



Nurturing the Writer Within is a workshop I’ve been preparing to write most of my life.

It’s a women’s issue. It’s a writer’s issue. It’s the core of creativity and it’s rarely understood.

We’re all pioneers here. Despite wild rumors about creativity and insanity (along with poverty and other problems) over the centuries, no one actually studied creativity until about 1930.

J. P. Guilford, a psychologist, conducted the early studies on creativity and taught university classes about creativity. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J. P. Guilford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._P._Guilford) Beginning after World War II, he studied the structure of intelligence for more than twenty years, and published widely in professional journals about creativity as a form of intelligence. .

Alex Osborn taught creativity classes within his advertising agency sometime after 1939. He published his book on brainstorming, YOUR CREATIVE POWER, in 1948. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex Faickney Osborn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex_Faickney_Osborn)

Robert P. Crawford was the third pioneer. By the time I was at the University of Nebraska, Crawford was a professor emeritus in the School of Journalism and sponsored the journalism honorary. His first book on creativity was published about 1931, and he continued to write about creativity until 1964. Dr. Crawford began teaching a class on creative thinking during the 1930s. He told me that he and Dr. Guilford were the first two (and in 1960 perhaps the only two) professors teaching creativity in academic settings. They were friends and were also friends of Osborn. Crawford was an engaging man who liked students and kept perennial open house in his campus office. We all wanted to write, of course. It was Crawford who got us interested in the creativity process. <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/suppmat/crow.pdf>

I’ve been following that trail for 48 years now, through all the experiences and training I could find that taught human creativity. There was a small flurry of interest in the early 1960s, especially from Paul Torrance. Later there were authors like Natalie Goldberg and Julia Cameron who taught us to use journals to foster creativity. Robert

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Dilts www.nlpu.com modeled creative geniuses using neurolinguistic programming methods. Hypnotherapists have studied writers from time to time. Writers have left journals and books and Paris Review interviews talking about their creative processes. There’s even a 12-step program www.artsanonymous.org that provides support for people struggling to make room for art in their lives without being overwhelmed. More recently, Eric Maisel, a psychotherapist from California, focused his practice on artists and writers and their problems. A writer himself, he’d found his niche. Eventually he pioneered the field of creativity coaching and is a primary instructor for the Creativity Coaching Association. I’ve studied with Eric www.ericmaisel.com and am a member of the Creativity Coaching Association.

What used to frustrate me about creativity studies was the phrase “and then they dropped it in the hopper and...”

An artist or scientist mulled over or became obsessed by a question. The artist or scientist did anything and everything to get an answer and finally gave up, walked around or slept, and voila! I wanted to know what happened in the hopper, of course. And I’ve found bits and pieces of that answer in ancient wisdom, kabbalah, women’s studies, hypnotherapy, neurolinguistic programming a long trail.

Just as I decided I was ready to offer this workshop, I gave myself a few days in Denver, attending a workshop on journaling and healing. The workshop amazed me and gave me a new perspective, a new paradigm, for decades of studies. I threw out all my notes for this workshop a month ago and started over.

NURTURING will be a personal workshop. If you have questions that are too personal to post, please send them to mary_ogara@comcast.net so that I can post for you without revealing your name. There will be homework with each lesson. Do the homework at your own pace. I’ve suggested a sequence for the work, but some of you may be more comfortable doing it in a different order. You’re invited, but not required, to post homework as we go.

The work is so important and so personal that I’m also inviting each of you to make an appointment (after the workshop ends) for a full hour of personal coaching with me at no charge. I suggest doing homework first and bringing your questions from the homework to the coaching session. Before the workshop ends, I’ll post a certificate in the files area to make it easier for you to remember and to claim your free session.

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I’ll post Lesson One on Monday and plan to post two or three lessons a week, along with resources and bonus material. Please ask questions at any time during the month.

INTRODUCTIONS, PLEASE:

Please introduce yourself and give us your name and location. Tell me what you most hope to gain from this workshop. I’d also like to know whether you’re published or not, what your current work is, what your greatest challenge as a writer is right now, and whether you have a written career plan.

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN – LESSON ONE

There are many ways to describe the creative process—and they all work. Some work better than others. Some work better in one circumstance and others in another.

One thing all models of the creativity process have in common is the idea of a gift. Some talk about divine inspiration or the muse. Some talk about “dropping it into the hopper” and waiting for results. Even the old wives’ tales about creativity and insanity, or creativity as dependent on drugs or alcohol, include the idea that creativity is a gift from something outside our human selves.

The primary model I want to share with you is based on Ancient Wisdom from the Western tradition or Kabbalah. The Western model sees all creation as having four stages or development steps:

- Called Forth
- Created
- Formed
- Made

Called Forth

This is the stage of divine inspiration or the gift from the muse. Henry James

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filled his notebooks with jottings about story nuggets. I carry a journal everywhere and write notes about story ideas as they occur to me. Ideas come in dreams, on walks, in the shower, while we’re cooking. They come when we’ve been focused on a question, but mostly when we’re relaxed and least expecting them.

At this stage, they’re not much more than a nudge, an emotional twinge that says something important is happening and we should pay attention. Or they’re tantalizing bits of dialogue or dream images—something compelling we have no clue about using. But the gifts do get our attention even if they’re so fleeting we lose them again unless we get up and write them down or record them.

Arts Anonymous www.artsanonymous.org speaks as creativity as something we can’t manage and control. (And oh, my, do we try! We try with all our inventive little hearts.) We cause ourselves all sorts of trouble by trying to manage, coerce, control or avoid and ignore our creativity.

This is a highly fertile stage. While some of us feel compelled to capture every idea, the truth is that ideas flow constantly at this level, and we can only use a small percentage of them. What we’re doing at this stage is noticing what gets our attention, capturing and considering what sparks our personal curiosity.

Created

The next step is structural. Some writers refer to it as the causal stage; some meditators discuss it as the stage where we see geometric shapes.

The original idea is filling out, but it’s not a coherent work. Some authors begin working with plotting structures at this point, filling them out as their questions about the project get answered. You know whether the idea is a screenplay or a novel or a poem. You may know genre and have a sense of its length and complexity.

This is the stage of commitment. We can wad up the notes and toss them away

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or put them in a folder and let them sit for a few years.

We might be nudging several projects along that are in the created stage. Karen Weisner suggests keeping folders for multiple projects while working diligently on one. Phyllis Whitney had space in her writing notebook for ideas that didn’t fit the current project. Writers who contract for a series have to write one book while others are at this stage.

The created step is about the form and weight and substance of a work.

And it’s about personal decisions. I can feel this idea, I know it, I recognize it. Do I want to live with it? Do I want to live with it this year?

Formed

The formed stage looks very different for plotters than pantsers or puzzlers.

For a pantsers, or someone who’s doing National Novel in a Month or even Book in a Week, this stage might produce a mass of words in need of organization and revision. From the outside, that looks as if you’re watching all the building materials arrive on a vacant lot but can’t see the blueprints.

For a plotter, it might be the kind of grid and storyboard Robin Perini and Laura Baker teach in their Discovering Story Magic series. It might be a detailed synopsis, like the ones Mary Buckham teaches writers to develop based on the hero’s journey. It could even be one of Karen Weisner’s 70-page outlines that is virtually a sketchy first draft. Or it could be completed plot sheets from Carolyn Greene’s plot doctor. Or any other plotting system, from Dramatica’s complex story model to my own favorite quick one-page outlines for short stories.

Puzzlers will do some pantsers work, some plotter work, and they’ll assemble bits and pieces. Many of them move back and forth among the creative levels, perhaps writing one chapter in nearly finished mode while huge chunks of the book are barely called forth.

This mode ends when you have the equivalent of a detailed blueprint from

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which you could build a house _and_ you’ve assembled or know where to find all the materials you need. (You may not have interviewed the FBI agent or the trauma nurse, but you know in general that you need to talk to an FBI agent and a trauma nurse and you probably know how to find them or maybe already have their consent to be interviewed.)

Made

Now you’re writing or revising finished manuscript. You’re checking facts, filling in research, layering.

Whether you do one draft or twelve, know the ending in advance or write to discover the answers, this is the stage where you flesh it out and bring it to life.

It ends when the book is ready to show an editor or agent.

Gift vs. Craft

I hope you’ve noticed, as we’ve moved from one stage or level to another, that some stages are more about gift and others more about craft.

- **Called forth is all about gift. The only craft involved is remembering to capture ideas as they float into your awareness. You may have methods for capturing dreams...but proportionately, the gift outweighs craft 10 to one at this stage. Maybe 100 to one or a thousand to one**
- **Created. We’re still primarily working with gifts at this stage. Craft is limited to things like knowing how to prompt the muse with morning pages or timed writing. And there’s one other important component that’s partly gift and mostly craft: knowing a good story when you see it coming along. Campbell’s work with the hero’s journey reminds us how ancient storytelling is, how deeply it’s embedded in our DNA. In primitive cultures, storytellers are healers. So that awareness of story is mostly gift—but gift that can**

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be enhanced by reading and by studying story structure.

- **Formed. Now craft begins to take over. The gift is largely there—and the conscious mind begins to step in, asking questions, filling in details. The balance is delicate. The conscious mind can’t afford the muse; dialogue is essential at this stage. But the conscious mind does more of the work now.**
- **Made. Ultimately, this is craft work, the work of the conscious mind. The story’s inherent theme and structure are already in place. Everything that makes the characters live is there. In this stage, craft honors the gift and polishes the words, rearranges the scenes, checks the facts.**

Your writing habits, as you develop them this month, have to take all four stages into account.

- Called forth takes time and space and openness. You have to plan for that time in your life in order to receive the gift. Morning pages are one way. There are other ways, too
- Created. At this stage, you daydream on paper. And you need the habit of regular attention. You make appointments with your inner self and keep them as meticulously as you’d keep an appointment with a new lover.
- Formed. You work regularly. Discipline sets in. And there are craft issues about form, structure, and enough self-knowledge to make the process as easy as possible for yourself.
- Made. Surprisingly, discipline may ease again at this stage. You have interviews to do, words to check in the thesaurus. You work regularly, but with more variety. You’re distancing yourself as you do before a child leaves home. Less emotion, more craft. Although you should still be crying in the sad parts as you write.

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Notice that the creative part of the mind is about pattern and emotion (right brain) and is gentle and vulnerable. The conscious mind is tough and can tear out whole scenes for the sake of the story. Part of the work is learning to let the conscious mind be tough on the story, but not tough on the inner creative process. (It is not fair, for example, to ask the creative side to guarantee a best seller when it’s still just thinking about how sexy your new hero is. Each stage is its own—and no browbeating.)

One more note: You have to do the first three stages completely if you want the final stage to be successful. Kabbalah says there are three creative elements (fire, air and water) and they mix to form earth. The creative elements are represented by the three primary colors, which mix and form a dark brown earth color. In ancient language, earth represents the external or manifested or “made” world.

If you rush the first three stages, you’ll have a flat final manuscript. And you’ll risk burnout by using the wrong part of the mind for creative work.

Twyla Tharp

In *THE CREATIVE HABIT*, choreographer-dancer Twyla Tharp discusses the four steps of the creative process in more modern terms.

- Generation is the beginning of ideas, and she draws ideas from three primary sources: memory, experience and activity.
- Retention is the second step, and its work is to hold the idea in mind and keep it from disappearing. She gets a box and begins gathering materials that might be relevant, putting bits of music, sketches, books, anything related to her theme into the box.
- Inspection includes detailed study and research and making inferences. Tharp’s work here involves body movement and is similar to working with a synopsis or to a sculptor’s rough work with the clay to get the form right before working on details.

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- Tharp calls the final stage transformation. In the final stage the work is to alter the materials to suit her creative purposes.

Robert Fritz

Robert Fritz is a musician who discusses creativity in his book THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE. Fritz groups the four steps into three: → Germination or conception

- Assimilations
- Completion or acceptance

His germination stage includes my first stage and most of the second. The work of assimilations for him overlaps with a little of my second stage and all of the third. The completion stage goes beyond mine to the actual public performance or release to the editor. As you can see, the work is the same. The difference is the same as plotting for beginning, middle and end or for four plot points.

HOMEWORK: Study these models and choose one or create one for yourself, defining the stages of the creative process as you are currently working. (Methods do change over time, usually in small increments, but you only need to be concerned now about your present working methods.)

Do a journal entry for yourself about each stage. Which one do you prefer? Which is easiest and most natural for you? Most difficult? For each stage, make notes about where and how you work, what conditions you need.

Robert Dilts wrote two articles on Walt Disney’s three-step creative process that may help you define your own methods and understand what your creative self needs at each stage:

<http://www.nlpu.com/Articles/article7.htm>

<http://www.nlpu.com/Patterns/pattern7.htm>

As you read the Disney articles, notice that Disney used different facets of

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his personality for each stage.

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN – LESSON TWO

However you define the stages of the creative process, it’s clear that what the work requires from a writer (or any other creative person) is different at each stage. We’ll be talking about ways to work on creative projects all month, but I want to sketch in some ideas and give you some useful resources right away.

Fishing for ideas

In the initial stage, think of yourself as a fisherman. You can decide what kind of fish you want to hook (a story fish, a screenplay fish, a poem fish, a marketing plan fish) and the lure you want to use to hook that fish (morning pages, walking meditation, remembering people and places, or even starting research on a subject you want to use in your creative work). Beyond that focus and intention, however, your main job is to be still, to watch and listen attentively for ideas, and to capture what comes.

Eric Maisel’s TEN ZEN SECONDS teaches simple ways to still your mind with mantra, and the mantras he recommends are provided on his website for the book www.tenzenseconds.com One of my favorites, when I feel useless and as if I’m wasting time at the computer, is “I am doing my work.” Breathe in and think “I am doing” to a slow count of five then breathe out and think “my work” to another slow count of five.

You need to find out for yourself what conditions you need for the work. Some people need peace and quiet. Others thrive on being out with crowds at malls or movie theaters. I like being alone in a group at a coffee shop. Henry James listened to gossip at society dinners.

Expansion

The mantras will serve you well in the second stage, too. But they won’t be enough by themselves.

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Here you are expanding on the initial idea. You continue to listen, but also to play and doodle and do clustering exercises. You may use charts and forms and grids— whatever you and your inner creative self find interesting. I’ve always done this work in journals, but I’m also attached to mindmapping software on the computer. Recently I’ve started using Microsoft One Note to collect material for this stage. Karen Weisner uses folders. Twyla Tharp uses a box.

There’s software for every writer. Pauline Jones told me about a site that gives away licensed versions of software (legally, through contracts with the software manufacturers) every day. Some days it’s little programs; Pauline’s Power Point software came from this site. Check out www.giveawayoftheday.com for software that will entertain and intrigue your muse and make this part of the work more interesting.

What you’re doing now is fleshing out the idea. You might make lists of names or titles until you find one that fits. You might make a list of the 25 worst things that could happen to a character—and then work the worst of them into your story. The work is still haphazard, and you’re still feeling your way into the story. This is the primary stage for brainstorming and play, but not the only one.

Again, you and your muse will need to figure out where you do your best work. I often work at my computer, using my software toys to keep it fun and to provide the kinds of patterns and graphics the right brain likes. But it’s also work I take out to coffee shops and bookshops and libraries, journal in hand, because my muse likes a change of place. Sometimes the computer just feels too much like working

<g>

Blueprint

This stage feels (and is) more closely related to the left brain. You’re thinking consciously now about shape and structure and what fits where and what the reader needs to know that you don’t yet know yourself.

Whether you’re outlining, making a synopsis, or writing the bare bones of a

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first draft, this is focused work. You probably need quiet time. This is the stage where you may have to take your laptop to the library or tell the family not to knock on your door unless someone is bleeding. The work is intense and focused—and at your best, you’re using both sides of your brain at full speed.

I’m not a soccer mom, but I’m married to a man who can run into a Home Depot for one part and disappear for an hour. I can make lists of titles in the car in the parking lot, but I’ve never learned to write a detailed synopsis or a good first draft without my computer. Miriam Sagan, a New Mexico poet who writes essays and memoirs, writes all her first drafts in journals and assembles them on the computer; she seems to be able to eke out a paragraph at a time under conditions where I can only do preliminary work. So this really is an individualized process.

The stages in general will be the same for each of us. The precise times in our work when we move from one stage to another are individual. Follow what I’m saying here as general flow and direction, then pay attention to your own muse. And understand that what works for you today may need to be revised at some other time. Or for some other project.

I draft poems longhand and only put them on the computer for final revision. Writing a book would have been torture for me without a computer.

Hey, It’s a Book!

Or a screenplay. Or a collage. The last stage ended, more or less, with a full detailed outline of the book. (Some authors move back and forth, finishing one chapter and going back to early stages with the next, but they work through the same stages each time.)

The creative work is mostly done. You might return to an earlier stage, for example, to change a title or brainstorm new solutions if something isn’t working. By and large, this is the work of the conscious mind. You’re bringing your sense of story to bear, but you’re dealing with precise wording. For the

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first time, grammar matters. Spelling begins to matter. Fonts and line spacing are irrelevant until this stage.

You complete the work and revise it. Your critic gets to come out to play. It has something to work on now (much better than giving you ulcers by eating at you when it doesn’t have anything appropriate to do for the work).

Some writers are like Walt Disney: They need to move away from their creative space for this work. I do most of it at the computer, but at some point I take a printout to a coffee shop and do the most contentious critical read away from my creative space.

HOMEWORK: Begin now to study yourself as you work through the stages. This will be a long-term project. You might get a notebook and keep a running record of what work you’re doing, the conditions under which you worked, and how that suited you. Or you could open a document folder and a file for each stage and write occasional entries there. Simplest of all, open an email folder and write an email to yourself as you discover clues to your best way to work at each stage.

Writer’s Block

Writer’s block is almost always a matter of mismanagement of creative stages. Writers who will remain anonymous ask how much money they can make from a particular kind of book before they find out whether they fish well for ideas in that genre’s pond. They’ve just let the critic go fishing—and the river or pond should be posted clearly “No trespassing. No critics allowed.”

Or they let the creative side run the final stage. They send manuscripts handwritten on pink paper to busy New York editors and wonder how the editor could have sent it back by return mail.

Habit and place will help your subconscious mind know which kind of work you are doing. Your intention should be to do a specific phase at a specific time. If you want to change to another phase, get up and move around the room, stretch your body (to let the work you just did get integrated), then shift

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gears.

We’ll talk more about shifting gears in a later lesson, but now I want to shift into a whole new subject J

What You Want vs. What You Think You Can Have

Whether you’re creating life changes or a novel, the first (and sometimes the most difficult) step is to decide what you want. At this stage, it’s fatal to focus on what you think is possible. There are both practical reasons and ancient teachings—but I’m going to ask you to test the process for yourself.

Until you allow an idea into your life, you have no way to judge what you can create around it. Focus first on understanding (and fishing for) what you want, then on growing with the ideas that come as you move from one stage to another.

HOMEWORK: Take a blank sheet of paper and date it one year from today. Begin writing a description of your ideal future life. “It is July 21, 2009, and I am celebrating ” or “I am enjoying “. You can write about your life in general or just your writing life. Eventually, I suggest you write both, of course J But do write only about yourself. If you want a research trip to the Antarctic and think your family might object to your taking the vacation budget for a “selfish” trip, write how pleased they all are now you’re back from the trip and they can see what it meant to you. Or write that your family loves the new house and is happy you have your own studio and multimedia room. Make it rich and juicy and full of everything you could possibly want to create or experience this year. Do not say no to yourself about anything you really do want and are willing to experience now. Above all, don’t leave anything out because it seems impossible.

Include a short note saying how pleased you are that everything on this list came about easily and effortlessly, with perfect timing, for the highest good of all J That’s enough creative leeway to let the Universe or the creative magnet for good within you modify what needs modifying along the way.

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HOMEWORK: Now make a list of 50 or more things you want to have in your life. You can make it a long long list of all the things you want to own, skills you want to develop, travels and learning you want to undertake, books you want to write, people you want to meet—everything you want to do before you die. Or you can make it about things you want to experience in the next 10 years.

I do this list in a spreadsheet, but you could do it in a word processor table or even by hand. However you do the list, you need three columns.

On the left, write what you want.

Next to it, write whether you want it in the next year, 3 years, 5 years, 7 years or 10 years.

And then begin filling in the third column with all the juicy, intriguing reasons you want that particular experience. Get your emotions about it on paper. The emotions have the creative power J

I use a spreadsheet so I can sort them by the number of years and put them in rough sequence. But you could use colored markers if you’d rather work by hand.

When you feel as if you’ve got everything on paper—which could take a few days— pick three. If you’re an overachiever and it’s a quiet year in your life in general, go for five. Highlight them and commit to making them happen.

For the purposes of this class, please see that at least one of the highlighted items is about writing you plan to do. The other items you highlight to work on this month should either be about writing or affect your writing conditions. We’ll all see the value of having a housekeeper even if she can’t type <g> and new golf clubs are writing related if they are part of your exercise and self-care plan.

I invite you to post the three items you’ve highlighted unless they are too personal. If you aren’t comfortable posting them with your name attached, but would like them to be part of the group’s discussion, please send them to me to

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post.

FURTHER READING FOR THOSE WHO ARE INTERESTED:

To see how location can support habits for your writing, first read the material from the Walt Disney articles from Lesson One, then from these two articles on anchoring:

<http://www.nlpu.com/Articles/artic28.htm>

<http://www.nlpu.com/Patterns/patt28.htm>

Then go to www.nlpu.com and click on ENCYCLOPEDIA in the upper center of the page.

Click first on Volume S and then on Spatial Anchoring in the index list. You’ll find two articles there, one on Space and one on Spatial Anchoring.

Then click on Volume C and on the words Circle of Excellence in the index list. You’ll find an article with directions for creating a Circle of Excellence.

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON THREE

Let’s start with a homework check. Do you all have your ideal scene for a year from today? And your list of 50 or more things you want to experience in the next 10 years, sorted by the year in which you want to experience them?

A tip for sorting: Let your feelings guide your decisions. If it feels “crowded” or pressured to have too many goals in the next year, move a couple back to 3. You can always bring them forward again You’ll want to read the ideal scene often—at least daily—until it is so clear in your mind you can see it and experience it with your five senses just as if it were happening now. You’ll want to work with the list when you do planning, probably once a week.

Goals and Standards vs. Intentions

A goal is measurable. Goals usually have dates included as part of the

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measurement (and for convenience in scheduling). Whole books have been written about goals, but what you most need to understand is that they are specific and measurable. They usually represent a decision made by your conscious mind. Julia Cameron’s three morning pages a day is a simple, easily measured goal. You did or didn’t write this morning

BUT—and it’s a huge BUT—a goal has to be yours. If you think you should write morning pages—but don’t—you probably haven’t made it your goal. It’s just someone else’s good idea for you. A decision IS decisive; it cuts you off from the option not to perform. It’s not a goal unless you’ve decided to do it and made it measurable.

A standard is a measurable level of performance. Let’s take morning pages. Let’s say I decide to get up and do morning pages every day. I’ve adopted the idea, made it measurable (three pages a day, first thing in the morning) and have made a real decision that this task is in my best interests.

I just don’t have a habit of performance yet. Some goals are just tasks to check off. Call the library to renew a book; check. Most important goals, like morning pages, involve habits. It takes time to develop a habit.

A standard is a goal that has become habitual. You can reasonably expect yourself to perform at least 80% of the time. You go on vacation, have a sick child, or you oversleep. We all do. By the time you can perform 80% of the time, you’ll have developed habits and routines that support the habits. Twyla Tharp, author of *THE CREATIVE HABIT*, describes her habit of going to the gym first thing in the morning—and there’s a driver waiting to take her. Now that’s a neat way to support the habit; even if she decided not to go, she’d have to get up and deal with the driver. An alarm clock across the room works for many writers who do morning pages.

The trick is to set a small goal, form habits until you can meet a standard, then raise the bar. Maybe your new goal will be morning pages _and_ two other pages sometime during the day. Maybe it will be morning pages and 30 minutes daily time plotting the next novel. Or something else. The new goal

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might be drinking eight bottles of water a day or taking a daily walk. We call it baby steps:

Set a goal. Find ways to support it and make it a habit. Perform 80% of the time and raise the bar.

An intention lifts you to a whole new playing field. It’s about being. It’s an umbrella for goals. An intention is about BEING rather than DOING or HAVING. It’s not measurable, but we can feel the integrity when we’ve established an intention that fits our present level of creative growth.

“I intend to be a financially independent writer” is an intention that might be supported by goals such as regular market study, freelance article writing as a means of getting paid to promote your own books, or writing five pages a day.

“I intend to be a writing mom whose writing enriches the lives of my children” might be supported by goals such as including children in research trips, writing children’s stories (with your own children as the first audience, or writing either fiction or non-fiction that lets you interview experts on topics that interest you as a parent.

“I intend to be a prizewinning author of romantic suspense novels” might be supported by goals to read the prizewinning romantic suspense novels from last year’s contests, to take photos of possible settings for your stories, or to learn storyboarding to make your work more cohesive.

One intention can, and will, have many supporting goals. The best intentions are ones you can visualize, so this is one good way to set intentions:

My intention is to be

Goal _____

___ It is (date) and I am celebrating (goal or intention) by (specific celebration plan or reward for yourself).

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(And thanks to Eva Gregory for teaching me the power of intentions and how intentions and goals differ.)

HOMEWORK:

1. Find your intentions in the ideal life list. We’re talking about writing this month, but everything we discuss here can be expanded to include your whole life. Who do you need to be in order to have the life you plan to enjoy one year from today?
2. What are the four most important goals on your list? (No more than four; as you achieve one, you can bring another into focus. Even fewer may work better for some of you.)
3. Make a short list of up to seven major roles in your life. (wife, mother, writer, engineer, volunteer, etc.) No more than seven even if you have to combine some to whittle the list down. The brain can’t handle more than seven at a time—and we fill our schedules with junk when we don’t have an overview.
4. Make a short list of up to five major projects that are as consuming as roles. A novel would be one. Getting a degree or preparing for a conference might be another.
5. Reduce this to one page that includes:
 - a. Your master list of roles and projects
 - b. Your intentions as a writer (at this moment)
 - c. The four most important goals you want to achieve this year.
6. Print copies. Have them wherever you making decisions affecting your time. This is your one-stop plan for the year. EVERYTHING gets weighed against it. EVERYTHING. How does an invitation or request fit into your list of roles and projects? Can you say “yes” without jeopardizing your intentions and major goals? Can you negotiate a better fit? I’ve been known to laminate this list
7. Weekly planning, this week and every week:
 - a. For each intention and important goal, brainstorm a list of inspired actions (toward intentions) or action steps (toward goals) you could take this week. Make it a long list, everything that comes to mind that it’s possible to do.
 - b. Cross of the things you really do NOT want to do this week. Be honest and acknowledge your feelings.

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- c. Schedule the rest in your DayTimer or planning calendar.
 - 8. Weekly self-care planning. It’s not selfish. It’s not a luxury. Self-care is what keeps you in shape for all those other goals and projects. You need weekly plans for self-care that include physical, mental, social and spiritual nurturing. (And you usually need to schedule this, too.)
- a. Stay open to even better ideas here. Get off the treadmill and walk with a friend, for example.
- b. Physical self-care should be regular, but regular might be daily walks for some and four times a week for others. Sometimes you will want to highlight a new habit and make it your focus for the week, but what matters is physical attention that keeps your body at its best.
- c. Mental self-care means mental stimulation that is NOT just part of your reading as a writer. It might be a great movie one week and an art class the next. Fresh air for the mind is the idea.
- d. Social self-care has to lift your spirits. Your critique group is work. A celebration with your critique group for a holiday or marking a sale is self-care. Lunch with a friend who makes you laugh is self-care.
- e. Spiritual self-care can be anything from Ten Zen Seconds to meditation to spiritual reading or attending church or a class. Whatever expands your connection with something beyond yourself in an uplifting way works. Natalie Goldberg teaches timed writing as a spiritual path as well as a writing path.

Working with the Mind

We say “the mind”, but the best model of the mind is threefold.

Our conscious minds make decisions, but can not create. That’s their nature. They do analysis, choose words, make decisions. The conscious mind gathers data through the five physical senses. Never had a new idea, but great critics. We use them to choose goals and set intentions.

Our subconscious minds are a vast storehouse of memories—our own, the ones we’ve visualized or imagined, the ones we’ve only heard about. They communicate largely by feeling. The conscious mind depends on the

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subconscious mind to provide the ideas to carry out its plans, goals and intentions.

I told you to brainstorm a list of action steps you could take this week. In that process, the conscious mind directed the subconscious mind to provide a list--and it responded. Then I told you to cross out whatever you didn't feel like doing this week. If the subconscious didn't feel like carrying out the command, it'd just sabotage you anyway. (More in later lessons on ways to persuade the subconscious mind to take action; for the moment, your focus is on learning to communicate and recognize the feelings.)

The superconscious mind is the vast unknown or unknowable, what many of us call the divine or the great creative force. We communicate with the superconscious through the subconscious. (Read any of the books by Serge King or Max Freedom Long to see how Huna explains this three-part mind.) The Huna model is that the conscious mind asks the subconscious mind for a creative idea, and the subconscious mind gets the idea from the superconscious and delivers it to the conscious mind for execution.

Learning to work with the mind is obviously in our best interests. We started in Lessons One and Two as we looked at the creative process and the work appropriate to each stage.

Next Week

The most time-consuming homework will be done when you complete the work for this lesson.

Next week our focus will be on using your mind to make your writing easier, stage after stage. We'll start identifying your individual strengths and ways to make writing more fun and more productive for each of you individually.

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NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON FOUR

Good morning. It’s Monday, and if you’ve done your homework, you may be feeling a little overwhelmed. There’s all this stuff you’ve already told yourself you would, could or should do—and then there’s a new clarity about what you want to spend your days doing. So let’s start with lifesavers for creative people under pressure

First Aid for a Mind in a Muddle

First, clear the decks

Neurolinguistic programming training (known as NLP from now on) gave me a whole toolbox full of ways to take care of myself. And this is one I use constantly.

You can read about eye movements at

<http://www.nlpu.com/Articles/artic14.htm>

and

<http://www.nlpu.com/Patterns/patt14.htm>

[m](#)

As you can see, eye movements are the brain’s way of accessing material we’ve stored in memory and ideas we’re putting together for future use. Eye movements alone will save you unbelievable time and trials and errors when you’re plotting and layering.

Would you like to clear the register (just as you’d clear a calculator so you could do something else with it)? Just roll your eyes in a big circle. I usually go up, right, way down, over to the left and back up to the top.

Practice it a few times until it becomes automatic as you switch topics or conversations.

Push the pressure away

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You’ll have to read this one and close your eyes to practice it.

Think of any problem that’s putting pressure on you or feels overwhelming.

Close your eyes and bring up the problem as a visual image. If you don’t see details, don’t worry. One of my clients sees pink post-it notes with a word or two identifying the problem, and he can do all this work. Just be aware of the problem. Let yourself feel the pressure, feel where the problem is located in the space around you in your inner world.

Overwhelming problems usually feel as if you were a child with a grown-up looming over you—they’re in your personal space somehow.

Find the problem and take your hands, just as if the problem were a person or object that was too close to you (maybe a dog trying to lick your face) and push it gently away from you. Push it back toward the horizon until you have a new perspective on it. Feel the shift. And from that distance begin to size it up and decide what to do about it.

Pivot

The pivot is from Robert Fritz, author of THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE. It works best when I feel stuck in a situation. You know the feeling—I want to be writing this morning, but I’m stuck here judging a contest or stuffing envelopes for my chapter’s conference or doing laundry. Stuck. Forever. LOL. Or maybe it’s, I just decided I’d like to write romances about Hawaiian princesses, but my agent and editor are holding me to my contract for the book that seemed wonderful until page 97.

Choose what you want. Make a clear choice. You don’t need to know how to get what you want, but this will only work if you know what you want.

Bring up two images, side by side in front of you—an image of what’s happening that you don’t want and an image of what you do

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want.

Make your choice. Say it out loud if no one’s around. Let the unwanted image dissolve and move the other one to front and center (at a comfortable distance, of course; we’re not creating new states of being overwhelmed here).

Now take some action in the direction of your choice. (And if you honestly can’t do that because you’re stuck in traffic, for example, just choose an action and commit to take it as soon as you can.)

The action step can be miniscule. Direction and movement count.

If you want to go to RWA National in D.C. in 2009, for example, you could visualize yourself with all the household bills piled up around you (yuck) and see yourself all dolled up and partying with other writers in D.C. I know which image I would choose. Let the bills go. Add some sparkle and color—whatever makes the D.C. image feel bright and attractive—and make that choice internally or aloud.

Action steps might be going to the RWA website and putting the conference in your calendar. Or printing the form so you can apply to be a presenter (one way to whittle the costs). Or you might get out a manila envelope and start “paying” yourself a dollar every day you actually write—and let that be the start of your conference fund.

Next Step: Uncluttering Your Mind Emergencies Only

Here is is jujitsu work from Jen White, author of WORK LESS, EARN MORE, for times when you are overwhelmed with pressing things like deadlines.

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1. Identify 3 most important things that must get done, 3 areas crucially important to business success, that drive the bottom line for your company. (Writing it your business and you are the company <g>) Then figure out what to do with everything else and what has to go.
2. Ask other people for help, even if you don't think they're ready to take on the responsibility. (Make deals; bribe the kids. Do what you have to do.)
3. Add nothing new to your plate. Nothing. Until everything is under control again. (Sometimes this is the announcement you have to make to the family to open negotiations for bribery in #2 <g>)
4. Get out of the office, without your cell phone, so you can just work through the essentials without distraction. (Go to the library, a neighborhood park, or a classroom at your church if you don't have an office away from the house available.)

Save this for emergencies. You have a huge job and a big deadline and you make whatever deals you have to make to clear the decks temporarily so it gets done and life gets back to normal.

Commit to Completion

Make a list of everything in your life that is incomplete. Everything. Take your time. Keep adding to the list until you've got all those jobs and tasks in one place.

Commit to doing one of two things with each item on the list:

- Complete it, or
- Delete it.

This is where you get rid of all those projects still hanging around from an earlier phase of your life. Make a choice. Get rid of them physically. The first time I did this, I bundled up boxes of yarn left over from the years when I owned yarn shops in Iowa and took them to the barter program I belonged to and traded for meals at a local Mexican restaurant. My cooking time became writing time

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No More Automatic “Renewals”

All the action is in the present moment.

Begin now to take a “sunset law” approach to commitments made in the past. Laws with a “sunset” clause expire and have to be reconsidered. Begin now to consider every commitment in light of your present and future plans as it comes up for renewal. Every commitment—committee assignments, book and magazine subscriptions, volunteer jobs.

Whether a commitment takes time, space, money or thought—if it doesn’t currently serve you, your creative work, or someone you really love with all your heart—it is clutter

Gratitude Grounds You in the Present Moment

We writers work all the time with our hearts out there in the future. Taking time to be grateful for the present moment is one of the best ways to stay centered and grounded.

Here are three of my favorite gratitude processes:

- I have a gratitude journal. Every day (usually with my morning coffee) I make a quick list of five people or situations or things for which I am grateful right this moment.
- Mother used to write a thank you list every day. In *MAKING A LITERARY LIFE*, Carolyn See recommends writing a thank you note to an author every day as part of your contribution to your own larger community.
- If you live in a city and drive in traffic, try this idea from one of my spiritual mentors, the late George Case: While you’re stopped at a traffic light, give thanks for everything your eyes rest on—even the modern “miracle” of neon lights. Sometimes it’s hard to be grateful for what we see—and that’s when it’s

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important.

<http://www.nlpu.com/Patterns/patt14.htm>

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON FIVE

Creative Bottom Line

In the first stage of creativity, the only work is being open and receptive. You don’t even need a formal intention beyond being open to whatever good (ideas) are available. In the other three stages, the actual work of creativity is a simple three-step process:

1. Choose a vision. Make a decision (cutting yourself off from other choices) and commit to the vision.
2. Take a good look at your current situation and resources. They do not control the outcome. They are only the starting point. The tension between what you want and what you have is the energy that creates what you want; it’s your friend.
3. Take the first step in the direction of the vision. Let the first step generate the next step.

Repeat as often as needed (for the rest of your life, project after project.) Everything else is a variation on a theme. Everything.

This is a flexible process you can apply to any stage of the creative process—or to life changes in other parts of your life. Play with it and share your experiences with the other students.

Victims

Victims, and passive characters, get stuck on step 2. They may have a clear vision—or they may be in so much pain they don’t even let themselves want something—but they talk themselves out of it by focusing on the past events

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and the present limitations.

I Want it, But....

The word “but” connecting two parts of a sentence allows the second part (coming after the “but”) to cancel out the first part (coming before the “but”). One use “but” to cancel fear or limitations

Good use of “but”: I can’t afford to quit my day job yet, but I’m creative enough to find ways to write good books in the midst of life.

Victim approach: I want to be a writer, but I’m afraid all the computer work will ruin my manicure.

Meditative Baby Steps

Builders of the Adytum www.bota.org teaches a powerful manifestation process built around this three-step process. The full explanation is included in the first seven lessons new members receive. Briefly:

You begin by choosing the next step toward a desire. Practice will tell you how large a step can be for you. If you’ve written 50 books, a synopsis is a breeze and you can whip one out as one step. If it’s your first book, a character sheet for the protagonist might be a good first step.

Write out a brief statement of commitment for yourself, which might read like this:

I will commit all my power to achieve the following primary aim: (_____). "All my powers" means my time, my attention, my mental abilities, my relevant resources. This is the step where you decide to write instead of playing solitaire on the computer

Close your eyes and spend five minutes (Use a timer; five minutes ONLY) to build up an image in your mind of the completed goal or project.

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Read the commitment step every day and take whatever action steps you feel inspired to take.

Repeat the visualization for five minutes a day, each day making the visualized image more complete and detailed until it is as clear before you as if you were bringing up a vivid memory.

Now take that vivid image and transfer it to the optic nerves at the back of your head—the back of the eyes. That’s the command center, which we already used with the circular eye movements to clear the mind. Now your subconscious mind thinks it’s already done and will bring about the conditions necessary to complete it in the physical world.

Sometimes you don’t get to complete the visualization before the step is finished

But when one step is finished, pick another.

I wrote my doctoral paper using this process, and I heartily recommend joining www.bota.org for two months to get these lessons. Of course, some of us stay on for years and years ... but no obligation.

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON SIX

Quoting Jack Bickham here, the scene includes goal, conflict and disaster. The sequel includes emotion, thought, and decision. Swain used slightly different language—but Swain and Bickham are talking about the same thing.

In Lesson Five, I showed you a three-step process for creative leverage (or any other kind of achievement. Now I’d like you to see how closely that process is related to the familiar scene and sequel so many plot instructors use.

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Goal—that’s our decision step.

Conflict—usually comes up in the reality check (or we’d already be enjoying whatever the goal represents) but our reality check also includes looking at the available resources.

Disaster—something doesn’t work out as we expected. Sometimes that’s a good thing instead of a disaster in real life. And sometimes in real life we just do what we’d planned and move along to the next step. But sometimes our first action step just shows us the flaws in our plan. And that’s much better than following a flawed plan for a year and then having to start over.

Emotion – If you have the right goal, emotions will lead you along and keep generating steps, keep you motivated. If you have the wrong goal, emotions will tell you. But they usually don’t tell you a thing until after you make a decision and take action.

Thought – This is the point where you look at the results of your action, recommit to the goals and decide on the next step

Decision – In real world this brings us back to the beginning of the circle—but with a new choice or at least a new step.

Disaster and conflict are essential for a story, but not for life.

Working with the 3-step process will not only make you more effective at creating what you want, but will also strengthen your mind’s ability to create scenes and sequels in your stories.

Step Size Revisited

Each of you will have to learn by experience.

For me, the steps are bigger and more general at the earlier stages of a work.

I’m just going to make up some illustrations.

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Stage One – Notice I seem to be running into stories about New Mexico ghosts and **decide** to write a book about New Mexico ghosts. Reality check might be taking time to review what I do and don’t know about ghosts and New Mexico ghost legends. Action step could be setting up files or folders for New Mexico ghost story book so my mind can fill it up and write the book. Or, **if I already had a request from a publisher for a New Mexico ghost story**, my decision might be to deliver that book (seeing it finished and ready to submit or seeing the proposal finished and ready to submit) and reality and action steps would be the same.

Stage Two – Decide to develop a plan for a specific genre and length book (Do you see that I now have a little more knowledge about the form and material?). Reality check might include looking at my other time commitments, my interest in the project, a list of people who might know ghost stories. Action step might be putting time for plotting in my calendar and/or organizing forms for plotting. Or I might just start writing a long list of questions for which I need answers before I could write the book. (What works for me may not be the first step for you.)

Stage Three – Smaller steps here. I might decide to write for 30 minutes tomorrow and reality check would be calendar time, space to work. Or it might be a larger chunk for someone with multiple books behind her. Karen Weisner recommends taking 30 days to complete a detailed outline that is one way to do this step. Robin Perini and Laura Baker teach a conflict grid/storyboard system that is another way to do this stage. Some people start writing here and plot as they go; some use this stage for plotting.

Stage Four – This is the final draft stage, but steps are tiny. One step might be revising 15 pages for punctuation. It might be marking up the manuscript with colored pencils (Margie Lawson’s revision method). If you just write and plot later, you might have written 50,000 words in baby steps as stage three and now you’re going through and doing your outline and final plot.

When I did my doctorate, I had a rough outline at the end of stage two (which included years of study while I figured out what I had to say). For stage three,

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I’d come to the computer, write what was ready to write in the next chapter, then go take a nap. I worked in roughly three hour write/sleep intervals for days until my husband finally called time because I had such deep circles under my eyes. Each chunk was a step.

The less I know about what I’m doing, the smaller the step.

The more I’m concerned about whether I can do it, the more I depend on visualization in depth.

In Real Life

Yesterday, I planned to do a critique, have lunch with a friend, come home and do a critique, then have dinner with a friend. Watch a movie with my DH in the evening. Simple, easy day.

Step one: Looked at the day, looked at my schedule. And did the critique (commit to do it, gather the relevant materials as reality check, do the work. Easy. Well, small change of plans because I had to go to the computer and look up a book title I wanted to recommend. Good thing I triggered my subconscious mind and it remembered the perfect book.

Next step in the day: Lunch with a friend.

Reality check: Everything on course. Lunch was even at a favorite restaurant with a half-price coupon

Action: Drive to the restaurant, right? Oh, but it wasn’t there. Moved. And the second nearest restaurant in that chain? Closed. Met in a parking lot and chose a third restaurant. Gone. But wait, in its place, a new restaurant, a branch of a local restaurant. Neither of us goes there (in spite of great food) because the owner’s so rude. And guess what? He doesn’t manage this branch. After a small change of plans we had a great lunch with outstanding service. (But do notice that we kept recommitting to the idea of lunch—plan one failed, recommit, plan two fails, recommit, plan three leads to a bonus.)

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Next step: Critique. Lunch ran late, and I ran a couple of errands. Reality check: I’ve now got a time conflict, but I could do the final critique after the movie. Recommit to it with an eye on time and make sure I’ve got everything I need to do it in one place.

And then dinner canceled. My dinner partner had a dental emergency and didn’t want to eat. I did a quick visual of us getting together another time and did the critique. Right on schedule.

Change of plans: dinner and movie with my husband And remember...I didn’t cancel my decision to see my friend. I recommited, and we agreed (action step) to talk about a date when she felt a little better. So that was still working. And today she called and said, maybe I’ll just come see you and show off my new perm and hairstyle. (Oh, yeah, she washed a man out of her life this week, too <g>). So I did see my friend, just a few hours late, and we’ll have dinner next week

And My Point Here Is

Form the habit of using your creative mind to move your work along and create the life you want. Get used to using it, just like riding a bicycle.

Stop using your mind to create things you don’t want. Disasters and trauma belong on the pages of your book. In your own life, they’re just course corrections. Truly. Sometimes you have to redefine what you really want, hone in on what matters to you in order to make those course corrections. But they’re just course corrections.

The more you understand your mind _and_ its connection to story, the easier the creative life will be.

Homework: Practice these steps. Practice, practice, practice. At first it will feel silly to do routine things with this process. And then you’ll see life getting easier.

More Fun

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You can learn even more about the way your mind works by taking the Myers-Briggs test online. Site with free online tests seem to come and go, but one I like that’s current is:

<http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes2.asp>

Or you can make your own self-assessment here (and it’s worth reading even if you take the test):

http://www.personalitypathways.com/type_inventory.html

And one more site. Take the test then look at all the information available to help you shape characters for your stories

<http://www.kisa.ca/personality/>

And here’s the fun part. There are Yahoo groups for each of the 16 personality types. Mine, for example, would be

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/enfp>

Just substitute your four letters to find your own group. Or the type for a character you’re trying to understand.

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON SEVEN

So do you feel more anxiety when you are creating or when you’re not creating? Is there a specific stage of creativity or a style of working that’s especially trying for you?

Now I have to tell you the sad truth: Creativity is like sex. Wonderful, but you can’t do it 24 hours a day. At least not day after day :) The author of the Inspector Maigret mysteries used to write a book in two weeks—doing nothing but eating, sleeping, and writing; he had dinner with his wife, but not his children.

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In THE VAN GOGH BLUES, Eric Maisel talks about meaning crises and the importance of meaning in a creative life. For Maisel, creative people are people who are born asking questions about meaning that don’t even occur to the rest of the world.

For many of us (but not for Eric, who is an existentialist and an atheist), meaning is found in spirituality. Some of us follow spiritual traditions that raise questions about meaning and some follow traditions that provide answers. Even if your particular spiritual tradition provides answers to questions of meaning, I’d like to invite you to spend some time considering how that meaning applies to you and your life.

If you visit <http://www.nlpu.com>, and click on Encyclopedia, you’ll see Volume L, which contains an article on Levels of Learning. On the home page, you’ll also see an article “Coaching at the Identity Level” in the list of what’s new. Please read both of these articles before continuing with the lesson.

Meaning and the Writer

If you find you have more anxiety when you are not writing (even during the hours of the day when you are not creating, but on a day when creating itself is going well), the issue may be about meaning in your life as a whole.

Maisel suggests questions about meaning might include:

How can I make life feel meaningful to me? What’s at the center of a creed by which I might live? On what operating principles might I create a meaningful life?

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What is my truth?

In VAN GOGH BLUES, Maisel says: “Ask yourself a single large question about the meaning of your life; What you want to stand for, what you want to embody, what you want your life to mean.”

If you have been starved for creative time, you may think, “All I want to do is write.” But that’s only a partial answer, and it’s not good enough. (Been there, said that, too.)

Dilts goes a step further with the levels of learning, which are based on the work of Gregory Bateson.

If you check the list of articles at <http://www.nlpu.com/articles> you’ll see one on the Wisdom of Jesus and its paired article on Wholeness. Essentially, this is work at a higher level than Identity, a spiritual level from which we draw meaning for our individual lives.

Julia Cameron’s morning pages are one way for meaning to show up. Over time, after the debris at the top of the mind is written out, morning pages give us stories and themes and “marching orders” coming from the parts of us that are directly connected to meaning in our individual lives.

Memoir, personal essays and poetry are often more connected to personal meaning than other writing forms. Working in those areas is another way to allow meaning to reveal itself.

Sometimes just working with a secondary art form brings meaning to the surface. I used to work as a photojournalist, but now I photograph for pleasure. One of my favorite artist’s dates is an afternoon with my camera. If I just wander and photograph whatever catches my eye, I’ll be photographing things that reveal meaning when I study the pictures later. Artists who sketch may have the same experience. The good part

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about a secondary art form is that our egos are less involved in the quality of the work and the critic is less likely to drown out our first thoughts.

When Anxiety Comes with the Work Itself

For some people—or maybe for all of us from time to time—doing our work seems to evoke more anxiety than not doing it.

If you’ve been working steadily, day after day, a day off to get out of the office and refill your personal creative well may be in order. But if it’s more than that...

Notice that most anxiety connected to the work is either

- A. A conflict between the work and what is meaningful in our lives.
- B. A question of craft

Some of us find one stage of creativity rewarding and feel intense anxiety about other stages. We may have less experience with other stages or need help from a critique group, a class, a coach or the work of another artist to improve our skills. If you look at the Dilts levels of learning, you’ll notice that revision, for example, is pretty much about craft when it’s about punctuation and spelling. Revision for meaning is about identity and sometimes about spirituality and meaning.

But we are artists even if we’re not doing our primary work. When Georgia O’Keeffe could no longer see well enough to paint, she worked with clay. If anxiety is connected to the work itself rather than the overall meaning—if it’s about the quality of the work or about editors and agents, for example—it may help to start by asking yourself what’s right about the work. What are your strengths as a writer?

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Are you using your personal strengths?

Are the inner conflicts in your characters related to issues you find meaningful?

Are you writing what’s true for you even if you’re afraid an editor will ask you to change it?

Have you looked at your own life and the frustrations surrounding creativity from the viewpoint of the hero’s journey or some other story structure?

A Meaningful Life

A meaningful life becomes the context for enriched creative work.

First, discover what has meaning for you.

Then begin to use that wisdom moment by moment throughout the day. Let it shape small decisions as well as large ones. (If you value beauty above all else, the time it takes to cut one flower for the table even when you eat alone is a meaningful use of your time.

Then come back to your writing or other creative work within the context of that meaning and within the context of the meaningful choices for your own life.

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NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON EIGHT

In the early 1980s Virginia Sandlin taught a weekend workshop in Albuquerque. She was a coach before the life coaching field developed, and I’ve used my notes from her workshops for myself and my clients for years. And here we go again, Virginia

Virginia taught us several things that changed my life. One is that you have to participate fully in any changes you want to create. Other people call it grounding, which is such a vague term that dreamers are likely to pass right by without give it due attention. Virginia said you have to be the context for your own changes. They have to be happening in and through and around you and you have to be participating with your whole self.

How do you know when you’re fully participating? One step leads to another (generative, inspired) without your having to manipulate it (left brain head work).

All the energy that ever was or ever will be is present and available here and now. Christians call it omnipresence. All the ancient wisdoms teach the same principle. Virginia said if you don’t have enough energy (spiritual, mental, emotional or physical) to keep moving toward your goals, then the energy is just stuck in some corner of your life. And you need to clear it out.

One way to look for stuck energy is to ask yourself (frequently, please) **“What am I creating in this moment? Is it consistent with what I want to create?”** When I give up writing time to listen to someone else’s drama, is that what I want to create? When I play solitaire instead of getting a story polished for submission, is that what I want to create? Did my ideal vision say I’d have submitted books or won solitaire competitions. Oh. That’s context.

How does energy get stuck and what do you do about it?

Virginia’s recommendations ranged from clean out drawers (energy stuck

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in junk and clutter) to unsent letters (to get emotional energy out of your body) to making lists of old beliefs you were ready to leave behind. (Thank goodness Mother never convinced _me_ that I shouldn’t talk to strangers; most of my favorite people were strangers to me at one time.)

Connierae Andreas’s book HEART OF THE MIND includes a simple NLP procedure called the Decision Destroyer that helps clear old choices. I’ve added a Nurturing the Writer Within page to my bookstore at www.iowapoet.com and [have](#) her book in the bookstore. I’m adding others as I think of them and it will be an ongoing reference site for all of you.

Two of my Favorite Emotional Clearing Methods

Two simple methods have made enormous changes in my own life. And a third I’m using this year

One is to set a timer for 15 minutes and sit quietly (eyes closed if necessary to keep your mind from wandering). Whatever comes up, forgive it. If you can’t forgive in that moment, say a quick prayer asking to be able to forgive. You may actually feel a small cracking as your heart opens with this one; I have.

Another is to write affirmations of self-forgiveness 70 times a day for a week. (Biblical 70 x 7—but also enough to make even the stubbornest mind just give up and forgive yourself). Write in first, second and third person. I usually do five each way and keep rotating. Longhand is best...doing it all at one time seems more powerful. But computer works, doing it a few at a time during the day works. Be prepared for tears. Just amazing how many things we’ve forgotten we were blamed for come up and get released with this work.

“I, (name), forgive myself completely now.”

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“(Name), you forgive yourself completely.”

“(Name) forgives herself completely now.

And my new favorite is the Sedona Method. Hale Dwoskin wrote a book by that method. Clients told me about it. I picked it up and pretty much yawned and put it down. A year later I was ready Free info and a CD at www.sedona.com

Thomas Leonard and Eliminating Tolerations

Years later I studied with Thomas Leonard, one of the founders of the profession of coaching. Thomas talked about eliminating forever the things we were just tolerating. My friends and I were sure the heavens would fall and the world would fall apart if we did THAT. And I’ve honestly never gotten as adamant about not tolerating anything as Thomas did I’m personally more patient with people I love and willing to give and take a lot more than Thomas advises. So for me tolerating NOTHING means tolerating NOTHING that hurts me, nothing that hurts anyone else. And if it’s something other than annoying but innocent behavior from people I love, THEN I do it Thomas’s way.

Hurting me isn’t limited to abuse. It includes keeping me from having a career as a writer. A friend who calls to whine day after day about issues she won’t confront and who just happens to do it at a time of day you’re “only writing” is hurting you. A baby who spills milk because her muscle coordination isn’t perfect is not

On the other hand, as I’ve gotten better about not tolerating mindlessly and have been more willing to tell the people I love pleasantly that I’m uncomfortable with some situations, they situations do change over time. My DH is hard of hearing, and loud television was difficult for me. Now he has a special headset that lets him turn up the sound without affecting me. If I hadn’t told him I had a problem concentrating when he turned up the TV, he wouldn’t have found the headset.

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Thomas’s suggestion is to make a long, long list of everything that’s annoying you. It’s not negative thinking because you also commit to living in a toleration-free zone a year from now. Put it all on the list and plan to create a solution to each item on the list.

So, you’ve got a long list. See if you can make it even longer by being petty about small issues that drain off tiny bits of your creative energy and attention.

Now choose 3 or 4 items and highlight or mark them. They’re your first targets.

Pick off a few easy ones (Fix the leaky faucet, throw away the shoes that don’t quite fit, you all know what the easy stuff is.)

But don’t settle for easy solutions that don’t quite fit and will just have to be fixed again.

Create permanent solutions...solutions that will hold up for at least a year, not band-aids.

Get wild and crazy and play with ideas. Take a good look at the resources at hand for solving the problems.

Friday we’ll look at finding what’s right in even the worst situations and using what’s right as leverage to make things better.

WARNING: These are all powerful methods even though they’re deceptively simple. Baby steps, a little work every day, will do miracles. Overdoing will leave you tired as if you’d suddenly run five miles after a sedentary winter.

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NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON NINE

Get a little help for yourself.

Jen White, author of *WORK LESS, EARN MORE* talks about three ways to reduce the workload and the stress of too many irons in the fire:

1. Delete. This comes first. *ORDER FROM CHAOS* by Liz Davenport is my personal favorite book on organizing and deleting. Liz is a friend from local groups, and she’s one of us Liz was legally blind as a child and had to learn to organize her create self. Check out her website www.orderfromchaos.com For the more organized among us, Julie Morgenstern has several excellent books out. I’m currently reading her new book, *WHEN ORGANIZING ISN’T ENOUGH*, which is about shedding the things you’re leaving behind at times of major transitions. Never mind whether you used it last year or not—if it’s not in your present or future, toss it. Or put it in storage in a dated box you’ll toss if you don’t need it in a year.
2. Delegate. Hire someone. Bribe someone. Barter. Trade. Share the work. Set up a small assembly line of family and friends. The key here is that you assign a task (or a project or whatever) with specified goals and standards—but you let them do it their way. If you find someone to do graphics, what do you care what software they use to create graphics so long as the final result works for your program? Right. While they’re doing it standing on their head or in weird ways that would make your skin crawl, you’re writing Just remember to inspect what you expect.
3. Duplicate. You do care how they do the job. Or you care about minute details. So it takes training time. If you want a family member to package autographed copies of your books or mail out 25 contest entries, you need to teach them precisely how you want it done. They need to do what you would do. Writers don’t often need to duplicate themselves, but sometimes you do need to teach someone to follow your research or market study procedures, for example.

My first reaction when I read Jen’s book was, “I’m self-employed. Where do I delegate?” LOL...that’s an evolving art even today.

It takes patience to shift important tasks into the hands of other people. It takes creativity and a cold heart When you need moral support, read your ideal life again. The surprise is that people thrive on taking responsibility for

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themselves. Organizations do better when the work is divided among more of the members.

The Career vs. the Day Job

Then there’s that delicious crunch when you start selling, but are not yet making as much money as Nora So there’s still a day job with all its responsibilities and a budding career.

Consider professional help as part of your writing budget. There are virtual assistants available (just google to find out more about these magnificent helping hands) and website gurus (mine, for example, is hughmungas@hotmail.com). Writers coming along a step or two behind you may be motivated to work with you at reasonable rates. (Do ask your accountant or your state labor board about the laws on independent contractors vs. employees.)

Keep the Drama on the Page

Julia Cameron’s book YOUR RIGHT TO WRITE was an eye-opener for me. Honestly, it took me years to implement her advice, and I still work at it from time to time. But it’s some of the best advice ever:

No drama off the page.

You deal with conflict day after day in your work. Save the adrenaline rushes for writing.

No drama off the page means friends don’t vent, and maybe people who call to vent aren’t the friends you thought they were. Good friends deserve to be educated gently and then firmly. Casual acquaintances may have to wait a few days for a call back.

They may go away mad. At least they’ll go away.

And be careful if they give you a second chance

Second-hand anger is as dangerous as second-hand smoke. As writers, we

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bring our conflicts to resolution. But the “friend” who vents and then doesn’t show up until the next time she has a problem is not only a writing menace, but a health menace. Check out James Pennebaker’s OPENING UP for more information.

Your ability to be present emotionally at the page is the passion that brings your writing to life.

Your muse is vulnerable and gentle as a child and needs to be protected from the emotional outbursts of people who have no claim on you.

You’ll find you’re actually able to be more fully present for those who do have a claim on you if you don’t indulge in drama queens. And when someone does have a claim on you, Eric Maisel’s mantras at www.tenzenseconds.com will help you center and balance and go back to work.

Balance, Balance, it’s All About Balance

In a private email, a student mentioned that some of the material here reminds her of the Secret. And that’s undoubtedly true The Law of Attraction is worth knowing. We limit ourselves when we don’t lift our vision to include what we truly desire.

The Law of Attraction doesn’t function in a vacuum, though. There are other ancient laws that are just as powerful...laws related to inflow/outflow, masculine/feminine balances, above/below. One great reference is THE KYBALION, and I’ll post a report I wrote on the Kybalion in the files area to give all of you a summary of those laws.

Nothing functions alone. There’s gravity, punctuation, mathematics, editorial quirks (which might as well be laws of the universe if you’re a writer).

One ingenious way to maintain balance is to ask the right questions as you deal with life.

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“What’s right here?” provides a better foundation for solving problems than “What’s wrong?” (The question may annoy people who are fixated on what’s wrong with a situation, but they’re probably in a bad mood anyway.

“What’s right here?” defines strength and uncovers existing resources that can be used to move swiftly to resolve problems.

Asking what’s right is the specialty of Kurt Wright, a consultant whose projects included work with a team climbing Mount Everest. His book, **BREAKING THE RULES**, is mostly about corporate settings, but we can all use his five primary questions:

1. What’s right? What’s working?
2. What makes it right? Why does it work?
3. What would be ideally right? What would work ideally?
4. What’s not yet quite right? (What would make it more right?)
5. What resources can I find to make it right?

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NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON TEN

Joy. Fun. Play.

Your muse loves those words.

Make a list of at least 20 things you love to do that you haven’t made time to do lately.

Schedule one a week. Make it a habit.

OR make a list of at least 100 things you truly love and work them into your schedule.

Find ways to communicate with your muse while you’re having fun.

The more time you spend on simple pleasures, the better your connection with the muse.

There’s even science behind that claim. ACCESS YOUR BRAIN’S JOY CENTER by Pete Sanders, Jr., teaches a way to “stroke” the joy center in the brain and lift yourself above the limbic brain’s fear and stress. Many meditation methods stroke that center—but Pete developed a simple process that lets you remain grounded in your body while you’re feeling the joy and release of stress. Pete graduated from M.I.T. with honors, and his major studies were biochemistry and brain sciences. <http://www.freesoul.net> includes contact information for instructors around the country who can also help you learn the joy touch.

Another author I like is Sanaya Roman, whose books include LIVING WITH JOY. If you’re working so hard you’ve forgotten how to relax and have fun, this is a book you won’t want to miss

And My Point Is

For the truly driven among you: Remember all the old studies about creativity. After a lot of work, the creative scientist (or writer or whatever) would just “drop the problem in the hopper”, i.e., give it a rest or even give it

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up—and voila! The answer would come on a long walk or while soaking in the tub. But always when the person quit searching furiously for answers and let go for awhile.

Joy is the way to let go. And while you’re having fun, the muse may decide to join you

This lesson is so important I’m not going to clutter it up with more information.

Your only homework is to do something today just for fun and find ways to make it a habit. (If you don’t have time, go back to the tolerations lists, simplify your life— do whatever it takes to make room for fun.)

NURTURING THE WRITER WITHIN -LESSON ELEVEN

Journals—not diamonds—are a writer’s best friend. JOURNAL TO THE SELF by Kathleen Adams is filled with ways to use a journal. I teach an entire workshop on journaling for writers. So what _else_ is there to say about a journal?

It’s the integrity spot.

Writers tell lies (stories) to reveal truth.

Integrity, which is another way to say wholeness or oneness within the self, is our bedrock.

Storytellers are the healers in primitive society. Storytellers explore and elucidate important truths, both those that a society embraces and those a society fears.

For those of us who are drawn to be storytellers, the work itself seems like its own reward at times. (And its own punishment at others.)

We fight to do it. We feel selfish for taking the time—our time—away from what everyone else wants us to do. We feel selfish for taking time for

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financially risky work when there’s so much that needs doing in our physical worlds.

And, because we deal with truth more deeply and thoughtfully than many of our friends and family members do, we sometimes have insights about situations that they don’t want to hear even though they’re insisting on having our “help”.

Integrity says we have to tell the truth as we see it. If we ask less of ourselves, we cheat our lives and our stories.

We also have a right to keep silent. If no one is really listening, or we only know part of the story, wisdom may require our silence.

There are stories in my journals I wouldn’t share verbatim. There’s a note I wrote myself one night when two friends, married to each other, each called to vent their version of a fight and its outcome. The wife won and was triumphant. Her husband did what he had to do. My feeling in that moment was that the marriage had ended—and neither one knew that. Telling them would not have been kind.

Making that note kept the question alive for a story that may heal someone else’s marriage.

I don’t dwell on pain and I don’t let pain drive my life. But I don’t deny it. It’s in my journals. After I’ve dealt with it emotionally, it’s there to start stories. There’s an entry for the first time any man who had been my lover died. I felt as if there were small holes through my chest. And I was inexplicably angry. Furious that someone was dead who I’d chosen not to know. Huh. So I wrote about the feeling of holes in my best and I wrote short furious poems. And life went on. And eventually that moment became a story because it was in my journals when I needed a story seed.

With the best of intentions, we make huge mistakes in human relationships. As you know the truth about those mistakes in your own life, write the truth in the

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journal. It’s good for you ::::smile:::: and it’s good for your stories.

Some of you may be in 12-step programs where making amends is part of your work. I’m quoting here from the 12 steps of Arts Anonymous <http://www.artsanonymous.org>

“8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

I’m leaving aside the issues of health and sanity, and all the pros and cons about 12-step groups now.

Our deepest personal stories are in those statements.

Please take my word for it that you are good people. If you have harmed someone, there was a story about fear or anger behind that harm. Something was incomplete, unhealed, out of integrity in your own life. Capture that feeling.

As writers and artists, we need to know that our moments of shame and guilt are also steps along the hero’s journey.

We can’t deny those moments without cutting off part of the passion that powers great writing.

Amends are not always possible—or kind. Even if they are, writing your feelings before you speak will fuel your stories and reduce the drama in your life.

The journal will keep you honest, in integrity with yourself.

There is another kind of integrity that is best supported by a journal. You’ll find this work in the published journals of writers like Somerset Maugham and John Steinbeck and Henry James. Their journals show the development of their

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stories.

The journals also point the way through one of those appalling conflicts only writers and artists face: Knowing when to send a work to market, when it is done as well as we can do it, while still recognizing its flaws.

Much of this work can be done by a good critique group. Even then, an ongoing record of what you learned from the critique group will help guide your career.

The flaws in your work will either lead you to your next craft studies or tell you what forms are not your natural tools. Do you struggle with dialogue because you have a fine ear and are pushing yourself for top performance? Or do you struggle because you never really listen to people and, instead, could tell the whole story by describing body movements?

The flaws in your work habits will point out the new habits you need to form—and the rewards that will motivate you.

Above all, you need to be brutally honest on paper (where you can’t forget) about your strengths as a person and as a writer.

The tarot card Strength corresponds to the astrological sign Leo, and both are about creativity. Strength is about creating from the core of our being. It embraces both the pain that becomes passion on paper and the sinewy strengths of capability that are like long, strong back muscles.

When an editor wants more books than you’d planned to write in the next 12 months, you fall back on your strengths.

When there’s a family crisis and you still have deadlines, you lean on your strengths.

You hone the strengths, tend them—and use them.

You may find your strengths by finding the strengths of other writers and noting them in your journals, too. When Janet Daily started writing, she and Bill lived

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in a small trailer; they moved it from state to state and she rose to fame on Harlequins in a series with a romance in a different state in each book. Mary Buckham and Karen Weisner write synopses to die for—and they work ahead by synopsis so they can write quickly when necessary. Pearl Buck had China. Edith Wharton had New York society (and Europe). Erle Stanley Gardner had a legal background and a superb gun collection.

Pretend you’re the heroine of a new sitcom. You’re a writer who—who what? Whose characters talk and nag her like ghosts in the house? Who spins story plots so fast she gives half of them away to other writers? Who writes at the same time each day even if royalty is visiting? Somerset Maugham left Marie, the Queen of Romania, in his drawing room while he went upstairs to write.

I could go on. Journals have shaped my thinking and my life. But in the long run, I’d only be urging you to explore their value for you. Please do.