
Of Writing and Places in Between

Grant & Abigail Pearson

Write What You Know: Be Human

by Grant Pearson

In a recent college writing course, I wrote a story about a young man who watched his grandmother die slowly of Alzheimer's disease and about the changes he went through in his grief. My classmates read the story and almost every one of them told me that I had perfectly captured the complicated emotions of the young man and the almost serene situation. They said they felt entranced by the story because of how real it felt.

And that's because it was real. Years ago, I had a grandmother who died of Alzheimer's, and at the time of her death I couldn't see what good could possibly come out of it. But in the moments after my classmates appreciation for the story, the age old writing wisdom finally clicked in my head: Write What You Know.

I used to think this was a limiting suggestion to keep new writers from writing about whatever they wanted. But I've realized that's not the case at all. It's not that I shouldn't write about fantasy worlds, or the future, or the angelic hosts. It's that I should be focused on the part that everyone understands: human emotion, pain, and change.

I would wager that nearly every human in the world understands loss and grief, and so emotion is the key to connecting with people whether face-to-face or through words on paper. Emotion and empathy is what makes us all human, and when we are able to share those feelings with other people (in a story or in reality), we feel understood and connected. I have come to believe that's one of the major reasons why people read. And a major reason why people write as well. To share a connection.

Life is not always sunshine and gumdrops. I've experienced this first hand. Every summer for the past three years, a family member or close friend has died unexpectedly, and the tragedies have shaken the families around them. Loss hurts and changes people. It has changed me. There's nothing wrong with that, I've realized. Because each experience gives me another way to make a connection with someone because of my newfound knowledge of that kind of pain.

That may sound a little dark, but I see it as turning the pain to a good cause. Life still hurts, but now I know how to tell someone else that they aren't hurting by

themselves. I'm still sad sometimes, and sometimes I wish the summer was over so that no-one else dies, but I appreciate Fall a lot more now than I used to.

I like the beautiful changing of the leaves, the cool breeze whipping through the trees, the sound of the raindrops on pavement, and the smell of the grass growing green. I have always thought of Fall as the time when trees die, but that's not because of the Fall. It's because of the summer. Fall is when the rains come to wash away the heat and soak the ground with the promise of new life.

No life can ever be replaced. No pain can ever be unfelt. Rather I think we should do everything we can to remember those we have lost. After all, there are over five billion people on the planet who have likely experienced similar loss. I've been told there is healing in sharing the stories of our loss because of the connectivity it brings. We are human because we feel things. And sometimes the things we feel are painful, but what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?

For Abi and I, we're able to turn some of this experience into stories, and someday we hope those stories will make a difference to someone.

Characters: Some Things I've Learned

by Grant Pearson

I am now a Senior at the University of Oregon. I'm minoring in Creative Writing, and I've taken a number of classes to benefit said writing. In the most recent of these classes I had a fantastic professor who I felt gave me a lot of really beneficial advice.

Being in the writing industry, I often hear a lot of suggestions repeatedly such as "Show, don't Tell," "Develop your characters," or "Set the scene." Though necessary, they are still boring to hear so repetitively, so I was relieved when my recent professor gave some fresh ideas on how to improve my writing.

This professor dedicated a lot of time to character development and helped me recognize some core attributes of every literary character.

1. "Characters need 2 things to make them realistic and believable: A desire/goal and a fear." This way when the fear

Our Favorites

Below is a list of a few characters that Grant and Abi adore and the simple details of their persons.

Amelie

Amelie (French film)

Character: A awkward naive girl who loves to help people.

Desire: To have meaningful relationships.

Fear: That her social awkwardness and surreal view of life will bring rejection.

comes into conflict with the desire/goal, character change can happen.

As an example, my professor used Indiana Jones and the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In the beginning of the story, the viewer recognizes that Indiana Jones has a fear of snakes. Shortly after the viewer recognizes he also desires a meaningful relationship. The viewer may not realize at first what these two attributes have in common until Indiana is forced to jump into a pit of snakes to save his relationship with the girl. He is given a chance in the moment to give in to his fear and let the girl die, or overcome his fear and save the girl. Both options provide room for character change. In this case he saves the girl, and probably doesn't fear snakes as much after that. Every character has a similar story to fulfill because every character has a fear that needs to be conquered just like every one of us has fears that need to be overcome.

Some writers become too caught up with the complexity of the plot and trying to make the character save the world that they forget about who their character really is, and so the character becomes a plot device instead of a human being. This is what my professor was trying to help us avoid.

2. "Secondary characters only have one purpose in literature: to push the protagonist towards their fear and towards change." My professor suggested that the world is always against the protagonist, thus providing the maximum number of possibilities for character change and a larger feeling of accomplishment in the end of the story. This includes secondary characters such friends, tavern keepers, parents, etc. They all should be in conflict with the protagonist to a certain degree to push him/her towards change.

3. "Falling in love is like catching a rattlesnake in mid strike; it sounds awesome, but rarely turns out the way it is imagined." This was more in reference to romance, but it sums up a very good point for all writing. Characters need conflict, and if they succeeded at everything they did, there would be no need for them to change. Therefore everything

The Doctor

Doctor Who (British TV)

Character:

A time-traveling alien who does his best to help people.

Desire:

To do good, to make people better, and to have fun.

Fear:

That he will someday make the wrong choice.

Marko

Saga (US comic)

Character:

A homely alien who is trying to start a new life for himself and family.

Desire:

To be a good father and protect his family.

Fear:

That his fugitive status and cultural differences with his wife will ruin them.

Raymond Reddington

The Blacklist (US TV)

Character:

A brilliant, sarcastic criminal with honor and a love for people.

Desire:

To see his daughter safe and happy.

Fear:

is stacked against them, including their friends and their love interests.

There are so many more examples and ideas I could share, but it would take all day, so here's to characters: may they always be forced to face their snakes.

That stepping into the role of father will make him too vulnerable to his enemies.

Prose Selection

by Grant Pearson

At ten years old, Charles had been ordered to clean his room and closet, and he did so without arguing because he didn't want his mom to hit him again. He let his bottom lip hang out in frustration when his mom left. She rarely asked nicely. He bet if he had a dad that he wouldn't yell at him to do everything. His dad would play ball with him and take him to the movies and let him have sleep overs. He wouldn't yell at him for wanting seconds at meals because there wasn't enough money or send him to bed without eating because he'd accidentally spilled his water on the floor. His dad wouldn't leave him in his room without a nightlight or tell him to just go back to sleep after a nightmare. His dad would be there for him. But he didn't have one.

On this particular day, when Charles opened his closet to clean, he discovered a small wooden carved box with black steel corners and a golden clasp holding it shut sitting on the floor. Around the sides were delicately cut swirls that almost seemed to move in the dim light of the closet. He'd never seen it before and wondered if his mother had put it there. He couldn't take his eyes off of it, so he brought it into his small room and set it on the bed to look at it better.

He noticed then that two words were carved into the top of it. The first: Darkness. The second: Father. Each word seemed to glow slightly in the wood, and he simply stared at the box, thinking it was far too beautiful and expensive for his mother to have ever bought herself. He glanced toward his bedroom door to make sure she wasn't coming. Then he licked his lips and picked up the box with both his hands, noting that it seemed to weigh almost nothing.

He started to open the lid, and the words on top began to glow a golden red as if they were beginning to burn. He shut the lid, and the letters returned to their previous state. He opened it again, and again they leapt to life. He opened the box all the way this time, and when he did, the room instantly went dark.

He gasped. The room was black, darker than at night when his mom shut his window shades and closed the door, darker than the closet, darker even than when he buried his face in his pillow and cried because his mother was yelling at him again.

He felt himself let go of the box, but he didn't hear it hit the floor. He reached for his bed, but there was nothing where it should have been. Then he screamed. What was going on? Why was it so dark? Why was there nothing there? He stopped screaming for a moment and took a breath, but he heard nothing, so he screamed again.

He tried to find a wall to curl up against, but there was nothing to support him.

Then he began to cry, and he cried for a long time. Nothing happened. Nothing moved. Nothing. His mother didn't yell at him. No monsters came out of the closet or out from under the bed. He slowly stopped crying and sniffed a few times. He wiped the tears and boogers off his face with his sleeve and listened. It was still dark, but it was quiet. He sat on his bottom and licked his lips. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know where to go. He didn't know who could help him. And he didn't know how to get out of this darkness. He started to tear up again, and no-one scolded him for doing so.

He let the tears come and rush over his cheeks. He cried quietly this time, from fear and anxiety rather than pure terror. He stood up and began to walk. He walked in one direction and found nothing. So he tried to walk in another direction but found nothing. All there was was darkness. He was alone.

He cried and walked for a long time, until he was exhausted. Then he collapsed. His memory told him that his mother would be making fun of him for this and telling him that he wasn't a real man if he cried. She would say there was no such thing as a good man, no-one would ever take care of her or him, and that she wasn't going to wait around any longer. She would tell him to grow up.

He couldn't do anything but cry and lay in the darkness.

Finally when he couldn't cry any longer, he swallowed and stared at the darkness. He was alone. He knew it, and it was even worse than he had imagined all those times in his room. Not even his mother heard him now, and there was nothing he could do to get help.

He thought about the times he had nightmares, and she had told him to leave her alone because she needed to get up early in the morning. He would return to his room and hide under the covers, and they would comfort him. He couldn't do that this time. But why did the darkness scare him now and not then? Perhaps because his blankets had cocooned him and held him like he always imagined his father would.

At the realization, he began to imagine that's exactly where he was: swathed in blankets and held by a father. As he thought about that, a calm spread over him, and the darkness suddenly seemed warmer. He sat up again and noticed that the darkness felt different. It wasn't as lonely anymore. He still heard nothing, and he knew no-one else was there, but it wasn't as scary. He stood up and began to walk around. "Hello?" he called. There was no answer, though he hadn't anticipated one.

As he walked around, he wondered if this was what it was like to be dead. This wasn't so bad. At least he wasn't being yelled at anymore. And he didn't have to clean his bedroom.

Suddenly he tripped over something. He bent down and picked up the box. On the top of the lid the words still glowed, but as he stared at them, they began to change. The letters glowed bright and disappeared, and then two new words appeared: Be Brave.

Something about the words made him smile, and he closed his eyes and held the box close to his chest. When he opened his eyes again, he was back in his room. He looked down into his arms and the box was still there with the words 'Be Brave' still engraved there, though now they didn't glow. He licked his lips and smiled as he glanced around at the room that still needed cleaning. But he didn't mind now, and he slipped the box under his pillow and started to clean.

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