

Zen And The Heart Of Writing

"Life is what happens while you're making other plans"-John Lennon

Everything you can think of will and in an odd way SHOULD get in the way of your writing. In other words, if you are doing the work...REALLY doing the work, you are constantly digging into the least comfortable corners of your psyche, constantly struggling to understand yourself, your culture, your world. Constantly engaging with questions of the origins of violence, sexuality, love, hate, war, need, hope, and hopelessness. In other words, you are going deeper and deeper into the one human being you will ever have any hope of comprehending...yourself.

There is a thought exercise that goes something like this: take a beaker and fill it with rocks. Is it full? Yes? No? Take pebbles and pour them into the beaker so that they fill the gaps between the larger stones. NOW is it full? Yes? No? Take sand and pour it in so that it fills the gap between the pebbles. NOW is it full? Yes? No? Finally, take water and pour it in so that it fills the gap between the grains of sand. NOW is it full? You get the picture.

This exercise has been used as an illustration in physics classes, and in time-management courses (do the big things first!), but here, I want to apply it to something else. As I've said repeatedly, I'm in the run-up to finally finishing the most punishing project of my life, the novel Great Sky Woman. The copyedited manuscript came back to me for a final two-week read over...you guessed it...during Christmas vacation. In fact, it was delivered to me in Atlanta, where I traveled with my family so that my wife could experience the birth of her niece. Along the way our jet-lagged two year old woke us up at ungodly hours. We never quite knew where we were going to sleep (just logistical stuff-no one's fault.) Rooms were too cold, or too noisy. Vehicles that were supposed to be available became unavailable. Nerves were on edge. Maps were inaccurate, leading to long, stressful drives. Cassette players didn't work, making drives even worse. By the time we got home we were flu-ish, and I was running out of time to work on my book (and I hadn't been able to do much in Atlanta, because my research material was all at home in L.A.!) The baby, now adjusted for East Coast time, was waking up too early AGAIN, as he adjusts for West Coast time. Stress, stress, stress...

And yet...you know something? This is life. A beautiful child was born. Tananarive got to spend precious time with her sister at a critical moment. My son got to play with his cousin Jaxon, a wonderful little boy. We got to have Christmas with her family.

These things are far more important than a book. Any book. They are the essence of life itself. But the temptation is to think that they are "distractions" from the work. No. they are what life is about. What any book, any story worth a damn is about. Life. Our hopes and dreams, and how reality interacts with them.

How to do it? How to navigate these perilous channels? Lifewriting suggests that the answer is in us, and in the way we address our challenges daily. The creative flow, the magical moments when we are swallowed whole by the work we love, is still there, waiting for us to slow down, center, and find it...ESPECIALLY when we are stressed out. Slow the #@\$\$ down, people. Listen to your heartbeat. The rocks, the pebbles, the sand are the emotional reactions we have to the "distractions." The water, which can ALWAYS fit between these "problems," is the emotional juice of our lives, our ability to improvise, to reinterpret, to create in the midst of chaos. This is your challenge. How will you Flow through the madness?

In everything we write, aren't we constantly addressing the question of how a character will respond to unexpected pressures? How in the world can we learn this without developing such skills ourselves? The "water" is the zen immersion in the moment. It is our genius, our capacity for full engagement. The voices in our heads are the rocks, the pebbles, the sand.

Be clear that you are the water. Regardless of the challenges or barriers, you must be committed to returning to the ocean of your soul, your creativity. Writing, as life itself, must be a constant search for what is real, and beautiful, and absolute, even in the storm of life itself.

When all is said and done, that is all that really matters, isn't it?

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About the Author

NY Times bestselling author Steven Barnes has published three million words of fiction. He has lectured on creativity from UCLA to the Smithsonian Institute. Learn more about his unique whole-mind writing system at: www.lifewrite.com