

# THE CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR BEAST

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My talk today is about the process of writing, and a model I've developed the deep cognitive process of writing. I've found it a useful model. It may help you in developing your craft. But writing is a highly subjective art, and there are as many ways to approach it as there are writers. So take what I'm about to say for whatever it's worth.

Now, I'm a chemical engineer by training. When I was a kid, what I REALLY wanted to be was an astronaut, but back then they didn't let girls into the space program. I ended up in the ChemE program at my university, out of a love of math and science and a fascination with technology—though frankly, I didn't have a clue what it is ChemEs actually do.

Once I got out of school I found out, and quickly got out of THAT business. But before I did, I discovered what ChemE's do. They're the Scotties of modern industry. (Scotty, as in, “But Captain, the engines kinnae take it anymaer!”) ChemEs build, maintain, and improve all our chemically-based industrial processes. They are our modern alchemists. They can't turn lead into gold (though their cousins, the nuclear engineers, can), but composition and reaction and transformation—changing substances from one thing to another is the name of the game for chemical engineers.

I would be willing to hazard a bet that just about everything we use in our daily lives has had a close encounter with a ChemE somewhere along the way. The

plastics in our shoes—the metals and etched silicon chips in our computers and phones—the construction and textile materials in our lightbulbs and chairs, and in the building we sit in now—the fuel in our cars and planes—everything is made up of organic compounds and inorganic minerals that at one time were natural substances that were extracted from their resting place somewhere on the surface of this world, shipped somewhere else, piped into a reactor or dumped into hoppers, munged up, mixed with other stuff, heated, separated, liquified, and physically or chemically altered. We live amid transformed matter. All this that surrounds us has been removed from its various starting points, and fed into a long chain of assorted machinations and manipulations to be transformed into something that is useful to us, humans.

That's something we excel humans at, putting things to good use. According to one statistic I read recently, about 30% of the Earth's biomass is now in harness for human use. Think about that for a minute. We are one species among millions on this planet, and have managed to coopt nearly a third of this planet's resources. You can now see human-made features from low Earth orbit. ISS crew have seen major cities, dams, and the Egyptian pyramids, just to name a couple of objects. (The Great Wall of China is not readily visible, though, under most circumstances.) What clever monkeys we have turned out to be!

Of course, many of the features you can see from out in space are signs of depletion and erosion, and other warning signs that we are approaching the limits of our Earth's capacity to sustain our consumption. I personally am gravely concerned about whether we will survive our own alchemical excesses. What idiotic monkeys! But that's not the point of this talk, so I'll resist that digression.

So back to ChemE. In a nutshell, what my teachers trained me to do was to model chemical and thermodynamic processes, and use those models to more deeply understand the behavior of systems. As a consequence, I often find myself interested in the *process* of writing—not just the rules we follow to create a work, nor its ultimate results—though these rules and outcomes are also fascinating and important.

But it's the nature of transformations that interests me. Transmutation. Change. What causes them? How do we harness the powerful natural forces that fill the world? What happens—for good or ill—when we do? And since literature is about characters undergoing change—and science fiction in particular depicts not just change, but change on a very large scale—a societal, species-wide, even planetary scale. Science fiction is the literature I love best. Give me a good SF story, where people, machines, and monsters clash, and I gotta tell ya, I'm happy as a pig in shit.

So to kick off this study of storytelling as a process, I'd like to take a poll of the class.

What is a story?

**A character in a setting with a problem.**

The protagonist wrestles with a series of escalating challenges, until the problem is resolved, and we learn what the story is about (theme).

“The Eensy Weensy Spider”

Sheherezade and the 1001 Nights.

Recent cognitive research on storytelling tells us what writers have always known: we humans are storytelling creatures. Humans think in narrative. Storytelling serves as a means for people to gain understanding of others. It

facilitates empathy and social intelligence. That light trance state others have referred to is something scientists call “narrative transport.” A state of reverie. We are transported to a different mode of awareness.

To understand why this is from a neurological standpoint, we have to understand how the human brain has evolved.

-History of thinking – linear/verbal thinking versus pattern recognition

Earliest form of thought was simple stimulus response. Amoebae. Then reptilian. Mammalian. Emotions important in allowing quick response to inputs.

Pattern recognition grew into elaborate social reasoning tied to our emotional response systems.

As the benefits of living in a social society grew, improved social reasoning led to language. And what is a fundamental characteristic of language? It is sequential. What else is sequential? Logic and causality.

These two systems are differentiated. They are processed in different ways in different parts of our brains, and are not particularly well integrated.

So what is storytelling then? It is a hack that connects these two very disparate parts of our brains. It bridges the gap between the newer parts of our brains, which are linear, verbal, and logical, and the older parts of our brain, which govern intuition, pattern recognition, creativity, and emotion.

I divide the skills that go into writing into four categories. To write well, you need to be able to do all four of these things at least reasonably well, and you must excel at at least one of them. The four skills are:

- The ability to grok story structure on a large scale (plotting; logic; theme; character arc; strategic thinking).

- Craftsmanship at the word and paragraph level (wordsmithy; scene-setting; tactical thinking).
- A storyteller's instinct ("street entertainer" smarts;chutzpah; exhibitionist tendencies; a knack for pacing).
- Creative inspiration.

The first two are more learned skills—though having innate talent always helps—and are the province of your logical, verbal brain, which I am going to call your Editor. The latter two are more ingrained—though there are always things you can do to hone your abilities—and are the province of a part of your mind that is experiential, ruled by emotion, and really under your control. I call it your Beast.

Many writers who've been writing for a while report this experience of having two selves involved in the writing process. Kate Wilhelm calls this part of herself her Silent Partner. Damon Knight called his Fred. Ursula LeGuin calls hers her story place. For David Marusek, he steps into the dark wood and confronts the bear that lives in there. He doesn't always know if he'll emerge again afterward.

You may have a different name for that part of yourself, a different experience of it, if you have sensed that silent watching part of yourself that drives your desire to tell stories.

However you experience it, the Beast within you is the source of your creative drive. Your inspiration. Your muse. It's critically important to understand how to collaborate with it. You can't tell good stories unless you have a healthy relationship with your Beast.

Every writer has nightmares about running dry—going years without being able to wring a single ounce of creative passion out of their unconscious; or of their

vision drying up in mid-project and leaving them with a mess of lifeless garbage. These horrors can happen to anyone, no matter how skilled or advanced in their craft. Not always, but typically, these are symptoms that a rift has developed between you and your Beast.

Nothing you can do will guarantee that your Beast will always be present for you and accommodate your needs. But you can create an environment conducive to its presence. You can learn tricks to help coax it out of the woods and, if not eating out of your hand, at least nibbling the shrubbery (or small prey) nearby. You can learn how to gain maximum benefit from its presence. That's what this talk is about: the care and feeding of your Beast.

### **LESSON 1:**

**Analytical and sequential thinking are the province of  
your Editor, and creative passion and desire to  
entertain are the province of your Beast.**

The most important thing is to realize you have this Beast inside you. The ancient Greeks referred to them as muses—goddesses of the creative arts. It's that niggling feeling of dissatisfaction with how things are—anger at an injustice—a vision of how things could be—a startling realization that seems to come out of nowhere—those bizarre, cool or creepy images that fill your mind at times—or experiences that linger in your thoughts, cluing you in that something important is buried underneath.

It's that gut sense that this thing is important—more important than it appears. It's a need to say something you don't have the words for. That's your

Beast, looking out at the world through your eyes.

Your Beast is that part of you that's filled with passion and insight. It sees vast marvels and perceives great mysteries. But it has no words, no body, no voice of its own. It depends on you to lend it your mouth and hands and eyes. You must hone your craft and bring your skills to bear to help the Beast realize its vision.

**LESSON 2: You have the voice; your Beast has the stories. And you need it as much as it needs you.**

The next most important thing you must know is that your beast is unbidable. It is intrinsically and irrevocably wild. You can't control it or dictate to it. It can't be tamed.

You have a deadline next week? Too bad. To make the crucial battle happen in chapter seventeen means that Princess Lona must fall in love with Duke Charles, and not Morgan, the shiftless yet charming balladier? If your Beast drags you in a different direction, you would do well to attend.

This does not mean that as a professional writer you can afford to just blow off your deadlines. Part of being a professional is writing whether it comes easily or not. Finding ways to produce good work under pressure is a key to success as a writer.

It does mean, though, that you need to recognize that that part of you operates on a different timescale, and a different set of priorities. If you try too hard to muzzle or harness your Beast, you will pay a serious price. It's best to seek ways to give the Beast room to strive—to roam—to feed.

**LESSON 3: Trust your Beast. It knows what it's doing.**

To detect the presence of your Beast, you must listen. Not on the outside, but on the inside. The Beast speaks not in words, but in emphasis. It invests important ideas and observations with a kind of excitement or glow. If something draws your attention or just feels right, your Beast is talking to you.

The third lesson in the care and feeding of your Beast, then, is listen. As you observe the world around you, attend that still small voice inside. It has something important to tell you.

#### **LESSON 4: Listen.**

OK, so you're attuned to your Beast's presence, you've managed to quieten your Editor; you've achieved inner harmony, and the ideas start flowing in. What next?

The fact is, it's extremely rare that ideas will spring into your mind fully formed. You need to grow them. And you do this in a sort of internal tango: a partnership of your Editor and your Beast.

There are two "boundary" modes you can get into here: first, when the Beast blasts you with ideas through a fire hose—way too fast to process; and second, when it dribbles them to you maddeningly slowly—or gets started but then cuts you off halfway through.

#### The Fire Hose

First let's talk about the fire hose effect.

It's a real rush when the Beast is feeding you all these great ideas, but there's another important thing you must know about the Beast. It doesn't do structure.

It's not logical. That's your Internal Editor's job. (and when I refer to your Editor, I'm not talking about Patrick or Teresa; I'm talking about the critical/analytical part of your consciousness, which handles structure, wordsmithing, and plot logic).

Sometimes the Beast will get frisky. It'll feed you a thicket of wildly original, unstructured and exciting stuff, and your job will be to prune it into something usable. If too much is coming in at once, collect them—write them down—but when don't be shy about pruning out things that, no matter how good they are, just don't fit. That's where the expression “kill your darlings” comes from. You mustn't shrink from cutting, if the concept, phrase, or character just doesn't fit.

Remember, though, you'll need the help of your Beast to guide you. Here's where a little humility helps. Your Editor is used to being in charge, and it can be hard to turn the reins over. But you can't manhandle the Beast—remember, your Editor is in charge of analyzing and organizing information—not generating the ideas. You have to turn that process over to the Beast.

### The Dry Well

So what about the reverse situation, when the well runs dry? That's much worse! At least when things are flying at you, you've got material to work with. What do you do if you're getting only a few limp and fragile notions that don't seem to add up to much? Or if you get off to a promising start with an idea, only run into a dead end?

Like a farmer planting his crop, you can't force your ideas to grow; you can only encourage them. When you feel those early, tentative nubs of ideas forming, treat them like the seedlings they are. Nourish them with plenty of information.

Explore them, but gently. Write down notes, read related material.

If you're not getting anywhere, set the idea aside for a day or two. Chat with other writers, do brainstorming sessions. One writer I know works on two separate projects. When she reaches a lull on one, she switches to the other. It's been highly effective for her.

Or you can read about the craft. Or read poetry. Visit museums, go for long walks. Do other creative activities—nonverbal ones, in particular: play a musical instrument, garden, draw, do carpentry, Tai Chi, take dance lessons. Then pick your ideas up again. Above all, pace yourself. Avoid negative self talk.

When the well runs dry, do energizing, pleasing, and creative activities. Keep checking in and trying different activities, but don't try to force your concepts to fruition too soon.

So exactly how do you communicate with your Beast? You can't just sit around waiting for lightning to strike. When you have a flood of ideas, how can you tell which are the ones you should follow, and when the Beast is silent, how can you coax ideas out of it?

Because your Beast is nonverbal, you basically have to play Twenty Questions. Either ask yes or no questions or make a positive statement, and then listen with your internal ear. If you're on the right track, it'll feel right. If you're headed for a dead end, you'll get a no feeling back, or you'll get silence.

The reason for this actually has to do with the way the human brain has evolved. Scientists have found that, rather than being a monolithic unit, our brains comprise numerous centers with different functions that have developed in response to various environmental pressures. These different mental centers don't

necessarily understand each others' functions, nor do they communicate well with each other.

This stems from neurophysiological research begun in the seventies. Certain drug-resistant epileptics have their corpus callosum severed to prevent seizures. (The corpus callosum is the thick band of connective tissue between the right and left hemispheres of our brains.) After surgery, the two halves of these people's brains are not able to communicate directly with each other. What brain researchers found was that many patients developed the habit of speaking aloud to enable their hemispheres to share information. Sure enough, their brains registered activity when they spoke aloud in areas that did not respond when they simply thought the same thought.

Even more strangely, followup research found that it wasn't only epileptics who benefited from speaking aloud to themselves. Even people without a severed corpus callosum show greater brain activity in numerous centers when they speak aloud to themselves.

Like touch, smell, taste, and motion, our auditory processes go deep into our brains. The visual centers don't penetrate as deeply, so they're not as useful for communicating with your Beast.

**LESSON 5: To communicate with your Beast, use positive statements. Articulate your ideas out loud.**

Now that I've given you all these tips on coddling your Beast, I'm going to contradict myself. I know I said that you can't force the ideas before they're ready,

and that's true. But it's also true that if you want to produce fiction on a regular basis, you can't let your Beast dictate your schedule. You need to establish good writing habits—in other words, you need structure. Discipline. For this you need the help of your Editor. Turn this aspect of your writing over to your Beast, and you create a recipe for disaster.

This is because writing is an unstructured activity by its nature. Few of us have people clamoring at us to write all the time—in fact, most of us have the opposite problem; way too many distractions and demands on our time. I've found that for myself and for most writers I know, if we don't impose some structure on ourselves, it's easy to let time drift by. Before we know it, years have passed without our having written a word.

There are dozens of tricks you can use to keep the wheels greased and turning. Some writers I know use daily or weekly page counts. Some set a period of time each day that they must sit at the computer, not getting on the web, just staring at that blank page until they get bored enough to put something down. You can do what I call the blah-blah trick—set a timer for ten minutes, open up an empty document, and start writing whatever comes into your head. “Blah blah blah, this is crap, why am I wasting my time?” And so on. Your Beast will get quickly bored with the blah-blahs and start playing around. Before you know it, you'll be off and running. That's how Steve got himself going on his first book, *Jumper*.

If what's holding you back is a worry that you can't produce anything of substance, give yourself permission to write crap. I did this after over a week of paralysis at Clarion. I called it my constipation-breaker. One evening everyone pitched in for takeout Chinese food. The next day I wrote this silly story about

20,000 little white boxes dispensed around the planet by a technologically superior race of aliens with instructions not to open them, and an emotionally abused wife who finds one. To my utter shock, the teachers and my fellow students took it seriously, and even liked aspects of it. After a rewrite, it garnered me my first non-form rejection letter, from Stan Schmidt of Analog.

**Anecdote:** Study of college students in creative writing – graded for quality vs. graded by the inch.

The main thing is to write. Don't edit yourself before you get the words down. I know I said earlier that you should pace yourself and not rush the ideas if they're not ready, but if your problem is producing on an ongoing basis, it's more important that you get something down than for you to wait around for inspiration to strike. Your Editor doesn't have to take a two-month trip to Tahiti; there are a lot of different ways to get a Beast to come out and play.

**LESSON 6: Read, read, read; write, write, write.**

As many of you may already have discovered, pursuing a creative profession is no cakewalk. Each time you complete a work, you're putting everything out there for the world to see. Prior success is no guarantee of success the next time around, and when you fail, you do it in a very public fishbowl. When a work that you labored for years over is panned, lots and lots of people get to witness the evisceration. Rejection goes with the territory. The most successful among us have our works harshly criticized, even reviled.

So many aspects of a writer's success are beyond our control. Steve will talk more about that later. It can be painful when things don't go the way you'd hoped

and planned. You can strive for years without success to make your first sale; or you make your first few sales and think you've got it made—only to follow them with a string of form rejections. Your perfectly wonderful book can be orphaned; or a publication with your story in it can tank through no fault of your own. All these obstacles can leave you feeling bloodied and battered.

If you want to survive as a professional writer, it is critically important that you find a way to avoid succumbing to envy, jealousy, and despair. You will feel each of these, I can virtually guarantee it, in the course of your journey.

I know a talented writer whose career got off with a bang when her first SF novel won a major award in the field. This writer wrote over a hundred pages of a new novel and sent it to her publisher with great eagerness. But because it was fantasy and the writer's first novel was SF, the publisher didn't want to buy it. They probably feared they'd confuse the writer's audience.

She was crushed. When the talk turned to writing, all she could talk about was what terrible shape the field was in and how she didn't stand a chance of selling anything. It took nearly ten years for her to start writing again. I can't help but wonder what terrific works she could have written in the interim, if she'd only been able to overcome their fears of further disappointments.

And that's the trick: not to let negative feelings rule you. Remember, your Beast is your biggest ally, and it lives on the ragged edge. Just as it knows no limits to joy, it has no buffers against pain or anger. If you give into despair, you disable your Beast.

A useful technique to insulate yourself against the assorted slings and arrows that come your way is to join or form a group with writers you trust. The company

of fellow travelers does wonders for the morale.

There are other techniques you can use as well. Whenever I sense myself wandering into a low place, I turn my mental vision inward. I envision a protected garden, a hidden one, wild and overgrown, one with high stone walls, in which my Beast can thrive. I don't have to accept reality. I can make my own. I learned that as a child, and that lesson has served me well. In my own cloistered reality, I can nurture my Beast and give it room to roam. Later, when it's safe to emerge, the Beast comes out to romp on the wide open grasses, and I try again.

Remember, as long as you are alive, your voice matters, and your story matters.

**LESSON 7: Don't give into frustration or despair. Find ways to keep your spirits up. Avoid dwelling on past disappointments and don't compare your progress to that of others.**

It's not just people in the creative professions who have to be concerned with their Beasts. Everyone has a wordless part of themselves that paces restlessly in the borderlands of their consciousness. When you create a good story—while you're distracting your readers with clever plot tricks and fascinating characters—at a deeper level, you're coordinating the numinous vision of your Beast with the logical and detailed attention of your Editor to create a subcutaneous message, one that slips beneath your readers' radar and communicates directly with their own Beasts.

People mostly try to tune out the nasty, painful stuff in their lives, and avoid trouble. They have little conscious contact with their Beasts. But trouble comes, sooner or later, for everyone. We have little control over the bad things that happen.

All we have to assuage our pain is a knowledge that we're not alone—that others have gone through what we have, and understand us.

Storytellers are revered not only because we entertain people and distract them from their woes—though that alone is a worthy reason to write a story. We are the ones who extract all that raw material, joy and terror and predation and trauma, from their resting places somewhere deep in our psyches. We pipe it all up into our plots, munge it up and mix it with other stuff; we heat, separate, liquefy, and alter the stuff that we have lived, and create new experiences for our fellow humans to enjoy. Our stories give people companionship, and a sense that others out there know what they're going through. We give them characters to care about and problems that ultimately get solved. We give them heroes; we give them people who wrestle with the same moral dilemmas that they do. We help them live up to—or reclaim—their own ideals. Just as we have we have been given by other storytellers.

We entertain; we dispense hope; we look ahead to warn of dangers not yet encountered; we nourish humanity's spirit. Your Beast is the part of you that makes all that possible, so let's hear it for the Beast!

**Digression:**

- Unconscious incompetence
- Conscious incompetence
- Conscious competence
- Unconscious competence

**Exercises:**

Now we are going to do a couple of exercises that you can use to communicate

more effectively with your Beast.

1. Walkabout – three characters.
2. Twenty Questions – further exploration of the character(s).
3. Character in a setting with a problem.