

The Three Cosmic Rules of Writing

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The Three Cosmic Rules of Writing

By Dennis Palumbo

As a veteran writer and a licensed psychotherapist specialising in writers' issues, I know enough to know there aren't any rules when it comes to writing.

Except for the following, which I modestly call the Three Cosmic Rules of Writing. I'm serious. Learn these simple rules, then burn them into your hearts and minds. It couldn't hurt.

The First Cosmic Rule: You Are Enough.

It's a growth industry: there are dozens of seminars, how-to books and audio tapes promising to teach you to write better, faster, more commercially. And there's nothing wrong with most of these. I know; I teach some myself.

Because, frankly, there ARE things a writer needs to learn about craft, the traditions of storytelling and the reality of the marketplace. But for the writer just starting out, there's a hidden

danger: namely, the belief that if you just take the right seminars, read the right books or pick the right guru, then you'll be successful. That the person you are right now just isn't enough.

It's a classic belief system...writers who feel they have to be something more to succeed - smarter, better educated, funnier - with more interesting lives, more unique experiences. More...something.

As a therapist who works with writers, I see this every day. Writers who feel they're somehow not enough. Who believe all the OTHER writers are more talented, more confident, less burdened by doubt.

It puts me in mind of that famous opening sequence of Woody Allen's Stardust Memories. A glum Woody sits in a dark, dingy train car, with other lost souls. Looking out the window, he sees another train car - shining, brightly lit. Inside, beautiful men and women laugh and drink champagne, a festive vision of wit and privilege out of a Noel Coward play. Woody despairs. Why isn't he in the sparkling car, with the sparkling people?

Once, when a writer client of mine made reference to this scene to explain his feelings, what emerged was not only his sense of himself as inadequate, but something else, more insidious and undermining.

Namely, the idea that he'd been dealt a bad hand - I'm in the wrong car - because of intrinsic defects in himself. If he were a better writer - smarter, more talented, whatever - he'd be in the right car. Those happy, glittering people were in the shining train car because they DESERVED to be there while he did not.

Thereafter, in our work together, his self-sabotaging behaviours could be understood as a natural result of his belief in himself as basically defective. When this painful self-concept was successfully illuminated and challenged, things began to shift in his view of himself.

What this anecdote illustrates is the real danger to your writing in seeing yourself as less than, not enough. Admittedly, a common, self-limiting belief. To which I offer this thought, which will save you thousands of dollars in therapy bills and trim years off your spiritual journey: everybody thinks the party's happening somewhere else.

But it isn't. It's happening right here, right now. With you.

You - with all your doubts and fears, joys and sorrows - are enough. You - the one reading these words at this very moment - have everything you need to become the writer you want to be.

"Me?" you may be asking. "Just as I am?"

Yes, you, who may, at this moment, be feeling scared, frustrated, blocked, discouraged. If so, join the club. Because so does every other writer in the world, even the most successful ones, who, after all, were once struggling writers themselves.

And now that they're successful, guess what? They still struggle.

They have the same doubts, fears, longings, worries. They just don't give these feelings the same negative meanings you do. Smart writers recognise their feelings as important information about their inner lives, as the raw material of their writing craft. Just grist for the mill.

Which brings me to the Second Cosmic Rule of Writing: Work With What You're Given.

One of my favourite New Yorker cartoons by George Booth depicts a tormented, obviously blocked writer sitting at his typewriter, crumpled paper strewn about, surrounded by literally dozens of dogs - napping, barking, hanging from the window sills, etc. The writer's wife stands in the doorway, glaring at him in weary disdain. "Write about dogs," she says.

Aside from its dark humor, the cartoon's truth is that the frustrated writer often doesn't see that a subject for his writing is right in front of him - the dogs. That is, the obvious elements that actually inhabit his life.

In other words, work with what you're given. Writers have to practice SEEING, really seeing the world around them. As a writer, your job is to do this consciously and artfully, using craft and

imagination as well as memory and reflection. You have to pay attention.

Tolstoy said, "Love those whom God has put before you." The Tao says, "Love the Ten Thousand Things." In short, love, that is - see - everything.

What do I mean by this? To love the totality of what we experience is to accept all our responses to it, to be enlivened by the variety of ways we experience events, good or bad, painful or joyful. The writer's task is to see every moment - and our reaction to it - as potentially interesting, challenging and worthy of our creative participation.

Viewed from this perspective, a writer is never bored, never longs for things in his or her life to be more exciting, more interesting, more something else than they actually are. Except, of course, when you DO feel that way, in which case you should write about that boredom or that longing. That's your grist for that particular day. It's working with what you're given.

Which brings me to the Third (and, thankfully, last) Cosmic Rule of Writing...namely, Writing Begets Writing.

If you're stuck on a difficult article or passage or scene, write it anyway.

Write it badly. Write it in verse. Write it as a journal entry, a rant. If you're frustrated at being stuck, write about that. I don't care. But write.

If you have angry, self-critical feelings, give them to your writing. If there isn't a likely candidate, invent one. There IS one, anyway: you. Your anguish, doubt, fears and frustrations are as vital and elemental to what you're writing as anything in writing. Might as well make use of this fact.

Writing begets writing. Just as worrying begets worrying.

Obsessing begets more obsessing. Pacing back and forth begets - well, you get the idea.

When you risk writing from where you're at, you set in motion a whole set of internal processes. The first rotten sentence you write has a life you can inhabit, evaluate, cross out. This first attempt

can be replaced by a second, hopefully less rotten sentence - maybe a good piece of description or a sharp line of someone's quote or a character's dialogue.

Then again, maybe not. But it doesn't matter. Just keep going. As writer William Goldman reminds us, some stuff you write are just going to be sludge, but they're important connective tissue. They keep things moving; they're links in a chain. Weak links, perhaps, but you can always go back and strengthen them later.

With what? The knowledge that you've written, for one thing, because writing doesn't just beget writing, it also begets - and reinforces - the reality that you can write; that pages will accumulate.

Look at it this way: Every hour you spend writing is an hour NOT spent fretting about your writing. Every day you produce pages is a day you DIDN'T spend sitting at a coffee shop, bitching about not producing any pages.

Writing begets writing. Not writing begets...well...not writing. You do the maths.

There you have it: the Three Cosmic Rules of Writing.

1. You Are Enough
2. Work With What You're Given
3. Writing Begets Writing

Which all point to one rule, really. Write now. Don't wait. Write now. And keep writing. Pass it on.

Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (*My Favourite Year*), Dennis Palumbo, M.A. MFT, is a licensed psychotherapist specialising in creative issues. He is a regular columnist for the Writers Guild of America. His recent book, *Writing From the Inside Out*, published by John Wiley and Sons, is a favourite at The Writers Store at www.WritersStore.com for US\$12.76.

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