

I CAN'T TEACH TALENT BECAUSE IT'S ALWAYS, ALREADY THERE

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Let me begin by reassuring you that yes, most scripts are awful. Anyone who has worked in this business knows that most scripts are dreadfully boring. This is why I stopped working as a script consultant. Reading people's work was so boring, I couldn't stand it. My husband would watch me grunt and squirm on the living room couch all day, dozing off, then forcing my eyes open to get through yet another page. Every word was pain. I had to quit. But the reason I was a good consultant, besides my knowledge of the nuts-and-bolts of screenwriting, is that no matter how God-awful a script was, I could always smell the talent hidden behind the drab.

Talent is the ability to be yourself on the page (or the stage, or the canvass, or at the piano...) The more yourself you are, the more fresh and alive your work becomes. Poor writing is fearful writing. That's all.

If you can find the courage to be yourself on the page, your writing will be pure genius. The rest of it can be learned: story structure, scene work, action, etc. Contrary to popular belief, even the writing of good dialogue can be learned. I've seen writers move from laborious, on-the-nose dialogue, to quick, trim, funny, subtext-filled dialogue. The craft can be learned.

What can't be learned is talent, but that's because it doesn't need to be. It's always there, to be unearthed and unleashed.

As a writing instructor, I have two primary functions. The first is to teach the technical craft. The second is to create the conditions that make it possible for writers to be themselves. If you make it safe enough for someone to take risks, if you hold out high expectations, if you quit criticizing and correcting a writer, if you don't mistake their fearful writing for what they're truly capable of, then you have begun to water those writing seeds and are likely to see some sprouts.

Luckily, you don't need my class to be yourself on the page. Moral support and company make a difference, but why wait for that. How do you become more yourself? You begin by doing the last thing you would ever do. Whatever that is.

In my early twenties after graduating from film school, I did what many film school graduates do. I quit. I didn't survive the amount of criticism, bashing, isolation and the let's-see-who's-a-real-artist-genius-and-who's-a-fake type of environment. I quit and went on to become a rabbi.

In my thirties, I dared to revisit my childhood aspirations to make art. Why I made this decision is a long story that you'll read about when I publish my memoir. Suffice to say for now, that the only way I could approach making art again is through a full-out rebellion of everything that I ever learned about art.

After ripping up a few magazines and making some interesting collages, I signed up for a painting class. I couldn't tackle writing yet; it was too scary. While painting at the Art Students' League, I scorned my father's preference for representational art and began splashing a brush around, using random strokes to make abstract compositions that would truly upset him.

I also used every color and color-combination that would make my mom squirm. I avoided the rich, deep blues and purples that she swoons over. Instead, I splashed on a bunch of bright red, orange, pink, being as ostentatious and offensive as I could. Pink and orange together? Blugh. I loved it. I was in heaven. I didn't know you could put orange and pink together! I was painting more beautifully than I ever have.

The rebellion, of course, is not a sustainable mode from which you want to create. It runs out and it also limits the way you think. By being the "opposite" of something, I was still bound to that something. I left one box and hopped into another. But it was the right thing to do at the time. It was an excellent stepping stone to experiencing myself as capable of ideas I didn't know I have. Orange and pink?! I needed another box just so I could see *anything* outside the shackles of needing my parents' approval.

I happen to think that I produced stunning paintings. They are not the paintings of a trained pro. I would need to spend several years to study and develop my technique, something I eventually decided to do as a writer and not as a painter. But the raw passion that showed itself on the canvass was pure talent. In other words, by not being myself, I got to be my real self. A little bit more so than before.

It may be that for a while, you will find it useful to experiment hopping into other boxes, just to leave yours for a while. Eventually, you want no box. You want to be free. You want the blues and purples, you want the full pallet. But you'll never discover the random strokes of pink and orange if you cleave to what you like (or was it what mom likes...?)

What's the last thing you would write? Writing something your parents would hate is generally a good place to start. If you've worked in the film industry for a while (as producer, development exec, agent) you are probably super blocked. You need to write something that the company you worked for would vomit over. Oh and by the way, if you've gotten rigid about rebelling against your parents and have been making stuff they'd hate for a while, I challenge you to create something your parents would love. The point is for *you* to step outside of your comfort zone. It's not only safe to do that, but it's the only way for you to move forward.

Last year I was teaching a group of women writers. One night I asked them to write a scene that was all action, no dialogue. We then went around and each writer read a page from their action scene. What kind of actions did I hear? She picks up the phone. She puts it down. She eats the sandwich. She ties her shoes.

The following week I returned with a new writing assignment: write a scene in which your character gets physically injured. It had to be an injury that would take at least three months to heal. It was lovely to have a group of women physically injure their characters.

The reason you're not completely yourself on the page, the reason your genius is not yet fully showing, is because you have a limited idea of who you are.

Are your scenes always in a certain style? Always the same topics? Do your stories always involve heart-to-heart talks at the diner? Maybe you should introduce a machine gun. Do your stories always involve machine guns? Maybe your characters should fight with rubber bands. Or have a heart-to-heart at the diner.

Talent is the product of a willingness to play, to experiment, to dare and do something you've never done before. Drab, mediocre writing is fearful writing. You're filling in the blanks. You're painting by number. You're using the colors your parents would approve of (or your cool friend would approve of, or your producer, or whoever.)

If you're a human being, then you're a talented writer. Light years more talented than you've let on. Light years more talented than you're aware of. Go worry your parents. Disappoint them. Scare them with abstract strokes of pink and orange. Go crazy, so you can find out who you really are. The further you are from your comfort zone, the closer you are to being yourself. The more your true, playful, vulnerable,

passionate, unique self shows on the page, the more "talented" you become. You carry with you a unique genius that only you have. I demand that you bring it out here, for all to see.

Now set your egg timer to ten minutes, and improvise a scene involving your main character in a situation that *you would never write about*. Put him in a predicament that would be completely foreign to your script and your style. If he's a tough soldier fighting in the desert, put him in a mall where he'll discover an abandoned baby. If you're writing a family drama, put your character in the jungle and unleash a hungry lion on him. And remember: no lifting the pen until the timer goes off. No matter how loudly your parents' voices are screaming in your head: "You call that writing?! That's junk!" Write junk. Tell your parents to zip it. Or heck, put them in the scene and let them duke it out with you on paper. You can always write that hungry lion in and unleash it at them instead.

Talent can not be taught because it doesn't need to be. Producers are always hunting for the next great talent. It is always sitting in front of them, in the heart of the fearful writer who handed them drab. There is always tremendous talent to discover, in every writer. Always. Having worked my butt off to learn the craft, I'll be the first to say that hard work, lots of practice, and the study of the craft, are essential. But knowing the craft can only produce good scripts. Being yourself will produce genius scripts. If the word throws you, forget about being talented. Just be bold. Can you do that? It's the same thing.

Oh, and as an aside, my mother, the one who swoons over blues and purples, absolutely loved my orange-pink paintings... Go figure.



Fish and People

Acrylic on canvass, 36" x 24", by Ela Thier

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