You bet. My dream? To be a fashion designer. My goal? To rock the world.

I still have the skirt. I can't fit into it anymore because I didn't even weigh one-hundred pounds in high school, but at seventeen, I loved to wear it even though I received some really strange looks. So why in the world do I still have it? I made a lot of other clothing in high school, but everything else has long since vanished from my wardrobe. The only thing I still have is that skirt. I think I kept it because it symbolizes something for me. I hadn't even realized it until I started thinking about what to write in this piece about integrity.

It symbolizes revelation. It symbolizes vision. It symbolizes something so great that the world just wasn't quite ready to embrace it. It symbolizes me.

I actually brought the skirt out a few weeks ago and showed it to my friends to prove that I was not, in fact, insane. You see, if I was able to wear that skirt today I would blend into the crowd. I would wager that I would actually get a lot of compliments and not a lot of surprised stares.

The skirt was before its time. I have always had an eye for the outrageous bordering on the sane. What does the skirt look like? It is short in the front and tailoring to almost brush the ground in the back. Sound familiar? You see them everywhere now. When I first saw this new trend I thought about my skirt, the picture, and sending in that packet. I had a strange sensation that someone had found my design after all of these years. They knew a good thing when they saw it, and the rest is history.

Of course, that probably didn't happen. Great ideas are there for anyone to visualize, but it is still tantalizing to imagine someone finding my picture and creating my design. Despite the fact that the picture I sent in probably found its way into the trash decades ago, when I see a skirt similar to mine, I feel a little robbed. After all, it was my design. It was mine long before it was the latest fashion trend.

For some reason that design was important to me. I still recall envisioning that skirt during my high school years, wondering why it wasn't on the market. I thought it would be cool. I thought it would be outrageous. I thought it would – well – rock the world.

And it has nearly 25 years later.

Ideas define you. They make you who you are. As writers we take ideas and put them on paper, enlightening the world or making believe, weaving a web of complex plots, or shining our personal thoughts to the world. We spill our soul. In time, what we spill will define us. People will think of your work and many will be able to proclaim a word or a phrase that describes just who you are and what you embody. I have a few words and phrases associated with me already. I didn't plan for it to happen, but it has. It is a necessary process of writing. We need to create a fingerprint in a world with a lot of fingers. Our blogs, our webpages, and our identities need to shine something that defines us – be it a concept, a saying, a phrase, or an idea.

What is not so fun, is when someone takes your idea and uses it for their own, especially if you are a struggling artist striving to make your mark on the world. You can rarely fight back, because not many know of your identity yet. It is not a good feeling. It actually feels like you have been violated. When you are out on the sea of uncertainty and walking on the rough waves as a writer, others will see what you are doing and try to jump overboard as well. After all, if you can do it why can't they? This violation of identity has happened to me quite recently. I picked up a work by a friend of mine a few weeks back. The word I use most often, the word associated with my name, she used in the exact same manner, not once, but twice in a very short literary work.

Even thinking about it still gets my blood pumping. Someone close to me – someone who calls herself a friend -- just stabbed me in the back. I am still bleeding.

Integrity

I would never do what this individual did. In fact, I have gone through pains to try to steer away from anything that would or could be associated with someone else. I want my own voice, not someone else's voice. I want my own fingerprint; I do not want to copy the lines of someone else's finger. But others don't feel that way. They want what you have and they do not care if they take your voice or your identity. In other words, if they like the picture they see, they may steal your design and try to make it their own. Do they know what they are doing? Perhaps, perhaps not, but in any case, we need to be aware these people exist. We may be unable to keep the picture from them, but we can try to guard our souls from too much blood loss if our eyes are open to the possibility of identity theft.

I did not invent the word associated with my name, but it defines who I am and what I want my readers to leave my work wanting to achieve. Ironically, this same word, like the skirt, was even with me in high school. It has been a way to describe me for over twenty-five years because it describes my soul. The wound I have will not heal anytime soon, but I will be stronger because of it.

What about my “friend?” I was mad for a while, furious in fact, but in time I calmed. She is trying to be a skirt-maker but I don’t know how successful she will be, especially if the camera is following her down the street. Not many can keep the charade up for long. You can’t fool the world if you are trying to walk in someone else’s skirt. False skirt-makers may have their day in the sun, but soon the sun will turn away from them and shine on someone else . . . someone with integrity perhaps.

Until that time, I will keep walking on the writer’s sea of uncertainty in a skirt that is short in the front, and tailoring to brush the water in the back. I will not turn to the right or to the left because the sun is about to rise and when it does, my path leads straight toward it.

See it up ahead? Take my hand and let’s go. Stay focused on the goal. The sun is about to shine.

Nicole DiCenzo

Who Owns What And Who Cares?

All writers, artists, photographers, thinkers, inventors, and creatives are faced with the same problem.. at what point in the process does someone actually 'own' something.

Copyright goes some way to alleviating the stress of being copied but you can't stop someone else on the planet coming up with the same idea, at the same time. And what of all the creatives who are basing their ideas on the ancients or others who have come before them, albeit with a new twist or a new way of representing those same ideas.

When I think of integrity in this space and the exponentially increasing narcissism that comes along with our social media worlds (and the fact that everyone now has the ability to be their own PR machine) I admit, I'm in need of a magnifying glass to find examples of good, old-fashioned human integrity.

The only advice I can proffer is – if you think you shouldn't use something, then don't. As well as being a writer, I'm also an avid photographer and spend many hours carefully editing my images and thinking of captions to go with them. When I see others use these without even a simple credit my heart sinks – but to counteract this I have now made a promise to the universe that I will take even more photos. I won't bother with watermarks or claims of ownership but will simply put them out there for all to share and hopefully enjoy. I guess in the end I may own the camera but I don't own the thing that I'm photographing, well unless it's my dog, or my house, or my stuff – you get the picture (and existentially do I really own those?)

I believe integrity is really all about your inner guidance system. Not only is it about your values and treating your fellow creatives with integrity but also treating the work with integrity. For me, it all comes back to the muse or the creative source that gives us our urge and intent to work and write. It's this power that I revere most and try to make integral to any writing or creative endeavour.

I also think integrity includes paying it forward and helping grow the talents of others, regardless of what stage we are at on our own journey. We can always find a way to stay true to ourselves and others, as our stories emerge and are shared.

Jayne Ryan

The End

So, we have come to the end of our experiment. This work has been such an emotionally rewarding experience for us all and we believe has helped us take our own writing to the next level.

We also hope you have enjoyed our small token to support YOU as an emerging writer – or an already published one!

Using a particular word to kick start this deep dive into our own creativity has worked well for us and we hope you find a way of using it too, either within your own writing groups or by yourself if that works for you.

Please don't hesitate to contact any of us if you would like to know more, or use us as a sounding board for your own experiments.

Good luck and in Nic's words – 'Never, never give up!!'

Biographies

Maureen Hannan is, according to her most current resume, the owner and “head storyteller” of a digital marketing agency. She’s also been (in no particular order) a magazine editor, a public health journalist, a college adjunct professor, a writer for humanitarian relief agencies, a high school English teacher and curriculum designer, a web developer, a car wash manager, a homeschooling mom, a soccer league administrator, and a landlord. No matter what professional or vocational hat she’s wearing, though, Maureen remains first and foremost a student. Her addiction to learning has led her to friends and mentors all over the world—including the three other writers featured on this blog.

Maureen’s primary writing ambition is to travel widely, explore urban landscapes, and to write about her adventures.

Maureen is the proud mother of four inspiring young adults—Haley, Allison, Mary Anna, and Matthew—who never cease to dazzle her with their curiosity, courage, and humor. She lives with her two youngest children in a sleepy Virginia town near the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

If you feel like sharing a bit of your own writer’s journey (or commenting on Maureen’s), feel free to get in touch via email: bellflowermedia@gmail.com

Nicole DiCenzo was born in Texas, raised in the hills of Tennessee, and has lived in Alaska and Germany. She has traveled the world from petting kangaroos in Australia, to walking the streets of Rome, to sitting on the beach in Hawaii drinking beverages out of coconut shells.

She loves a fire and a good glass of red wine (or two or three). She loves the sand beneath her feet and the sun on her back. She loves being surrounded by friends but she recharges by sitting alone and dreaming of a time when dragons can come alive and take to the skies (preferably with riders).

She currently lives in Georgia with her fabulous son in a black and white house surrounded by memories of an awesome husband (KIA 2006). She owns a scruffy dog, a fanatical cat, and a lizard named Drago Valentino (it is the closest thing to a dragon she can get). She is a reader who loves to write, a woman who loves to dream, and a girl who loves to laugh. Her motto is: Shine your Faith with Moxie.

Nicole DiCenzo is the author of five books. Her first: *Revelations: A Survivor's Story of Faith, Hope and the Coming Kingdom* was inspired her husband Army Captain Doug DiCenzo's death in May 2006. Her second book is a Bible study called *Revelation in Black and White* on the biblical book of Revelation. Nicole also uses the pen name Cole Pain for her fantasy books *The Quest of the Dragon Tamer* and *Faith of the Dragon Tamer*. These were the books that inspired her to become a writer and to have faith in whatever a writing career would hold. She just recently published another Bible study on the controversial topic of creation verses evolution: *The Beginning in Black and White*. She is currently working on the third book in her fantasy series entitled *The Dragon's Tear* and another Bible study that will discuss controversial issues within the church.

You can reach Nicole on the links below

<http://nicsrevelations.com/>

<http://www.colepain.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Nics-Revelations/142149562550664>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Cole-Pain/180186408858891?ref=hl>

<https://twitter.com/NicoleDiCenzo>

Karen Di Prima is a freelance commercial writer who holds the dubious distinction of having written scores of websites for law firms across the United States. In addition to legal website copy, she pays the bills by writing marketing materials, business and lifestyle articles, speeches, video scripts, executive biographies, press releases, and everything in between. She is the author of two novels (one of which was a semi-finalist in the 2013 Eludia Awards Competition sponsored by Hidden River Arts Publishing), and a collection of short stories, all (as yet) unpublished.

While awaiting the Pulitzer Prize, Karen enjoys traveling, reading, gardening, and all things Sherlock Holmes and Key West. As the mother of four and the grandmother of five (having started young), she can personally attest that the trials and tribulations of parenthood (of humans, animals or both) provide excellent practice for surviving the frustrations of a writer's life.

Currently, Karen is hard at work on a New Adult series. She lives in suburban Philadelphia with her wife of twenty years.

Jayne Ryan is the author of *Wisdom Is The New Black* and *The London Letters*. She is also the founder of *Story Powered Women* – a community for teaching story based marketing to entrepreneurs, change-agents and speakers. Formerly the editor of *Women Unlimited*, Jayne contributes to other London based publications and continues to help woman find the power of story in themselves and their business.

If you would like to contact Jayne the best place is through twitter @StoryPowered or email her at jayne@jayneryan.com.

You can also find out more about her work and courses here:

www.jayneryan.com