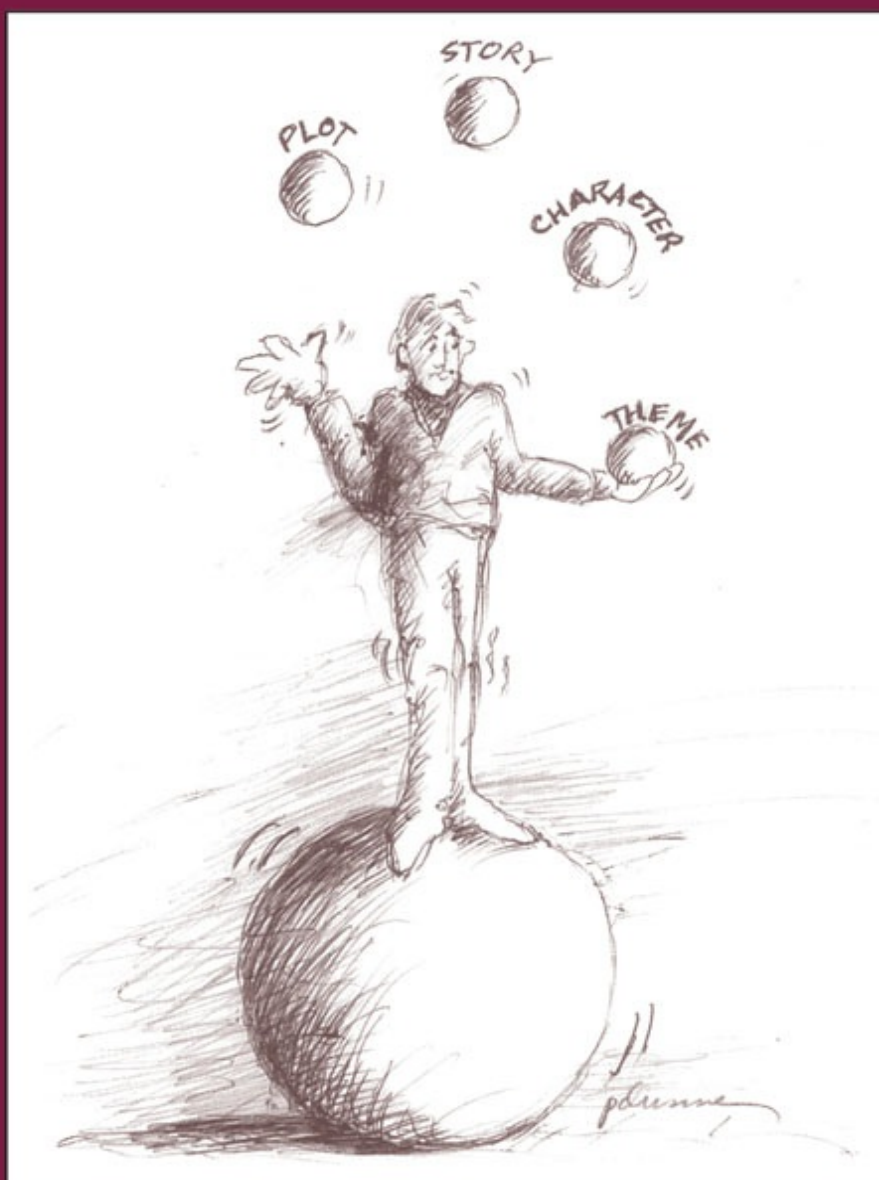


EMOTIONAL STRUCTURE

CREATING THE STORY BENEATH THE PLOT

— A GUIDE FOR — SCREENWRITERS



BY EMMY AND PEABODY AWARD-WINNING
PRODUCER AND WRITER

PETER DUNNE

Praise for Emotional Structure

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Emotional Structure

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PETER DUNNE



Fresno, California

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For my children Patrick, Michael, and Alexandra, and for Ben Masselink, the gentlest writer there ever was.

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Part 1

What Writers Write About and Why

1

The Writer's Rulebook

Rule No. 1 — Write

Rule No. 2 — See Rule No. 1

Writers must make choices. The first choice you will have to make as a writer is to choose to be a writer. This means you will choose to write. Every day for the rest of your life. Because you can only be a writer on the days you write. On the other days, the days you decide not to write, you will be something else. However, there is a caveat. On the days you decide to be a writer and you write, even if it's for only an hour, you get to be a writer for the other twenty-three hours, too. Pretty good, huh?

You can see, then, that it's possible to be a writer no matter what your day job is. Notice, too, there's nothing in the writer's rulebook that says you have to write about certain things. You just have to write. Anything. And it doesn't say anywhere in the rulebook that you have to sell what you write. You just have to write. Whatever you want to write. Especially write what's important to you. Write what's on your mind. It wouldn't be important to you if it weren't on your mind. When you have so much on your mind you don't know where to begin, begin with that, that there's too much on your damn mind. By the time you get that off your chest, there won't be so much on your mind. And you'll know what to write next.

Sometimes this can seem like an impossible undertaking. Sometimes we fail. For which we are forgiven. Sometimes we don't try. For which forgiveness comes harder.

Because trying is the key.

And trying is hard work. Turn what's inside of you into entertainment for a mass audience, and you'll see what I mean. It can be torturous. It is not the same as baking a cake. People will eat cake even if it's not good cake. People will laugh at stupid jokes. And even more will bob and weave to idiotic songs. But the people sitting in a theater watching your movie are far less gregarious. And far less generous. They came for what *they* thought the movie should be. They are unforgiving, self-appointed critics more concerned with their dates, and their popcorn, and their parking meters and babysitters. So naturally, a lot of writers don't want to open themselves up to people who don't give a crap. Some writers, scared and bitter about this reality, actually write the crap they think those people deserve. But creating crap is a dumb way to go through life. And creating crap on purpose is not officially writing.

You must never give in to the fear of others' responses to your writing. If you do, you will be trying to write what you think someone else will like. And that is not officially writing, either. Writing to please someone else will destroy the true writer in you. Writing what's important to you will make you an important writer.

It takes time to develop as a writer. A lifetime. And yet time is the one thing we are guilty of not giving it. I would imagine that a great majority of all people, not just writers and artists, are guilty of the same thing. And the sad truth is that more people than not wind up immobile in a rest home angry with themselves and the world for not having done the things they most wanted to do in their lives. Who is to blame? Are we lazy? Are we stupid? I don't think so.

I think we are human. We have doubts. We have fears that if we try to live out our dreams and we fail, we will have to live the rest of our lives without a dream and with self-loathing. What a risk, we say. It is too great a risk for any individual who doesn't have a cheerleading section behind him or her, or a way out. So we try to lessen or eliminate the risk. A common approach to lessening the risk is to wait for the right moment. The moment when the risk is lowest. And that moment never comes. Because the paradox is that that moment has to be made by taking the risk.

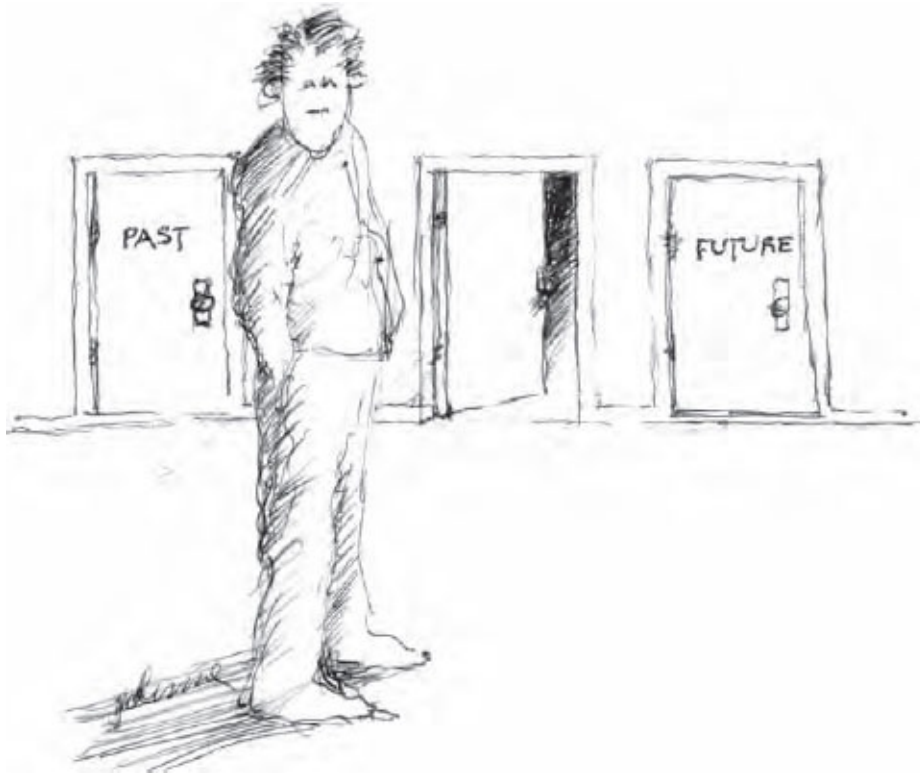
So we choose to take the risk by dropping the argument that we don't have the time to write. We all have the time. How do I know that? I know that because that is *Peter Dunne's Secret to Writing*:

The time you spend writing must never be thought of as time not spent doing something else.

Some things are, because they are. "Beauty is its own reason for being," according to Shakespeare. And I believe writing is its own reason for being. It is not something you should ever think of as a thing to get to when you're not doing something else.

You give your body food and drink, and air to breathe. You give your mind nutrition, too, by remaining inquisitive and teachable. But most important of all, you must feed your soul. Praying can feed your soul. Meditation certainly does. Acts of kindness and selflessness are at the top of that list, too. And right up there with them, because often they are vehicles for the others, is artistic expression. Art is born in the soul. It is actually the expression of the soul. So if we don't make time for that, we are not making time for the most important thing a human can do: express himself.

So we must find time to express ourselves.



Knock fifteen minutes off lunch and dinner, and put that half hour aside for writing. Knock another fifteen minutes off the time you spend zoned out in front of the television and bank it with the other minutes. Knock fifteen minutes off your cell phone obsession, and take at least fifteen minutes from browsing the web. Put those minutes in the bank, too. Now take all that time, that hour or hour and a half, light an aromatherapy candle, grab your Calgon, a pad, a pen, and turn on the hot water. Slip into the soapy mix and rest your mind and body in the best part of the day... your writing part. Wiggle your toes, take a deep, relaxing breath, and be a writer.

Okay, you're in bubbles up to your eyeballs and you're committed to being a writer. All you have to do now is to decide what to write about. Another choice. And amazingly, this is a very difficult choice to make. It seems that we have so much to write about that we can't wait to get started, but we have so much trouble starting. We know we have a hundred good ideas, better ideas than the ones we see made into films day in and day out, but when it comes to putting those ideas down on paper, more often than not, we are stumped. We can't get started. It's frustrating and humiliating. And the more frustrated and humiliated we become, the harder it is to start. So how do we break that cycle? How do we start?

With *one* idea.

We have to learn to stop tossing around two or three or more ideas at a time. When we do that we just go back and forth forever. There is no "better" idea to start with. All your ideas are good. Well, almost all of them. Remember, we said in the beginning that writers have to make choices. The first choice is to be a writer. The second choice is to choose one, and only one, idea to develop into your screenplay. You will have plenty of time to develop the other ones in the future.

This act of choosing your first idea is a giant step. And, once you make the choice

you must stick with it. Just because the idea may prove difficult to develop into a screenplay does not give you the right to abandon it. Every idea is difficult to develop into a screenplay. And most times, the better the idea the more difficult it will be to get down right. That's the way it goes. I'm almost willing to say that if it's too easy, something's wrong. And the "something wrong" is almost always a symptom of an undeveloped Emotional Structure. And that is because most of us feel we should develop the broad strokes of the plot first, and fill in the emotional layer later on. Big mistake. It is precisely this big mistake that ruins script, after script, after script.

The emotional through line, that is to say the Emotional Structure, is the first story to be developed deeply. Only then can the plot be developed to serve it. Never vice versa.

Now, this is about the time, if you were in my writing class and I were standing in front you and your fellow students that I would be getting...The Deadly Stare.

What is it that you and they are feeling, I wonder. Expectation? Self-doubt? Judgment of me or of each other? Buyer's remorse? Because, really, they just sit there and stare.

So I stare back. I sit on my desk and give nothing. Time passes. They shift. They look at me. They look at each other. Back and forth, back and forth. Then a hand goes up, and I win because I know what the hand will ask.

"Mr. Dunne," the hand says. "What the hell is emotional structure, anyway?"

They all nod. The same question on every mind. Every class. And these are people who have already paid for the course.

To most people, maybe you too, Emotional structure certainly sounds like an oxymoron. After all, aren't our emotions those mutinous little rats that jump us when we least expect them? Shocking us? Angering us? Confusing us, and embarrassing us, and depressing us?

And in fact, isn't the secret of their power in their ability to surprise us? And isn't the surprise element the thing we dread most about them? We don't so much fear the emotion, as we do the emotion's unpredictability. That's why we "fight our emotions." That's why we say we "hate surprises."

If you're like me, you don't know when your anger is going to flare up. And you don't like it when it does. You don't know either, when or why anxiety will grab you by the throat and turn you into a shivering mass. But it will attack whenever it damn pleases, and when it does, like some hysterical preschooler off his medication howling in that startled hollow between your ears, you just have to deal with it. Right then. Right there. That's the nature of emotions, and of our relationship with them.

So then, how the heck *do* we discipline them?

How do we *structure* them?

First, let's consider a screenplay's "structure."

While I am not a structure fanatic, I do bow to the necessity of it and teach it, and acknowledge that without an understanding of it no writer will succeed in creating a logical work. However, having said that, and having sat through a few hundred painfully unsuccessful movies, I do not subscribe to the theory that understanding structure is the same as understanding writing. To understand writing we must

understand emotion and capture it. And we do that by learning emotional triggers and responses, and tricking them to show up in the script where and when we want them.

Now you're probably asking yourself if all this tricking and triggering is really necessary? You don't want to be a psychiatrist; you want to be a scriptwriter for crying-out-loud. Well, yes, it is necessary, and here's why. Without understanding Emotional Structure, the beginning, the middle, and the end of your script have a 100 percent chance of becoming the beginning, the *muddle*, and the end. Because emotions rule the central, most misunderstood and most feared element of a screenplay: that of the story's underlying meaning. And only by understanding Emotional Structure can we bring solid, creative solutions to the writing process, and meaning to your story. It is the only sure way to turn your script's problems into your script's power.

So now we consider "emotions."

Knowing your idea for a screenplay is a start. Knowing who you are as the writer of that idea is equally vital. Who you are emotionally, that is. If you're like me, you probably had a father and a mother. Let's see a show of hands. Good.

Some of you had, as I did, siblings. Hands? Good.

Others of you were, as I was, raised in a fun-loving, balanced, nurturing, peaceful, sober, non-judgmental, spiritual home. Hands? Anyone?

Okay, so here's the point. I may never actually start out to write about my family and my upbringing, but I can't write anything *with meaning* without allowing those influences to inform what I'm writing about. There is proof aplenty of failure to do so.

Earlier in my career as a "Development Executive" I read scripts by the pounds, week in and week out, year after year. Where did they come from? They were breeding out there. Inbreeding. These were "spec" scripts mostly, written not on assignment, but on a wing and a prayer, in the hopes of selling it to a studio for a sack full of gold.

All across town, dozens of other development executives at agencies, studios, and networks were doing the same thing I was. Often we'd be reading the same scripts. We'd compare notes, shake our heads and wonder, "where are the good scripts?" How can so many people—many of them professional writers—turn out so many mediocre scripts? Are the ideas that bad? Are the writers that bad?

No. And, no. But, getting the best out of the idea, and getting the best out of the writer were the great, unmet goals.

Turning a good idea into a good screenplay is not child's play. It is work not meant for the faint of heart. Sometimes writing is euphoric, and sometimes it is sadistic. It can be extremely rewarding one day, and it can be a complete waste of time the next. It can be like having a good cry. Or having great sex. Or both at the same time. Or nary a bit of either ever.

Sometimes writing can seem magical. But the truth is, writing is not magic. You are the magic. And it is this magic that turns the hard work into art.

The hard work of writing a screenplay is not, as some would have you believe, analogous to climbing Mount Everest. It's more like taking a long hike. A very, very long hike where you may risk losing your footing, but never your life. Parts of the hike are uphill. Parts sweep gently downward. There are beautiful glades now and then. Just as there are surprise encounters with bears and bad guys. There are valleys, of course,

but they are not the famous valleys of death. Even when they feel like it. There are difficulties in the emotional landscape, and they are there for a reason even when you don't know why. There are fields of wildflowers. There are lakes of rainbows. And the longer you are on this screenwriter's hike, the more elevation you will gain until you reach the point of rare atmosphere where only writers and writing breathe. To the home of meaning, and the triumph of ideas. To emotional gratification.

In the end, it won't matter if you write about dog sleds in the Klondike, or gay monks in Greece. What will matter is your ability to touch me with your story. To move me with your movie. To inspire me. To validate me. To encourage me. Those are the things you will have to do to get me into the theater. Not an easy task, but not impossible either, considering all you have to do to reach *my* emotions is to use *yours*.

2

Know Your Story, Know Your Plot, Know the Difference

When we think about great stories, about great movies, we remember first and foremost about whom the story is told. More than the twists and turns of the plot and the grand scale of the action and the stunts, we recall the character around whom all of the action swirls. Who is the good guy? Who is the bad guy? Who falls in love with whom? With whom did we fall in love? Who was most memorable? Who? Who? Who?

The answer to the question, What is your film about? is nothing if it's not about Who.

And that is the difference between story and plot. The plot is *what* happens in the film. The story is what it does to the *who* it happens to. And, of the who and what of it, the who is far more important than the what. The what would be worthless without the who. But, to be fair, the who wouldn't be much without the what, either.

We can also look at it this way. The plot provides the action: the film's motion. And the story provides the reaction: the film's emotion.

Inside the story, where the emotions play out, the portraits of your characters are subtly sketched. The portrait is sketched by revealing the character's emotions through his behavior. This behavior can be as exaggerated as provoking a barroom brawl, or as delicate as a seductive glance. Your character's behavior is most telling when it is in reaction to some unexpected event. His or her emotional reaction can bring unpredicted results, and more importantly, unwanted revelations. Truth arrives on the coattails of surprise—truth that up until this point in your plot has escaped your hero's consciousness.

Suddenly the truth is out in the open. And the reasons for your hero not wanting to let you see his truths are the gist of his or her mystery. Your hero's truths—like everyone else's—are buried deep down inside. And often they are buried unknowingly. Subconsciously. When they are uncovered and examined through the story's arc, the reason they were buried provides the story with "meaning." As each of these epiphanies takes place, the hero becomes stronger for it. This is a new strength that he uses to forge ahead, and eventually, to forge a victory. His victory is usually the climax to the plot. Afterwards, his understanding of the changes that took place within him creates the film's resolution.

The story is the journey for truth.

The plot is the road it takes to get there.

We use the plot—the action—to push the story along to its logical conclusion. The

plot comes from external, uncontrollable sources. Something “happens” to your protagonist that she has no control over. It could be an Act of Fate, or an Act of God—a natural disaster could take a loved one away in an earthquake or flood. It could be the sudden onset of an incurable disease, or a heart attack. It could be a husband leaving his wife. It could be losing a job, watching your house burn down, or the miscarriage of a child.

Plot happens to your protagonist. We see plot first, well before story—but the seeds of story are there if we know to look for them... if we recognize them. As the writer, you have to plant them where they are needed. Sometimes you will think of them while you are there. Sometimes you go back to a point earlier in your screenplay and plant them after you’ve noticed the need for them.

What are the seeds of your story?

Everything we do in life, everything we experience, makes an imprint in our subconscious, and contributes to the formation of our core person. We become that accumulation of major and miniscule events; events of unimaginable heartache, and events of unexpected elevation and joy. We become complex. And there is no limit to our complexity. The more we take in our experience, that is to say the more we make ourselves available to them and learn from them the more complex our personal nature becomes. This personal nature, which is the combination of a deep and meaningful union of intellect and emotion, is our true spiritual self. When we know and trust our spiritual self we become learned. Which is not at all the same as becoming educated. It is our complex subconscious nature, our spiritually charged emotional self, which makes each of us unique. The difference between your story and my story is the difference in these seeds of our unique nature. I cannot live your story. You cannot live mine. Your protagonist and your antagonist have their own stories, too—each unique, each complex and dramatic. It is up to you to mine these stories if you are to create a truly rich and emotionally variegated film.

We use plot to help us see patterns in your protagonist’s life.

And patterns are emotional footprints. If we take the plot of a man leaving a woman, for example, we may discover during the story a pattern in the woman’s life regarding other relationships that haven’t lasted. Or perhaps she wrestles with issues of abandonment. Friends of hers may have said they could see the break-up coming for a long time. Why? What did they see that the woman could not or would not? Was denial involved out of desperation that any relationship is better than none? Sometimes we see the woman blame herself, feeling she wasn’t worthy of him in the first place. How often have we heard stories of a jilted lover moving to a different city to start over, only to relive the same experience? What’s that about?

Well, “that,” my friends, is your story. It is not a story of events. It is a story of emotional contradiction. It is the journey of discovery and growth. Of loneliness even in the middle of a crowded life. Of isolation from feelings we cannot trust. Of building and tearing down the walls that protect us.

Let's assume your hero has survived in life so far by using practical ways in an unwavering manner to avoid pain and loneliness. She depends on these habits of response to protect her heart. Her life would be too uncomfortable, too risky, without them. Now, at the start of your screenplay, something happens—the plot happens—and this time her practiced, habitual, dependable defenses don't work. Oh, my God. She is forced to take a new path—a risk—in order to survive long enough to get back to normal—to safety—to where her defenses still work. She is pushed outside her walls.

Then another event occurs, and the risky journey is extended beyond her initial plan. Further, her tools for survival are not working very well under these new circumstances. Anger and fear substitute for confidence. Her protective walls show signs of cracking. Her strengths are diminished and her weaknesses are exposed. Weaknesses of which even she was unaware. Suddenly she finds herself at the mercy of events and people completely unknown to her. She must put aside her old strengths, which are now useless. This does not make her weak, however. This makes her brave. As she takes this risk, this leap of faith, she leaves behind the moment of fear. And in this new moment she becomes vulnerable. This is not inconsequential. This is huge. This is life changing. Though plot-wise it may seem to be a small event, story-wise it is enormously important. Because at this moment she discovers the great value in all vulnerability: She becomes teachable.

And what you must teach her at this point is her hidden history. Her hidden history is that which caused her to build the walls in the first place. It is very often a history so deeply buried that it is painful to ever face again. But she must face it in order to free herself from the fear it created.

Events and new people challenge the *basis* of her defenses rather than the defenses themselves. Physical survival is now directly linked to psychological and emotional stability. And she discovers that a seriously underdeveloped emotional life lay useless under her defense system. She faces an impoverished core, devoid of self-esteem. This is the grand epiphany and the mid-point of your film, and the point at which emotional war must be declared.

She comes to realize that by having created a defensive shell around her feelings (lest she risk having those feelings hurt) she has kept those emotions from ever maturing. Now, in your film, she must learn to use those emotional tools in order to survive. She is clumsy at it, and frustrated. And she is scared because all of this is boiling down to one thing: She has to grow up. And she has to grow up fast.

The more challenging the story is in terms of emotional complexity, the deeper the seeds of discontent are buried, the harder your heroine has to dig to find the answers. Until finally she reaches the unthinkable place where pain and suffering have been hidden in shame for so long. She must confront this shame in order to get to the answer she needs to survive the plot.

If you are clever enough, we will all identify with your heroine's dilemma. We all have secrets, fears, and shame that we would like to avoid facing to our dying day. Though we may not identify with her particular *plot* problems, we will connect in every other way to her *story* problems.

This is important to remember while you are plotting your script. As long as the

story emotions are true, the plot can be anything you like.

So now you reach the point of choosing a plot and a story.



How should you choose what to write about?

Well, you've heard this before and you're going to hear it again. Write what you know about. But I am here to tell you that that is a deceptively complicated proposition.

The "what-you-know-about" which you will write about is not what you know about fixing a car or sailing a boat. It is what-you-know-to-be-true-and-valuable-and-meaningful-and-important-and-worth-living-for. *The "what-you-know-about" which you must learn to write about is your own emotional truth.* It is precisely your personal wisdom that supports and validates the story you tell.

No plot, no matter how clever, is worth anything if it doesn't ultimately connect your truth to mine.

The question every writer asks over and over again is if he is wise enough today to write. Not smart enough. Wise enough. How strong is that wisdom. How thoughtful. How deep. How generous. How individual is that wisdom, too. And how much will

others learn from that wisdom.

Being wise and being smart are two different things. Maybe you haven't given that a lot of thought, but now is the time you'll have to, because being smart isn't enough. Being smart won't help you be a good writer. You can possess all the knowledge in the world and stink at writing. But if you are wise, I can pretty much guarantee that you will be a fine writer. And if your protagonist trades his knowledge for wisdom he will eventually solve his greatest problems.

The difference between knowledge and wisdom isn't just semantics. The difference is real, and it has everything to do with emotional conditioning. Knowing something is one thing. Knowing how to use that knowing is another. Knowing how to use that knowing selflessly is wisdom. Wisdom is the application of knowledge with love.

We learn to love through our experiences, and we learn to be wise by learning to express what we learn in those experiences lovingly. Not romantically lovingly, but lovingly in the sense of emotional generosity. The richer our experiences, the greater our chances to gain true wisdom become. Some lessons take a long time to sink in and the wisdom isn't very clear early on. If the use of our knowledge does not expand the quality of our lives and those lives around us, then our knowledge has not been expressed as wisdom, and as such is worthless. Its value is only in its application. Much like money. Having a lot of it doesn't mean a thing if you don't know how to spend it.

So your hero will learn some tough life lessons because you will force him to learn if he is to survive. The plot, with its intellectual and physical obstacles, will teach him that he's limited intellectually and physically. The story, with its moral and emotional challenges, will teach him that his moral and emotional capacities are, on the other hand, unlimited. Not only that, but also that his newly discovered moral and emotional strength, his spiritual vigor, can save his physical and intellectual ass. If he is like most heroes, he will not learn this lesson quickly or easily.

And, if he is like most heroes, you are likely to notice how much like you he is. This is because ultimately you will be writing about the things you know best. the things about yourself you know to be true...remember? So your hero should be a lot like you since his emotional truth is your emotional truth. If your hero is not a lot like you, then stop and go back until he is.

In your script your hero may not share a single experience of yours, but he may have reacted the same way to his experience as you had to yours. It is the reaction to life that matters. It is the development of oneself by virtue of those reactions that matters. It is the universality of those reactions that makes us all so similar, though we may seem so dissimilar otherwise. It is in the moment of choosing our reaction that binds us. It is in the moment where loss is faced and felt that our spiritual brotherhood is created. For it is in that moment of loss wherein we are soul-bound. We have all lost dignity. We have all lost faith. We have all lost hope. We have all lost love. We have all known what those losses felt like. We have all wished someone would have felt them with us at the time. Now, as you write, the time has come again. This is your chance to right a wrong. This is your chance to give back what has been taken. To your hero. To your audience. To yourself.

It is the time now to develop a plot in which you force your hero to face the losses

of his early life through the discovery of the defenses he has built around them to forget them. For what your hero has suppressed in order to survive a long time ago must sooner or later rise to the surface again. Because what protected him once will not protect him forever.

In your physical plot you will create incidents that will result in expected reactions. In your metaphysical story you will create incidents that will result in surprises.

In your hero's physical world, what goes up must come down. In your hero's metaphysical world, what went down must come up.

When everything comes up, the truth will come with it. And the truth, as they say, will set your hero free. It is in this freedom that the happy ending is found.

When. Where. How.

We have seen classic stories told a hundred different ways. Through the centuries the works of many great authors and playwrights have been interpreted and misinterpreted, placed and misplaced in varying locales, and burdened with differing intentions. Great tragedies have been retold as comedies, and vice versa. Ancient tales have been rendered contemporary. Black characters have been made white, and white have been made black; men have been turned to women, and women to men. But the story remains the same. Still entertaining, still powerful, still meaningful because if the story is good in the first place, chances are it will remain good in any case.

As you decide on your story and your plot you must choose the when, where, and how. These are the period, the location, and the genre in which your film best plays. Through these choices, a good story can get even better.

When

The “when” of your screenplay is something you must decide based on the story material just as much if not more than the plot material. Telling your story in the context of a particular time in history can emphasize your point dramatically. This is because the psychological or emotional subtexts about which you are writing can be much clearer and more powerful in one set of circumstances than another. You want to match the internal story you're telling with the external world in which you set it. If the match isn't a good one, your movie can sink quickly. Most of us start off with a very certain time in which our film story takes place. It could take place in a time long ago (The Dawn of Man; Ancient Rome; the Old West; the sixties, or just last summer). It could take place in the future (science fiction), or it could take place today.

The reasons for choosing the time go beyond historical accuracy or nostalgia. Some film ideas simply work a lot better in a particular era. Other times in history were simpler, for example, and therefore may be a better time frame in which to tell a subtly complicated personal story. Today we live in a very open society where personal