

Writing From Everyday Experience

“At times, the simpler the image, the vaster the dream.”

--Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Remember, a theme of the Family Arts Program Writing Exchange is that we are already writers and simply need the time and space to let our inner-writers express themselves. Here is a quote that speaks again to the fact that what we need for writing is already within us.

“I was rich and I didn’t know it. We all are rich and ignore the buried fact of accumulated wisdom.

So again and again my stories and my plays teach me, remind me, that I must never doubt myself, my gut, my ganglion, or my Ouija subconscious again.

From now on I hope to always stay alert, to educate myself as best I can. But lacking this, in future I will relaxedly turn back to my secret mind to see what it has observed when I thought I was sitting this one out.

We are never sitting anything out.

We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled.

The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.”

--Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing*

Story as a Means of Connection:

As we think about what our inner-writer has been observing while we “thought [we] were sitting this one out,” it is helpful to think of our lives as made up of snapshots or moments. And each of those moments is rich with universal themes. It is those themes—love, loss, struggle, surprise, perseverance, fear, humor, etc.—that connect us as people. Ancient Western philosophers and Indigenous scholars agree that both the writer and the reader (or the speaker and the listener) are involved in the making of a story’s meaning. We can even think of the writer as actively waking or calling out stories from their listeners.

“Storytelling always includes the audience and the listeners, and, in fact, a great deal of story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners.”

--Leslie Marmon Silko, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective”

Questions for Discussion:

Think about some of the most powerful stories you have heard.

- Why were they powerful?
- How did you connect with what the author was saying?

- What stories in your own life did it bring to mind?

Big Truths in Small Stories:

Focusing on storying individual snapshots of our lives frees us from having to write our whole autobiography in one sitting. It also allows us to focus on one or two themes at a time.

Some of the most powerful stories written in the Arts and Corrections program have been these types of snapshots—small stories packed with some of the truest wisdom, most heart-wrenching loss, or humor that brings the house down. Here are a few examples:

- someone trying to wash their clothes in a metal prison sink
- having lunch with a grandmother during a school suspension
- trying to connect with a teenage daughter over the phone from prison
- riding the bus in Oakland
- waiting at the laundromat and thinking about a fight they had just had with a parent
- splitting the last available sandwich with someone of a different race

All of these stories have been unforgettable. Some of these stories have made both the reader and the audience cry. What all of these powerful stories have in common is that they told the story without telling the audience what to think or believe about it. They stuck to the details of the story and let the reader find the meaning therein.

Here are a few examples of snapshot stories—small stories with big truths—that were written by people in the Arts in Corrections class at CSP-Sac:

The Vetting **By K. Lewis**

The male voice from the other end of the line is deep. Still, from the *Umms* and *Errs* it keeps getting choked on, he knows it belongs to a pimply faced adolescent. He would prefer to be conducting this interrogation from the comfort of his spacious living room with a large Rottweiler growling by his side, maybe even a 9mm Calico, broken down to be cleaned, on the coffee table in front of him. Yes, he would enjoy seeing Jr., thin lipped and clammy palmed, a dark stain increasing under his armpits with nervous eyes darting to and fro.

However, in spite of being in prison, hundreds of miles from Jr., this concerned father proceeds with this vetting. “So, how old are you?” “How long have you known Lina?” “What time is the prom over?” “Where are you taking her afterwards?” “You better have her home by...” Even though he already knows most of the answers, his questions, and the not so veiled threats, keep coming like a buzzsaw. He gets a little satisfaction sensing the young man’s anxiousness to end his debriefing, so he

makes the would-be escort sweat a full 5 minutes more before demanding to speak to his precious, growing up way too fast, Baby Girl.

Untitled

By A. Hinds

I walked by him every day for two weeks without so much as a chin dip. This stranger in a wheelchair with his swollen legs and bloated torso, the heavy face and piercing blue eyes. He was dying and everybody knew it. But he had money and generosity so they stayed close. I walked by and walked by not needing another friend and especially not one so close to the grave. What was the point? Still, our paths eventually crossed with an obligatory handshake, tight lipped smile and “alright now”-type flat affirmation usually reserved for insecure/dominant male greetings. He had a firm, if fleshy handshake and the sort of ill-at-ease confidence I would come to recognize in terminal cases. I stood around with the herd for awhile exchanging petty banter and trying my best not to interact with him directly. Something in every one of his very few movements spoke of frustration and anger. He sat in that wheelchair with his puffy hands folded over a distended stomach doing all he could to give the impression of control; but he was a horse trapped in a burning barn with nowhere to go, nothing to do but make a valiant effort at dignity kept. Never once did I imagine what he thought of me. Over the months that followed circumstances thrust us together, finding ourselves in the same places at the same time every other night, discovering a green branch bond, a regulated trust. This wasn't easy, as neither of us was blind to the other's faults; the biggest being our own ways of judging people too hard, too quick. Interestingly, the closer we became the more others dropped away. All relationships require maintenance—his required an added physical/emotional sort most people were not willing to undertake. As usually happens, I would find myself the most responsible, silently volunteering to stay later, push him to the med nurse and then back home for the night. I didn't realize at the time it was in these brief moments our most enduring bonds would be formed. Away from the groups we changed, softened, relaxed and showed vulnerability. His embarrassment would bloom knowing I saw the handfuls of meds and cup after cup of thick, syrupy liquid he would try to hold down. I learned to stay the course during minor traumas, and in so doing, was rewarded with his trust above all: don't look away from the sores when he stands up—you might not see, and therefore stop, the fall; do look away when he vomits his medication into the toilet, into the bucket he keeps on the back of his wheelchair, onto the floor in front of everyone; always volunteer to clean the vomit and *always* without drama or disgust, so he keeps his dignity, so you can pick through it to find which meds stayed and which ones left; know when to call for a nurse *now*; but know when to clean his face first. Three years ticked by, neither of us paying enough attention to notice the earth slowing down. I finally met Tommy, my friend, and he finally knew me. But he was dying and everybody knew it.

Questions for Discussion:

- What big ideas or truths were packaged in these small stories?
- How did each author convey those big ideas or truths in their story?
- Were you able to connect with the author? Why or why not?
- What stories of your own did these stories bring to mind?

Activity 1:

Think of an experience from your own life that connects with each of the following:

love:

loss:

perseverance:

hope:

struggle:

surprise:

fear:

friendship:

What additional themes would you add to this list?

Now, take 15 minutes and write out one of the stories that came to mind. Don't worry about telling the reader what the point of the story is—just tell the story with enough detail for the reader to join you in the moment.