

The Way of Story

By

Catherine Ann Jones

Sometimes story ideas may arise from what happens to us in our own lives. Yet they usually connect with something felt within. I was still acting then and had been cast to play Virginia Woolf in an off-Broadway comedy. I began reading everything I could find by and about Woolf in order to better portray the character. Then one day I just sat down and started writing a drama about her struggle with madness in a world gone mad, i.e., WW II -- a story far removed from the life of this baby boomer raised in New Orleans and Texas. I had long been fascinated by the razor's edge between creative genius and madness: Van Gogh, Nijinsky, and Virginia Woolf, to name a few. So this was the theme I chose to explore through her life. *Virginia* (later titled *On the Edge*) had the good fortune to be directed by the legendary Harold Clurman (who launched the plays of Tennessee Williams). The play went on to win the National Endowment for the Arts Award, but the real reward was the emotional response from the audience. After one evening's performance, an older woman, born in Europe, approached me and was crying. She expressed how grateful she was that I had written of the Krystal Nacht incident. Tears filled her eyes as she held my hand tightly, and said simply, "I was there. I was there."

A surprise came when friends would come up after a performance of the play and remark how it reminded them of me. "It's so you," they would say. I was puzzled. Wasn't this a play about novelist Virginia Woolf? Then slowly I realized that though the facts of the story were quite removed from my own life, the emotional content was in some ways parallel. In other words, the story dealt with themes I felt strongly about—something friends would notice, even if the playwright did not! The themes of Bloomsbury were friendship, integrity, and a devotion to the arts which would form a cornerstone for a civilization, a civilization that would survive Nazi Germany and World War II. So, even when writing about well-known historical figures like Calamity Jane or Virginia Woolf, I still had to make their journey my own, re-discovering the story through myself.

After teaching the craft of writing for twenty-five years both in New York (The New School University) and in Los Angeles (U.S.C.), I took time off and re-emerged with a keen commitment to teach in a different way. I knew that somehow I had to convey both the inner and outer aspects of the writing process for the experience to be complete. While craft is vital, equally so is conveying the soul of writing. To do so, you must birth the work from what lies within. With this goal in mind, I finally sat down and wrote an integrative approach to writing, *The Way of Story: the craft & soul of writing*.

It is my feeling that some stories already exist in the ether, and my job is simply to bring them down to the gross level. The best times are when I seem to disappear altogether and the story writes itself. It passes through me, but is not really mine -- a kind of visitation, if you will. Sometimes story ideas may come through dreams at night. One night I dreamt of an *angel* returned to earth because he was not yet ready for heaven. Denied his wings because he was still too attached to earthly pleasures, he was asked to undergo a trial on earth, to earn his wings. I recorded the dream in my journal - then thought no more about it. About ten days later, my agent had a call from megastar Dolly Parton's company. Dolly had been scouting for a good Christmas story for television, and after two years, had not found one she liked. Because of the success of my film, *The Christmas Wife*, they thought I might come up with something. Immediately, I thought of the angel dream. I switched genders from male to female angel, and while driving to Los Angeles, developed the story, set it two weeks before Christmas, and called it, *Unlikely Angel*.

Now, please understand that I do not read magazines or *Variety*, or other books which talk about what stars like. I was simply guided by my intuition -- a faculty I have come to trust much more than the rational brain. So I was not aware that Dolly Parton is simply mad about angels. I walked into her Hollywood home and saw angel sculptures in the garden, a tapestry of angels on the wall, and little angel ornaments placed here and there on several tables. Bingo! I was home free. This story would sell. And, it did, to Disney Studios. The moral: pay

attention to your dreams! No neat formula can replace the golden story seeds stored in your unconscious.

How to develop the intuitive skills necessary to access images? We are taught many things in school, but all too often, this is linear learning, textbook learning. I can remember sitting in classrooms as a child staring aimlessly out of the window at passing clouds. The teacher's verdict was I was wasting my time, yet who is to say that daydreaming is less valuable than memorizing a list of facts. Thomas Edison was a daydreamer. He pondered, "What if there could be light in a small bulb powered by electricity?"

Non-creatives often forget how important unscheduled time is for a writer. This seems particularly true of those who hire writers. In the early Hollywood days when writers were kept at the motion picture studios in offices, they were supposed to be writing all day long. In fact, there is a story of Louis B. Mayer -- then head of MGM -- routinely walking by the doors of the writers' wing, his ear to the door to see if the typewriters were clicking!

Sometimes the best writing occurs when the writer is not physically writing. Once I was stumped while writing an original comedy feature for Universal Studios. I knew the *what* but not the *how*. So I did what has become my process: stopped writing. I went swimming instead. About the eleventh lap with my mind utterly blank, the solution appeared. My conscious mind could not find the solution to the story, so I let go, and allowed the mind to drift and dream.

Significant problems cannot be solved at the same level

Of the thinking which created them.

-- Albert Einstein

The solution appeared as a gift from the invisibles, allowing me to go back to the desk and make my deadline for the Studio.

A writer sometimes needs to do nothing. He may seem to be doing nothing yet in fact he is tuning out of the outer world in order to allow the inner intuitive mind, to drift and dream- rather like small children cloud-gazing. For those that remember, before television and computer games, there was cloud-gazing -- a spiritual, introspective pursuit with no goal whatsoever.

I saw myself when I shut my eyes: space, space,
where I am and am not.

– Octavio Paz, Nobel poet

Like dreams, creativity arises from the unconscious. We have to create an empty space in our conscious minds for the unconscious to emerge with its gifts. Our conditioning prods us to rush in with interpretative meaning, learned meanings, which may serve only to flatten the true value of what arises naturally from within. Mental understanding won't necessarily change us. To be transformed requires something more than rational thinking or sentimentality. The conditioned way of mental knowing often strengthens the ego at the expense of soul. In fact, mere mental understanding may be overrated today.

In the best art, form is the outcome of feeling, not thinking. Thinking -- though a valuable tool -- is only handmaiden to a deeper process.

It was the Christmas holidays and I simply did not feel like writing. After an hour of forcing or 'pushing the river', I sensibly decided to let it go for a while. Later that day, I was on my way to Los Angeles to meet friends for a play and dinner. In the car, suddenly ideas of what to add to the book I was writing kept popping up. I jotted the three ideas down while driving, and the next day added them. I had let go of the book for the day, but my unconscious had not! There are indeed invisible helpers at work when you least expect them!

I must confess that even after writing professionally for twenty-five years, my writing approach or process may unexpectedly change. From my own professional experience, I have often found that the process must adapt to the story at hand. For instance, generally speaking, I first write an outline and then write the story, play, or script in the order it will be read, chronologically. That is, beginning on page one and plowing through without edits or revisions, to the end. This, I had come to understand as my process. Imagine my surprise, writing *The Way of Story*, when ideas would appear that belonged in a much later chapter. Eventually, I gave in and followed what became a new approach or process.

EXERCISE

Sit quietly for a moment and simply feel your body. Now imagine you are naked lying in the sun. Stay with the feeling, feel it specifically all over your body. Now allow your mind to free associate. You might think of someone you love or when you were a small child. Go with the images. Now pick up your pen and describe a character undergoing some trial or peak experience where the feelings are raw.

EXERCISE

Choose a family photo of one of your parents, grandparents, or a lover. Sit quietly in front of the photograph, allowing your mind to drift into memories of things past. Close your eyes. Try to remember how this person smelled. Recall their touch. Then, whether the experience is positive or negative, describe it in words from a *feeling* perspective. Find an image (bird, animal, or object) to represent your character and how he or she would move and behave.

Even before there are stories, there are images. Each life is formed by its unique image, an image that is the essence of that life and that calls it to destiny. To discover the image of our theme or main character, we must enter the invisible world and allow it to carry us. Intuitive images occur, we cannot make them. All we can do is get out of the way, thereby inviting them to come through.

The history of man is the history of images.

– Wallace Stevens

A picture is worth a thousand words.

-- Old Chinese saying

Andy Warhol, who began as a graphic designer for advertising, focused his art on American icons or images that have become signposts for an era. Images as Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy, and Campbell Soup Cans all bespeak America. What makes them work as art is that the audience identifies with these images.

The soul of writing comes through the image -- what Keats called “soul-making”. Images are indeed the language of soul. They integrate mind, body, and spirit, and thereby serve a healing function. When Shakespeare writes, “Out, out brief candle”, he is using the language of metaphor or imaging. He does not say, “Out, out brief life.” The metaphorical or symbolic image lifts the

reader above the gross level to a realm of poetry where image and soul reign. This is where transformation occurs.

The poet is the priest of the invisible.

– Wallace Stevens

Writing, like life, is a process. You can't rush it. Story -- like any other important relationship -- needs time. As Shakespeare rightly said, "Timing is all". Furthermore, I have come to believe that more often than not, the story chooses its own time.

Metaphor is the language of the soul. Look for metaphors in both waking and dream states. Awaken that part of the mind that generates images. Dare to explore the unknown regions of the psyche, for therein lie creative gold.

Well-chosen images can help us integrate mind and feeling which in today's culture has been split asunder. Write with your senses, feelings, and invisible wonderings. Write stories that serve soul. There is no greater path than the path to wholeness.

The Way of Story: the craft & soul of writing is an integrative approach to writing all forms of narrative, illustrated with insights from the author's own professional journey. It is the integration of both solid craft and experiential inner discovery that makes this book on writing unique. www.wayofstory.com

Catherine Ann Jones is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter whose films include *The Christmas Wife* (Jason Robards) nominated for best picture and best writing, *Unlikely Angel* (Dolly Parton), *Angel Passing* (Hume Cronyn, Calista Flockhart) which played at Sundance and went on to win fifteen awards in festivals both here and abroad, and the popular television series, *Touched by an Angel*. Ten of her plays, including *Calamity Jane*, have been produced both in and out of New York City. In addition, she has published several essays and short stories. A Fulbright Scholar in India and winner of the National Endowment for the Arts Award among others, Ms. Jones has served on the writing faculties of

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