

This is a slightly edited version of a Paper that I delivered last year on '*Fractured Narrative*' at **Plagiarism: Plague of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**, a Conference in Lebanon at the Universite de Saint Esprit de Kaslik.

I have also included an outline for the proposed book.

It is a pleasure to be speaking to you yet again – this time about ‘Fractured Narrative,’ a topic that is close to my heart. I am hoping that this short presentation will become the basis for a book about healing this condition – sort of ‘Heal Your Story; Heal Your Life,’ which will include a number of case studies and interviews. Significantly it will not be a book for writers, although I would expect that some writers will read it, but rather a book about healing one’s life through storytelling.

My first two Papers, ‘Interventions’ as you call them, were directly related to our conference on Plagiarism: the first used the metaphor of Plagiarism as a disease with symptoms, diagnoses and cures; the second was about creativity as an antidote – by maximizing the creativity that we all have, we naturally diminish plagiarism whose roots are in lack of imagination and self-confidence.

This topic is more oblique: ‘Fractured Narrative’ is my term for a condition that some people have who have difficulty telling stories because their stories have been broken by trauma – usually but not always childhood trauma – divorce, abuse, incest, a war, the death of a parent, etc.

Not being able to tell your own story and stories in general is more serious than you might think. It does not only mean that you cannot make a living as a storyteller; it means that you do not know where you are in your own story; you do not know where you have been or where you are going. You are essentially adrift and living from day to day without a plan.

The following quote is from Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*:

These insistent scenarios had a repetitive and borderline-brutal quality that reminded me of the wound-up Wall Street husband of one of Hobie’s clients who, when he got in a certain mood, liked to tell the same three stories of his Vietnam war experience over and over with the same mechanical wording and gestures: same rat-a-tat of gunfire, same chopping hand, always in the exact same spot. Everyone’s face got very still over the after-dinner drinks when he spied off into his routine, which we’d all seen a million times and which (like my own ruthless loop of searching for my mother, night after night, year after year, dream after dream) was rigid and invariable. He was always going to stumble and fall over the same tree root; he would never make it to his friend Gage in time, just as I would never manage to find my mother. But that night, finally, I did find her.

The whole book is about fractured narrative. When he is a very young boy, the narrator's mother is killed in an explosion at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He survives and lives in a prison of repetitive, destructive behavior until he puts his narrative and his life back together.

I had fractured narrative. My thinking on this is based on my own experience learning how to heal myself, teaching screenwriting on the graduate faculties of the American Film Institute and the University of Southern California for 15 years and subsequently teaching in Afghanistan and Lebanon where because of war and strife, virtually everyone has some form of this condition.

I recently lectured at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey at a conference on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Until then, I was addressing 'Fractured Narrative' as a writer teaching writers and this was the interface with a broader therapeutic culture that was treating veterans. Subsequent to my presentation and further discussions, it was agreed that you don't need a war to have PTSD and that fractured narrative was a form of it. Storytelling was also instituted as one of the protocols for those suffering from it.

When I was 38, six years after my first film Pumping Iron loosed Arnold upon the world, I made a feature documentary called "Stripper" that Hollywood loved, which incidentally does not mean that it was good, but it brought me out to Hollywood as a feature film director for hire. There, when you have an idea, you go in and pitch it to the head of a studio, and if they like it, they hire a writer and develop the script... I had a lot of opportunities and ideas and when I got in the room the question was inevitably: what's the story? And that was a question with which I had a great deal of difficulty, and this was not a new problem. When I was a child, I had difficulty learning how to read and when I did, I read very slowly and would escape into the world where the words took me. I was so absorbed in the details that I could not tell you what had happened after I had finished a book. Many times I would see film versions of books that I had read and think: Oh, that was what happened. There was no part of my mind that could step back and 'fly' over the story at 50,000 feet and say what happened.

And so it was with my life. I had wandered from opportunity to opportunity, grazing as it were, without any real plan. I had some success and now had a real opportunity but this inability to tell stories and know and plan my own would ultimately sabotage me and be the catalyst for a serious reckoning as to why and how this happened. Also, in great part to heal myself, I became attracted to writing and began to study the mysteries of narrative.

Stories have beats. When something happens, that is a beat. This leads to this and that leads to that, etc., etc. In good stories, there is an unmistakable causality. Things don't just happen; they happen because something else happened that causes something else to happen. I began tracking the beats of stories. After I saw a film, I would make myself write down what happened from memory. At first I got only about thirty beats but soon I was getting sixty or seventy which are the number of beats that most films have. This is a very important exercise because it shows causality and the relation of one event to another, and it also brings your attention into the present. To do this, you have to be present in the cliched 'Here and Now' and not off in some dream.

I began studying the narrative Gods: Lajos Egri's **Art of Dramatic Writing**; McKee's book **Story** which is essentially about classic three act structure; and Vogler's **The Writer's Journey** which takes the work of Joseph Campbell in comparative mythology and applies the journey of the hero to narrative. I learned a lot about what most stories have in common: an 'Ordinary World' before the story begins; an 'Inciting Incident,' a 'Premise,' which is what the story is really saying, its values as it were; a 'First Act Break' where the hero is irrevocably committed; 'Raising Stakes' and 'Mounting Action' – many, many things.

And I began to apply this storytelling 'technology' to my own story and I realized that the reason that I could not tell stories was that my story had been broken. There was a moment with no causality. Something just irrationally happened over which I had no understanding or control: in my case it was my parents divorcing and moving away when I was eight years old, and I was sent away to boarding school. Prior to that I was, to use the metaphor, floating effortlessly, unconsciously down the river of life. Then in one second and I remember exactly the moment, I was jerked out of the river and sitting on the shore, alone, watching life go by. That was the fracture and it created a wound and I compensated for the wound by creating a 'mask.' Life goes on; you have to go on; what do you do to go on? I

created constant distractions and things to do; there were always several enticing options to distract me from what I really wanted to do, which was to go back to my family and my life as it was and that wasn't possible anymore. At that time I also started lying. It was compensatory. My story was broken so I made up other stories about myself to make me seem like a cool guy. It was really ridiculous stuff like my Uncle was Roy Rogers and I knew Karate and Judo. I also became an extremely adept petty thief. That was also compensatory. If I cannot tell the story of who I am and where I am from and where I am going and be proud of it, then at least I can have a lot of stuff.

I was in my late thirties when I realized all this. Then with a lot of help from some very smart producers, I wrote a script about a man-eating tiger on the loose in LA and sold it for over a million dollars. As you can imagine, this was not literature, but it did launch my screenwriting career, which began with selling a number of 'Spec' scripts.

This led to two things: an opportunity to teach screenwriting at the Graduate level at the AFI and USC, and more and more I felt the need to tell my own story. I realized that the 'wound was the gift' and the great story that I had to tell was the story that broke my own: my parent's divorce, being sent away to boarding school and being in my own mind, abandoned. And then the worst possible thing that could have ever happened turned out to be the best. The end of one life was the beginning of another. One brilliant early spring day, a helicopter flew into my boarding school and aboard was my mother with her new boyfriend who was a fantastic guy. And he was rich. This was 1958 when everyone pretty much agreed that it was desirable to be rich. He was also a great athlete and to an eight year old that was also highly desirable. A few months later, he became my stepfather but effectively he was my father and it ushered in a whole new life in which I was sort of a prince.

The novellas and scripts that I did on my life were my best writing and although they were not deemed commercial, they attracted major actors and came very close to getting made and/or published several times. I also lied much less. The compulsion was gone and I 'told stories' not so much to aggrandize myself but more for entertainment. I stopped stealing completely. I also got married and had a son and my wife and son are the loves of my life. I am by no means perfect, but I am a lot better. Learning to tell stories and telling my story healed me.

The work I did on my own story also made me a much better writer and teacher. By now, I was making a good living writing and teaching became a major part of my life. Typically I had at least one and sometimes two sections of 8-12 Masters screenwriting students each year. Over the thirteen-year period that I was at the AFI, I taught over 150 students on a fairly intimate basis. Apart from the pedagogy, the fun was getting to know them and help them determine the stories they needed to tell.

During my first years as a teacher I was very much an elitist. I was very proud of the many students that I had taught that were having successful careers. At a conference I was in the middle of bragging about it when another teacher said that he was teaching people that would never sell a script. That was a turning point for me. I became much more interested in teaching as a healing tool.

I began to recognize fractured narrative in some of my students. About a quarter of my American students had it in some form. Beginning in 2006, I went into a flurry of documentary production all over the world and became too busy to teach on a conventional week-to-week basis. I did, however, lead teaching intensives in Afghanistan in 2006, 7 and 8 in which I organized a filmmaking curriculum and took teams of 10 teachers there for a two week intensive in each of the three years. We taught all the Television personnel in Kandahar and ultimately gave certificates to 120 Students. The idea was to teach them to tell their own stories rather than cramming our media down their throats.

I also taught a number of storytelling intensives in Lebanon in 2013 and 2014 and in the spring of 2014, I taught a screenwriting class for 25 Masters students here at the Universite de Saint Esprit. Significantly, because of the trauma and conflict in Lebanon and Afghanistan, a much higher percentage of students had fractured narrative – probably about 80%. In cultures like this, teaching storytelling is really saving their lives. Suddenly they have a plan and the accompanying resilience rather than just surviving.

I am going to tell you about three other people that I have taught that are rather archetypal. I will address the masks first as that is the first thing that you see. Then I will talk about the symptoms in their writing, and finally the ‘cure’ and how it affected them. The cure always involves restoring causality and linear storytelling and telling the story that broke their

narrative, but during this period, I also encountered some non-writing modalities that were very helpful and I will mention those briefly in closing.

The first is a woman that I shall call Abi. Abi was very sensitive, gentle and angelic looking. Life was always happy and she loved her boyfriend and everything was a fairy tale 'vivant'. Abi was an American student and a poet. Not surprisingly, many whom I have taught that have this condition are poets – often award winning poets – because unless you are a poet writing narrative poetry, poetry is a form of institutionalized fractured narrative.

Surprisingly, Abi was drawn to commercial and unredeemed action films. When I began reading her first script, I noticed that she would set up a big action sequence like cops about to break into a drug dealer's apartment and make a big bust, and then she'd cut to the next day and skip all the action. She repeatedly avoided the cathartic action, which is the lifeblood of the form.

I met with her, suspecting that she was repressing something and she told me the most incredible story about her life as a child growing up with a psychotic, abusive, homeless, alcoholic mother. They wandered around living off the kindness of relatives until they were thrown out. Her mother was violent and extremely possessive of her beautiful daughter. Relatives and teachers tried to help her but her mother made it impossible for her to get away and have any kind of a life. Abi's struggle was to get away from her mother whom she had very complex feelings about – love, pity, gratitude, shame, hatred, fear that she might be similarly afflicted...and she wanted to get an education, so she surreptitiously applied to colleges with the help of a relative. She got into a top university on a full scholarship and ran away only to have her mother follow her there. And the story goes on and on. I told her that she had to write that story which she did in her second year and it is an absolutely terrific script called 'Hush'. It has been optioned several times and I am certain that it will ultimately be a terrific film. It has already attracted several major actresses.

In summary, a young woman is living this everything is nice and pretty life that masks an unbelievably painful childhood which is the great story that she has to tell. So, she wrote the story and is now on the staff of a major television series. She has become much less fragile and more self confident

and gregarious. She is married to her boyfriend and is ‘considering’ children.

The second person is Rich, the ‘Achiever’ and ‘Action Junkie.’ Rich always needed to be distracted, or as he would say, consummately focused by the adrenaline that most probably approximated the stress that fractured his story. He always had to have stuff going on. His measure of success was how much he got done. He was very charming, a fast talker, a great seducer and salesman. He had a tendency to drug and alcohol abuse. He wrote comedy – broad and not very well plotted comedy - but lots of gags. On the very rare occasion when he slowed down, usually when he had a hangover, he began to exhibit bi-polar tendencies and a couple of times he began to go into the details of his family life – both parents were shrinks in Baltimore and there was violence all over the place especially against his baby brother. He had considerable guilt about not doing anything about it. He felt that he had just escaped, which he continued to do in his life. Writing comedy was an escape for him as well but he really needed to take the time to make his comedy about something – there needed to be a plot.

I do a serial storytelling exercise regularly with my classes, which seems remedial but it is very effective. It was especially so with Rich. It starts with someone saying an opening to a story, like: “I got up this morning and ...” The next person repeats that and continues with the next ‘beat.’ The third person repeats the first two beats and says a third...and on and on. We go around in a circle. It is amazing how this trains the memory and puts causality into the students’ ‘hard drive.’ It also brings their attention entirely into the ‘Here and Now.’ You cannot do this exercise if there are lapses in attention. Students get really good at this and the stories can be wildly inventive and funny. The record without a mistake was fifty-three beats but it was not unusual to get over thirty.

I also made Rich see all the great comedies and do beat sheets after he had seen them and he learned that even in the broad, stupid comedies, there was a story under all the jokes and there was a ‘Premise’ which is to say that there was an important message. And then we focused on what he really wanted to do with his life and say with his writing. And he wanted more than anything to help people in a way that he failed to help his brother.

At the end of his first year, he called me and he was very upset and wanted to get together. We met and he said that he had gotten into medical school

and he didn't know what to do. And there was no question in my mind that that was what he needed to do. He became an absolutely fantastic Emergency Room Doctor. In a sense this is succumbing to or accommodating the wound, as the reason that he is so good at it is that things are coming at him that he has to deal with all the time. He has become the action junky incarnate. He'd still like to write and he still may some day.

The third person is Marc who keeps himself busy by helping others and making himself indispensable. This type is very common in war torn countries. They make great lovers but it is not ideal for leading their own life. He is Lebanese and in his late twenties. He is a talented filmmaker but spends all his time running a video and technology store. He is constantly absorbed by the endless details of the store: copying pirated videos and selling them, selling tech gadgetry and instructing customers on how to use them and generally helping anyone and everyone out. When I probed, I learned that he lost his father when he was very young and spent most of his childhood and adolescence in his bedroom watching films. His mother was extremely understanding and loved having him live at home and let him do whatever he wanted. His films are not personal at all but rather ponder large questions like God and the nature of the Universe. An angry old testament God speaks endlessly in Voice Over in his films.

Marc will do almost anything to avoid dealing with his anger, grief, sadness and loneliness. He affects emotions and has real trouble with any kind of real human, authentic interaction. It is all deeply buried. He is 'frozen' in the moment of his father's death.

The cure for Marc was tricky because telling the story of his father's death was too painful at first. We started with Beat Sheets and serial storytelling and then I had him talk about his favorite films and why he liked them. He would talk about all kinds of crap like the images and the cinematography and the actors but when we really got down to what the movie was saying, he realized that although he had been unaware of it before, the message was extremely important to him. We also did this with songs and oddly, he was a huge fan of Broadway musicals and he knew many songs by heart. Among his favorites was one from a sixties musical called No Strings and some of the lyrics were:

“The Sweetest Sounds I've ever heard are still inside my head.

The Sweetest sounds I've ever heard are waiting to be said.”

And I asked him if he believed that. And he was completely shocked. It had never occurred to him that the lyrics were so important to him. He thought he just liked the melody. And so the question became what are you going to do about it? How can you get the sounds outside your head?

The telling of his story became about avenging his father's death, not with violence but in living his life in such a way that it honored his father and justified the sacrifices his father had made.

Now a year later he has written a powerful script that is getting produced in Lebanon and is set against the backdrop of the Civil War. He also, incidentally, was able to buy the video store where he worked and he just recently sold it for a good profit. Not bad!

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There you have four rather typical cases: there is me with lots of different and interesting things going on, a life of constant distraction. Kind of institutionalized ADD; Abi who would have us think that everything is perfect and wonderful – sort of hippie bliss sitting on a volcano; Rich, the action junkie and achiever who thinks he is what he does; and Marc who distracts himself with the details of life and tries to make himself invaluable.

I have identified about 10 'Masks' thus far and they will be described in detail with many examples in the book. I will also talk about the symptoms and weaknesses in their writing and the exercises and therapeutic modalities that have proven to be most effective.

Each type does certain things very well and other things terribly. A certain amount of this is getting people to become a bit more of what they are not. For example, a terrific diagnostic tool is to ask how fast someone reads: the Achievers read very fast and have a good sense of story because that is what they read for. But their stories lack dimension and tend to be deductive as if to prove their point of view and justify what they are doing. They also tend not to have a very good ear for prose and dialogue, but there are remedies for these problems.

A few months ago I taught a weekend seminar that included a number of older people who were very attracted to the subject. This was very

interesting as the majority of people that I have taught are under 30. I learned, for example, that while most people's narratives are fractured when they are most vulnerable as children, this can happen in adulthood and it can happen numerous times in one's life. Combat is obviously a big cause but it can be any trauma that so overwhelms your system that you cannot track things causally. The homunculus shuts down and life becomes a series of irreconcilable unprocessed images. It can also be an event that makes your story not make sense any more, so your narrative has to be realigned so that your life makes sense again.

In some cases aligning one's narrative involves reclaiming a disinherited part of one's past. One woman told me that the 10 years before she became a pastor had absolutely nothing to do with the rest of her life. Somehow she had to make sense of it and I suggested that hibernation as defined by Ralph Ellison was "covert preparation for a more overt action." Obviously those ten years were hugely important if only in counterpoint. She used her imagination to deconstruct those 10 years and began to see the events that led to her decision to become a pastor.

Recently my work at Esalen Institute and the Naval Postgraduate School has interfaced with the broader therapeutic community and that has produced more tools for healing some of which are extremely effective. There is a handout that refers to the healing 'toolbox.'

In conclusion I imagine you are asking what this has to do with Plagiarism. And I can only say that plagiarism is often the solution that people choose when they are asked to tell a story and they can't... for all the aforementioned reasons. Thank you.

## **Don't read this. Unfinished**

### Book Outline

#### **Forward:**

“Jerome, where do you want to be in 10 years?...Then work backwards, step by step and then start going forward one day at a time...Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Why storytelling and your story is so important for you and for us all.

Introduction to my story and my experience teaching.

#### **Healing myself**

##### **Symptoms**

The Big Questions.

Be very honest about your life. What have you done and where are you going and are you happy with that? If not, how would you change that and are you willing to do that? How would you change course.

What do you want to be when you grow up and what do you have to do to get there?

Kaizen is slow steady progress.

The wound is the gift so write it!

Models of Structure and how to interface with them and use them.

Masks: examples from life and film and case histories.

The others are briefly and simplistically stated as follows: ‘The Boss’ who can be both bully and protector; ‘The Ascetic’ who minimizes needs and withdraws into a monastic life; The ‘Woe Is Me’ type that is beset with a sense of unworthiness and the hopelessness of life; ‘The Hypercritical’ who sees only flaws and tends to see things in black and white; ‘The Skeptic’ who suspects plots and conspiracies and can be paranoid; and ‘The

Indecisive' who has serious problems making decisions and sees the validity of all points of view.

Varieties of Fracture.

Moments frozen in time.

### **Diagnostic tools.**

#### **The Toolbox**

#### Writing Toolbox

Beat Sheets.

Serial Storytelling.

Interfacing storytelling with dramatic models like The Inciting Incident or The Ordinary World.

Most Importantly, recognizing that the wound is the gift and telling that story.

#### New modalities/more tools

**Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE).** I met a guy called David Berceci in Big Sur and again in Lebanon. In studying trauma, he realized that animals and small children trembled to recover from shock and that was their way of dissipating the trauma and restoring equilibrium. I am sure that many of you have seen a deer that has been hit by a car get up and tremor all over for a few seconds and then run off into the woods as if nothing had happened. Children also do this and he noticed this in Afghanistan and Lebanon when children were dealing with violence. But as they get older, 'tremoring' is discouraged as either childish or cowardly, so this trauma is internalized. So he designed a set of exercises that borrow heavily from Bioenergetics that take about 5 minutes to do and then you lie down on your back with your knees apart and allow your legs to tremor. You allow this to go on for 5 or 10 minutes and it is hugely powerful in terms of relieving stress and getting people to talk about what is really on their minds.

**Improvisation** can be very effective in breaking behavioral patterns. Fractured Narrative as per the Donna Tartt quote creates a prison of repetition and anything that breaks that pattern and encourages people to be in the present is good.

**Feldenkrais** work is a system of effortless exercises that make you aware of all the choices that you have in any movement and it has a similar affect on the mind. Like improvisation it breaks patterns and makes people be present.

**Psychodrama** in which the writer has to play different characters in their story. This is particularly effective with people who have made the other an arch villain because they have to think positively about the other.

**Psycho-physiological work of Van der Kalk** who is a pioneer in treating PTSD. To quote him: 'It was as if war had broken the projector of their imaginations, he says, and their only options were to play one reel over and over or turn the machine off altogether.' He has developed treatment that involves assuming physical attitudes that affect mental states. "Everybody hunch their backs forward and droop their heads, like this," he said, demonstrating. "Now try saying: 'Oh, I'm feeling great! I'm very happy today!'" The audience laughed. "See, it's impossible to feel happy in that position." To drive the point home, he asked us to do the opposite: sit upright, assume cheerful expressions and then try to feel bad. The mind follows the body, he said.

Shattering the mask...or becoming it.

Cognitive dissonance.

Interviews with writers and former students.

The toolbox. Narrative exercises and other modalities.

Interviews with former students and successful writers.

