
Verbal Equinox

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Studies on how the right and left sides of the brain function have shown that ...people think in images not words.. (Barbara Ganim)

Most writers I talk to are just as frustrated as they are pleased when the magical flow of metaphors and slippery concepts begin to crystalize onto a page. The ghost of the abstract has become concrete, but like trying to remember a dream, the process creeps back into the fog as we attempt to study it and we seem to be left in a mysterious "aahhh-."

We are pleased with our product, but frustrated by the realization that we have no idea how or why this level of writing came to be.

Often, in trying to describe the process, we use these words: "It just came to me." We feel powerless, and yet, we sign our names at the bottom and we imagine our reader's thoughts about us. "Wow, how do they do it? I wish I could write like that any time! wanted to." We let them think it about us, and we wish it were true.

But that's not the only reason we sign our names. We also sign our names because we know that our lack of understanding the process doesn't mean we had nothing to do with the outcome. We own our better writing in the same way we own our subconscious—we are not sure whether we are creating it or it is creating us.

When I say, "better writing," I am referring to that writing which is both concrete and abstract. Much like looking at a good piece of art, it is concrete in that it is recognizable and understandable. It is abstract in that it is symbolic and mysterious. The things an artist paints are themselves concrete, but the way they are painted to be somehow more or less than they really are is abstract.

The same holds true for writing. When Frank Decaria says, "Night is a creature squatting on its haunches in the crawl space under a house," he has made night abstract. This combination of concrete and abstract is what art and writing

are all about. But how is it accomplished? Is it just luck?

Joseph Campbell, professor of philosophy at the University of Glasgow, once said: "The exact formulation of

a problem takes one a long way on the road to its solution" (386).

So today, I will first define the problem in more detail and then introduce nine tools to enhance abstract thinking. The problem, to be exact, is this: good things come out of our subconscious mind and show up in our writing. We don't know how to make this happen on command because we don't know how to get our conscious mind into our

Tool #1: How to dismiss a dissembler. **Value Odd Thoughts.** Simply be on the lookout for disconnected, fragmented, scatterbrain thinking, and go with it rather than screen it out. Realize that our subconscious mind often is not rational, but with a little more patience, a little more play, we can cause our right brain and our left brain to meet in the middle and weld us up a pretty hot metaphor. Above all else remember this: whatever you do to abstract, let it be you. Let that healthy self esteem crush those insidious dissemblers. "Let those weird thoughts that you're saving for an insane asylum come out and play for awhile; you may be surprised at the wisdom caught within their currents" (schizophrenic interview).

subconscious mind. When we become conscious of our subconscious, it is no longer subconscious but conscious.

One may argue that the problem may be solved by simply waking from a dream (subconscious) and then recording what you can remember of the dream (conscious) onto paper. But this is really no answer at all because it brings up an even bigger problem. How do I dream about what I want to write about, and would I be able to remember enough of it to benefit my writing if I could dream on command?

Further defined, the dilemma is that we are trying to bridge left (concrete) and right (abstract) brain thinking, and we have been taught in this society that only left brain thinking is acceptable. A stern finger points at abstract thinking and tries to make it concrete. This intimidator shows up in the off-hand comments we were raised with, comments like: "What exactly do you mean?" "Stay on task!" "Explain yourself." Or even just "Why?"

These comments have their place in the functional world in which we live; however, they also tend to become a curb for the mind. They foreclose any mental drifting that could occur with the threat of, "You damn well better be able to

Poetry, Essay, and Short Story

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explain what you're doing over there in the weeds!" This is not always possible for a child (or a natural abstract thinker) to do. So rather than look like an inarticulate idiot every time we have disconnected thoughts, we curb our thoughts and we institutionalize the weed thinkers.

We are too much concerned with making sense; we are too much concerned with even flow; we are too much concerned with a finished product; we are too much concerned with mental institutions.

All of these concerns can really be funneled into one fear, a fear of becoming lost in the weeds without a North Star, and this fear has one thing in common with all other phobias --it is not rational. It is not rational to think that if you cannot explain every thought, feeling, or idea you have, you're going to become autistic.

For example, most people talk about romantic love as being the ultimate experience in life. However, when asked to explain it, they almost always include in their explanation this phrase, "words cannot express." Do we throw them into mental institutions? No! We look at the object of their new-found affection and we see a pudgy teenager with pimples. Do we accuse them of hallucinating? No! So why don't we accept other inexplicable thoughts and feelings within ourselves as being wonderful thoughts too?

The actual reality of this world is that the larger part of it is unexplained. One of the most fascinating aspects of the subconscious mind is that it has the ability to reason on its own. Scary. It is creating and pushing out ideas constantly but, as logical, rational, white-knuckled adults, we have learned to dismiss anything we cannot explain to local authorities.

Now that we, as writers, have agreed to let drifters drift, how do we join them? How do we get over the curb without bending the wheels of our bikes? It is simpler than you may expect. We stop dismissing our fragmented ideas. Realize that dismissers are like insidious little minus signs. They subtract from the whole person those interesting parts that give us definition-leaving nothing memorable.

When a drifter jumps the curb and heads for the weeds, we need to understand that he/she is only feeling without explaining. He/She is only thinking without censoring and, if you want to know the truth, this is what the psychologist means by "risking." This is what the poet calls a window to the soul, the capacity for and willingness to be intimate. It is a bubble that surfaces from the core, leaving a pink moist tunnel to intimacy-Don't cork it with a question.

*In the brush doing what it's doing,
it will stumble on what one couldn't do by oneself.
-Robert Motherwell*

Poetry: (65 Entries) Judged by Margaret Rostkowski, teacher of English and author of After the Dancing Days.

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| 1st: | Mariane Balay, "Tenses" |
| 2nd: | Mike Vier, "The Lip of Lonliness" |
| 3rd: | Mariane Balay, "Birthday Poem" |
| 1stHM: | Megan Hansen, "In That Moment" |
| 2ndHM: | Mariane Balay, "Painting" |
| 3rdHM: | Susannah Rojo, "If I Had A Dog I'd Kick It" |

Essay: (15 Entries) Judged by Bob Sawatzki, editor of *rough draft*.

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| 1st: | Xaidie Newey, "The Box" |
| 2nd: | Nancy Smith, "Rise, Take Up Thy Bed, and Walk" |
| 3rd: | RoLayne Staffanson, "The Haystack" |

Short Story: (9 Entries) Judged by Sherry Lewis, author of No Place for Secrets and community education teacher.

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| 1st: | Marie C. Alvarez, "Never Too Old" |
| 2nd: | Adam Cheney, "Fish Tank" |
| 3rd: | Adam Cheney, "ball, basket" |

Tool #2: Say It Plainly

Tool #2 came to me by way of Sundry Watanabe. Sundry is a talented poet who seems to be able to abstract naturally. She simply writes the poem in plain English, not necessarily in an artful way, and without symbolism. Just get the message, or feeling, that you wish to explore onto paper in a clear plain sentence. Now you can abstract. (Watanabe) Now there is a base to push off of. Now you can bend this thought or melt that one and see how far you can distort it without losing the message. Usually, rather than lose the message, the message is artfully strengthened.

Tool #3: Write About the Essence of the Concrete Object Rather than the Object Directly

Tool #3 came from a man named Siah Arrnajani. He said this: "Conceptually I like people, but I like to be away from them" (Arrnajani speech). He likes the concept of people or the essence of people, but to be with the actual person is not his preference. I found this to be very interesting and occasionally true myself. I also found a tool for abstraction in his comment. Think about what you like or dislike in an object, and rather than writing about the object or person, write about how they make you feel. Tool #3 is sequential with tool #2 because first you would have to identify the object or concept in its natural state.

Tool #4: Create Your Own Mistake By Combining the Unlikely

Tool #4 may surprise you, but it shouldn't because we do it all the time without trying. Create your own mistake. That's it. Create your own mistake. One may argue that it is not a mistake if you're doing it on purpose, but humor me by going along with the terminology for now. One way to do this is the same way Reeses Peanut-butter Cups were created. Simply try putting two unlikely objects together-like chocolate and peanut butter. Or experiment with an object and a concept. There are countless combinations.

Tool #5: Distort Your Senses

Tool #5 deals with the five senses. These senses have much to do with the way we experience and perceive life. So if you want an abstracted or distorted way of experiencing life, why not start by distorting one or several of your five senses. Look at your house through several layers of cellophane. Listen to your spouse's favorite monologue with your ears submerged in water. Walk around the block on stilts. Drink a glass of milk with a chunk of tuna wedged in one nostril. Run through a sanctuary. Make love on the roof (better use an anchor). Now you're ready to write descriptively in an abstract way.

Tool #6: Consider How You Would Feel About An Issue If You Had A Different Belief System, or No Believe System At All

Tool #6 has to do with an understanding of the way we think. According to Barbar Ganim, art therapist and cofounder of The Center For Holistic Development In Kingstown R.I., "... studies on how the right and left sides of the brain function have shown conclusively that, contrary to popular belief, people think in images, not words. (37) She goes on further to say that this imagitic perception begins in the subconscious mind, in the right hemisphere of the brain. These images are then transferred to the left hemisphere where they are analyzed, categorized, judged, and altered to conform to ones belief system, and emotional state at the time. In this way, our beliefs shape the way we think. However, our beliefs are not always a true reflection of the way we feel because they alter our feelings by judging them. Tool #4 will facilitate combining unlikely objects because it is usually our belief system that won't allow us to do so. This is the reason that, up until now, you have never heard of a "drywallogist." We believe that the "gist" endings should be reserved for professions that require a formal education.

Tool #7: Begin Writing The Sentence Before It Is Finished In Your Head

Do what we tell our kids not to do-speak without thinking, another way to by-pass the judgement center, or the left hemisphere of the brain. The biggest foreclosure to the abstraction process is that we refuse to write our sentences on paper until they are finished in our heads. Go ahead, say something that you will regret later because, in this case, we are not really saying it; we're writing it, and we can retrieve it before any damage is done. This is called speed writing, or trying to write faster than you can analyze, categorize, sterilize, and hypnotize yourself into believing that you're a fit product for society.

Tool #8: Write The Impossible

Fortunately, this is not as hard as it sounds. When I write about what is not possible, I am using the right side of my brain because what is not possible is also not logical, not rational, and not left hemisphere. Therefore, it is abstract. For example, it is not possible to obtain funding for the development of genetically designed deer antlers that grow in the shape of kitchen utensils (like rolling pins and potato mashers) causing women to hassle men less about going deer hunting and thereby saving marriages all across the nation and reducing the money spent on welfare; it is not possible to obtain funding for this.

Tool #9: Write The Possible

(Why be consistent?) When we write the possible, we are also facilitating right brain thinking because we are writing what could possibly be, and that is fiction. As before, start with the lead-in of "It is possible." For example, I have a coarse wooden guitar. It is possible that this guitar was made by a bored gypsy male as an escape from the ever-dethroning looks that his disappointed wife cast at him from her side of the wagon. It is possible that I picked it up while learning to chop wood, and that all those frayed fibers could amount to something someday. It is also possible that we all play coarse wooden instruments and wear the slivers like jewelry.