

“Reconsidering the Ruby Slippers”

The only way you're ever going to get to direct is if you write your own script.

- Robert Altman, Director (1925 - 2006)

Every fall, as we in the Bay Area enjoy some of our best weather and, likewise, hope to hell the wild fire season is short, thousands of students and teachers return to school. At City College of San Francisco, where I teach, eager screenwriting students fill the well-worn classroom, ready to make their mark on the world with their stories. Some take Beginning Screenwriting as part of an Associate Degree in the Cinema Department and continue on to a 4-year undergrad program, others take all the script classes offered to complete a screenplay and proceed to a graduate film program, still others follow their passion and change careers into film.

Whatever the goals, most students exhibit similar wild-eyed enthusiasm in the first few weeks, as they come to realize that they really did sign up for a creative class that asks them to take some pretty big risks in front of strangers. By week four, they want me to tell them truthfully if they have any talent, or talent enough to make it in the film industry.

Characters' dreams are the most important to know, because their dreams will help you motivate the story.

- Lawrence Konner, Screenwriter (*Jewel Of The Nile, Star Trek VI*)

My first answer is: of course you have talent! Students sitting in Beginning Screenwriting have lots of stories to tell and the talent to tell them. They may not know yet what stories they will develop, but most students carry a lineage of tales stretching back for generations. And in the early weeks of class students also discover that the real question they want to ask is: how do they access their talent?

Welcome to Beginning Screenwriting, where the class is not only about learning to format a script correctly, or mastering three-act structure, but the essential goal is learning to access one's innate and unique talent.

In the ten years of teaching screenwriting and more than thirty in exploring my creative path, I've found that the three key skills needed for tapping into one's talent exist right along with our imagination: a heart, brain and courage. That's right, click your heels together and begin chanting, *there is no place like home*, because all the skills and talent reside inside of us, waiting to be put into service.

I tell students, “you gotta have heart” to be a screenwriter, because it requires opening our hearts wide enough for our characters. The heart skill demands that we love our characters' good and bad sides, their light and dark ways. It asks us to feel compassion for our characters' poor choices and risky behavior. Which is not to say we have to condone a character's deceit, or murderous ways, but, as the creator, the heart skill asks if we're willing to walk in our characters' shoes and feel their fear, or disquiet, or joy. We have to have the heart to do the heavy lifting and feel the contradictory impulses pulling each character.

And it's not only a matter of understanding a character's outward personality, but we need the heart to explore the conflicting emotional life behind a character's mask: the private side he or she may reveal to just a few people, if at all. Moreover, we have to engage in the deeper character work too. The work of mining a character's unconscious desires and dreams, which most characters are clueless about, but we have to know their dreams to do our job.

I write every day, regardless of whether I want to or not. It's not even an issue. I just write four pages a day. And I am a firm believer that bad ideas lead to good ones.

- Wesley Strick, Screenwriter, (*Cape Fear, Wolf, True Believers, Arachnophobia*)

The brain skill involves discipline. Like an athlete who trains daily, a writer writes daily. And a good part of writing involves rewriting, because most of us have no idea what our first draft is really about. Our stories are far more complicated and nuanced and even crazier than the first draft reveals. It's only by re-reading, and reconsidering and revising the story that we begin to discover the unique connections our conscious and unconscious selves want to say. It allows for the unexpected to emerge, and the subtext to burble up.

Discipline also includes knowing when to turn the Critic inside us off when we're writing and when to turn the Creator off when we're revising. It's about disciplining the dual nature of writing: holding the act of creating sacrosanct and free from criticism, and then holding the act of editing and critiquing with respect. It's in this duality of writing freely and then revising that the bad ideas typically lead to uncomfortable ideas, and then we've hit the mother lode of raw insight. Ironically, it's through discipline that we find out who we are and what we want to say.

Find that material that speaks to you and has a certain truth. Forget about whether it's commercial. "Dracula" took me 15 years. "Hook" took me 10 years.

- Jim Hart, Screenwriter (*Hook, Dracula*)

Great courage, the last skill, involves great risk-taking, and great risk-taking involves belief in one's story. The tricky part is finding the story that resonates deeply. This is why half the students in Beginning Screenwriting ditch their stories mid-semester. They come to learn that if they're really going to hang with characters for a long time, then the characters better be worthwhile to hang with. Moreover, the story has to mean something, or contain an important theme or message that engages the student's passion, because screenwriting is like a love affair, requiring time, attention and devotion. It's one of the early battles beginning writers engage in: do they risk their time to write a screenplay? Do they have the courage to create?

Great courage is also needed to write a risky story. A story that is perhaps laden with emotional grief or stress for the writer, or contains transgressive or forbidden content, or tells the truth about torture or oppression.

And sometimes just the act of sitting down to write demands great courage, because a beginning writer may feel completely alone and unsupported in taking this risk. After all, it's extremely risky baring one's story to strangers, much less to one self. Blandishments like, "you suck at writing," or "the story stinks," or "why aren't you doing something useful," are the typical kinds

of abuse beginning writers heap on themselves. Fortunately, these voices fade away. Or at least change to: "you have to write today, or you're worthless."

But the greatest risk in screenwriting, is letting go of our great big fat ego. There's a sign I have in my classroom: *Kindly check your ego at the door*. Screenwriting is a collaborative endeavor, involving other very creative folks. The screenwriter brings the heart, brain and courage to the story, but the other departments impart their skills as well. And the sooner beginning writers are able to collaborate with others, the sooner a beginning writer becomes a talented pro.

"Screenplays are not works of art. They are invitations to others to collaborate on a work of art."

- Paul Schrader, Screenwriter & Director (*Taxi Driver, American Gigolo, The Last Temptation of Christ*)

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