

Title:

Forget About "Talent"!

Word Count:

1056

Summary:

How is a writer to access her deepest and most powerful wells of creativity? How do we tap into our talent, our genius, our greatest potential for success? Writing classes often tell us how to plot, or structure, or build characters, or create poetic images, but the question of accessing our excellence is a slippery and elusive one. It is possible we'll need to go outside our usual sources to find an answer.

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Keywords:

writing, novel, advice, creativity

Article Body:

How is a writer to access her deepest and most powerful wells of creativity? How do we tap into our talent, our genius, our greatest potential for success? Writing classes often tell us how to plot, or structure, or build characters, or create poetic images, but the question of accessing our excellence is a slippery and elusive one. It is possible we'll need to go outside our usual sources to find an answer.

Many will merely say "be born with talent," coldly suggesting that writers are "born" with a particular amount of potential, and that one either has this or not. And you know? There is a certain amount of truth to this. It is hard to argue with the idea that geniuses like Mozart or Shakespeare were gifted. But the nature versus nurture argument is both fascinating and, for the average person, irrelevant. After all, since we can't go back and choose our grandparents, what are we to do? Just abandon our dreams of excellence if we don't happen to be one of the gifted few?

I often say something to students that is both deadly serious and a slight (and deliberate) exaggeration. It is this "I don't believe in talent. Every time I've ever gotten close to an excellent performer in any discipline, all I've seen is a lifetime of hard, honest work."

Why would I say something like this? Because it is the way I truly feel. The

fact is that I've seen endless people fail due to lack of honest work. And given those years or decades of work, I've seen few fail for lack of talent.

The truth is that if "talent" exists, it seems to be the capacity for long, concentrated periods of tunnel-vision focus, combined with a unique capacity for digging into themselves to find truths most of us are reluctant to reveal. These phenomenal men and women sacrifice outside interests, relationships, and sometimes their health and sanity to focus on their divine obsession. And yes, if you find a group of these people, some will rise higher than others. But the primary gift of art is to be able to spend your life in the act of creation. And to do that, you don't need to be "the best" (whatever THAT means). All you need to do is to get into the top twenty percent in your field, and you'll do just fine.

And that is achievable with focus and honesty. But what exactly do I mean by that?

#### FOCUS

- 1) Can you write 500 words a day for twenty years?
- 2) Can you concentrate for an hour at a time without stopping for coffee, phone calls, or bathroom breaks?
- 3) Can you shut out the voices of doubt and failure? Then you have a chance. In my own life, writing was simply my only career goal. I would rather have failed as a writer than succeeded at anything else. I was willing to do ANYTHING ethical and healthy to reach that goal, and every single day I asked myself new questions about how I could do it, who I could ask, what I could read, what classes I might attend. Willingness to postpone gratification is essential, because your efforts simply won't pay off rapidly unless you are in that incredibly lucky fraction of a percent. And there is good news: even if you believe in "talent," in the real world, an absolutely driven "B" or "C" student will outperform a lazy "A" student almost every time.

HONESTY. This is where the rubber meets the road, the diamond path to excellence.

- 1) What is your actual current skill level? What is the skill level necessary to make it in your chosen field? Make no mistake: writing is one of the most competitive fields in the world. EVERYONE thinks they can write, and to a degree, they are correct. If you're going to make your mark, you will have to bring everything you've got.

2) Who has the resources you need to bridge the gap between your current and desired skill levels? Remember that they have probably spent a lifetime gathering their knowledge. What can you offer them (that is ethical and healthy for you) to gain their help and support?

3) What do you fear most? Love most? What angers you most? Makes you laugh? Your ability to create memorable characters will be based on the depths of your self-understanding, and capacity to accurately observe the human condition. If you can dig deeply enough, you'll find an incredible wealth of subject matter, more than enough to last a lifetime. But you must be honest. When writing to stimulate an emotion in your audience, first write to trigger that feeling in yourself. Write for yourself, or for an audience you respect.

4) What is your best effort? There is a great scene in "Walk The Line" where a music producer tells Johnny Cash to imagine he is dying in the street. He has one last song to sing to sum up the totality of his existence. What would that song be? Questions like this cut through the b.s. Don't try to be clever. Just tell the truth.

5) What do you actually believe human beings are? At the core of us, under all of the ugly and pretty. What are we? How do you explain the differences and conflicts between human beings: black and white, gay and straight, male and female. What do you think love is? What causes war? Why do we dream? Your own unique answers to these questions will point you toward your personal "voice."

6) What is the nature of the universe? Of God? Is there anything out there? Are we alone? While it is possible to write stories and screenplays from a variety of philosophical positions, the writer who knows herself and has a position on the nature of life will outperform a "brilliant" writer who has nothing to say. Dig deep.

These two aspects, (1) hard work, and (2) honesty, will keep you busy for a lifetime, and take you to the very edge of your potential as a writer. And after all, if you haven't used up all the potential you were given at birth, it hardly makes sense to complain that you didn't get more!