

## MY WRITING PROCESS

(Example used: The Babette Burnadette Story)

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1. WANTED A STORY TO ILLUSTRATE MY POINT.....WHICH IS POWER OF INTERNAL SCRIPT....WE BELIEVE WHAT'S PROGRAMMED INTO OUR HEAD.

AND BECAUSE DATA DOESN'T IMPACT, I NEEDED A STORY TO PROVE IT. STORIES SHOW INSTEAD OF TELL. THEY MAKE OUR DATA EMOTIONAL SO IT STICKS.

I NEEDED TO KNOW THE POINT OF THE STORY...LESSON...WHY ARE YOU TELLING IT? I CALL IT THE MESSAGE STORY – STORY THAT ILLUSTRATES YOUR POINT OR MESSAGE.

2. THEN, WHO IS MY LISTENER? WHAT KIND OF STORY OR LIFE EXPERIENCE CAN THEY RELATE TO?  
A STORY ABOUT A SINGLE MOM IS NOT A STORY I WANT IF I WANT TO IMPACT TEENS OR DAIRY FARMERS.

THE STORY DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ABOUT THEM, BUT I WANT THE LIFE EXPERIENCE TO CONNECT.

HOW RELATEABLE IS YOUR STORY TO THEIR HUMAN CONDITION – THEIR PAIN – OR THEIR DESIRE.

THIS IS HOW YOUR STORY BECOMES THEIR STORY.

3. SO I WENT IN SEARCH OF A STORY THAT WOULD ILLUSTRATE MY POINT AND CONNECT WITH MY TYPE OF AUDIENCE. “WHAT IS A REAL LIFE EXAMPLE OF WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT?” AN EXAMPLE OF HOW THE WORDS SOMEBODY THOUGHT ABOUT THEMSELVES DEFINED THEIR FUTURE.....SO MANY EXAMPLES.....BUT I KNEW I WAS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING WITH THE THREE ELEMENTS I LIKE IN MY STORIES FOR HIGHEST IMPACT: DRAMA, HUMOR, AND COLORFUL CHARACTERS
4. SO I JUST WALKED AROUND ON IT FOR A FEW DAYS...CHEWED ON IT.....THEN AT CHURCH, MY PASTOR WAS TALKING ABOUT CAREER ASSESMENT TEST AND I WAS THINKING HOW HE HUNG ON TO THOSE WORDS HIS WHOLE LIFE.....BINGO!

5. FOUND MY STORY IDEA.....ABOUT A GUIDANCE COUNSELOR WHO CHANGES THE TEST RESULTS

I ALWAYS MAKE SURE BEFORE I CREATE A STORY THAT I CAN SAY IN ONE SENTENCE WHAT THAT STORY IS ABOUT – WHAT WILL MAKE IT INTERESTING – WHY I AM TELLING IT – AND WHY THEY CARE (NOBODY CARES ABOUT YOUR MOM UNLESS YOU MAKE US CARE...AND I DO BELIEVE ALMOST EVERY STORY CAN BE INTERESTING IF YOU MAKE IT INTERESTING.....

SO KNOW WHAT THE STORY IS ABOUT, BE ABLE TO SAY THAT IN A SENTENCE...NOT THE PLOT, BUT THE POINT OF THE STORY...AND WHAT WILL MAKE THAT STORY MORE COMPELLING.

6. THEN...WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE IT MORE INTERESTING? HERE'S WHERE HUMOR, CHARACTERS, THE DETAILS, AND THE DRAMA COMES IN. THESE ARE THE COMPONENTS THAT REALLY MAKE MY STORY COME TO LIFE.

I THINK TO MYSELF...CAN I RAISE THE TAKES? BABETTE HELPS THE KIDS...NOT JUST ANY KIDS, BUT THE KIDS WHO NEED IT THE MOST. THE AT RISK KIDS. THAT MAKES THE STORY MORE INTERESTING.

7. THEN I THINK ABOUT HOW TO MAKE THIS STORY PERSONAL TO ME. I WANT TO HAVE SOME PERSONAL CONNECTION TO IT. SO IT'S ALSO AN ABOUT ME STORY. WHY DOES THIS STORY MATTER TO ME? NOT JUST SOME CANNED CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL STORY – BUT ONE THAT HAS MEANING IN MY OWN PERSONAL LIFE.

SO..WHAT IF I WAS ONE OF THOSE STUDENTS THAT BABETTE'S WORDS AFFECTED?

----OR-----

HOW DID HEARING THIS STORY MAKE ME CHANGE MY INNER SCRIPT AND HOW DID MY LIFE CHANGE BECAUSE OF IT?

---OR-----

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I SHARED THIS STORY WITH ANOTHER AUDIENCE, SOMEONE HEARD IT, AND TOOK THOSE WORDS AND APPLIED IT TO HER LIFE? COULD THERE BE A RIPPLE EFFECT?

THE POINT IS THAT I AM STANDING ON STAGE TELLING YOU MY LIFE'S JOURNEY TO THE

TRUTH I TEACH. THIS IS ABOUT MY LESSON, MY PERSPECTIVE, MY FALLS AND MY SUCCESSES. I AM THE PERSONAL PIECE TO THIS EQUATION. I'M NOT A TALKING HEAD. I'M A PERSON. AND THE MORE YOU LIKE ME, RELATE TO ME, AND FEEL LIKE YOU KNOW ME, THE MORE YOU WILL BE IMPACTED BY WHAT I HAVE TO SAY.

8. THEN I THINK ABOUT HOW TO MAKE THIS STORY REALLY ABOUT THEM. HOW TO TAP INTO THEIR STORY. I BELIEVE THAT AS SPEAKERS, OR LEADERS, OR PEOPLE OF INFLUENCE AND IMPACT, WE SHOULD BE TELLING THREE STORIES – THE ABOUT ME, THE MESSAGE STORY, AND THE CUSTOMER'S STORY. THE ABOUT ME PUTS A FACE ON YOUR TEACHER (OR SALES PERSON)- THE ONE TRYING TO INFLUENCE. THE MESSAGE STORY TAKES YOUR TRUTH AND APPLIES IT TO LIFE WHICH IS WHERE THE EMOTION AND THE IMPACT IS FOUND AND GOES BYOND TELLING SOMEONE WHAT TO DO, TO SHOWING THEM. AND THEIR STORY IS THE ENTIRE REASON WE ARE IN FRONT OF THEM – TO INFLUENCE THEM. TO CHANGE THEIR LIFE. TO IMPACT THEM. TO MOTIVATE AND INSPIRE THEM.

SO THEN I THINK OF HOW I'M GOING TO TAKE BABETTE'S STORY AND SPIN IT TO THE AUDIENCE. SO AT THE END OF THE STORY, I TELL THEM THAT BABETTE HAS ALSO SENT THEM A MESSAGE IN BRIGHT PURPLE FLAMBOYANT HANDWRITING, JUST LIKE THE MESSAGE SHE WROTE TREVOR. AND I KNOW YOU CAN SEE THAT MESSAGE RIGHT NOW. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS – BUT I KNOW THAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED A MESSAGE. CONSIDER IT YOUR FORTUNE. CONSIDER IT YOUR DESTINY. I JUST ASK THAT YOU CONSIDER IT.

AND IF I HAVE MORE TIME ON STAGE THAN NORMAL, OR I'M IN A SMALLER SETTING LIKE A WORKSHOP, I WILL PROBABLY ASK THEM TO SHARE THE MESSAGE THEY RECEIVED. THIS WILL BE EXTREMELY POWERFUL.

9. AS YOU NOTICE, I HAVE NOT REALLY STARTED TO WRITE THE STORY YET. THIS IS ALL STORY PLANNING THT HAPPENS BEFORE.

SOMETIMES I GET SOME CREATIVE IDEAS OF HOW TO TELL THE STORY – IN RHYME, AS A CHILDREN'S STORY, IN THE FORM OF AN ACT OUT, OR A SILLY SONG. ONE STORY I CHOSE TO TELL IS DONE IN THE FORM OF MY GRANDMOTHER CALLING IN TO MY CELL PHONE THREE TIMES THROUGHOUT THE SPEECH. AND WHILE YOU THINK SHE'S ANNOYING, AND YOU ARE LAUGHING AT THE HILARIOUS ONE-SIDED CONVERSATION I AM HAVING WITH HER – THERE IS REALLY A STORY BEING TOLD.

BUT IN THE CASE OF BABETTED BURNADETTE, I JUST WANTED TO TELL THE STORY. IT

HAS ENOUGH IN IT THAT I DON'T NEED TO GO FIND A MORE CREATIVE WAY TO TELL IT. THEN AGAIN – WHO KNOWS. I'M NOT FINISHED WITH IT. IT COULD COMPLETELY TAKE A LEFT TURN AS I AM WORKING ON IT.

SO NOW BECOMES THE TIME I PUT IT ON PAPER.

10. FIRST I SPEND A LITTLE TIME GETTING TO KNOW THE CHARACTERS AND DEVELOPING THEM MORE.

USUALLY A STORY WILL HAVE ONE-THREE MAIN CHARACTERS, AND THE REST JUST POP IN AND OUT.

IN THIS STORY IT'S BABETTE, TREVOR, AND ME.

SO I THINK ABOUT EACH CHARACTER – WHO THEY ARE, WHAT THEY ARE LIKE, HOW TO DESCRIBE THEIR APPEARANCE SO YOU REALLY SEE THEM – AND HOW TO DO THIS WITH AS FEW WORDS AS POSSIBLE. I'M ALREADY A CHARACTER ON STAGE AND IN MY SPEECH, SO THAT'S USUALLY THE EASY PART (THOUGH MANY SPEAKERS NEVER DEVELOP THEMSELVES AS CHARACTERS ON STAGE. THAT'S ANOTHER INTERVIEW.)

I WAS EXCITED ABOUT BABETTE BECAUSE SHE SHOWED ME HERSELF IN A DREAM. I KNEW RIGHT AWAY THAT SHE IS AN OVER THE TOP FLAMBOYANT GUIDANCE COUNSELOR WHO WOMEN FIND TACKY – WHO FOLLOWS THE STARS AND READS PALMS. I KNEW SHE WOULD BE A GUIDANCE COUNSELOR YOU DON'T TAKE SERIOUSLY – BECAUSE I LOVE TO SURPRISE MY AUDIENCE BY REDEEMING SILLY CHARACTERS.

THE OTHER CHARACTER IS TREVOR – THE AT RISK STUDENT SHE HELPS. THE ONE WHO NEEDED IT MOST. I COULD SEE HIM IMMEDIATELY. I WASN'T JUST PAINTING A PICTURE OF WHAT HE LOOKED LIKE, I WAS PAINTING A PICTURE OF WHAT HIS LIFE WAS LIKE. CHARACTERS ARE MORE THAN HEIGHT. SPEAKERS RARELY SHOW US A CHARACTER, THEY TELL US. SHOW ME THE CHARACTER. TAKE ME IN THE SCENE. PAINT IT FOR ME OR I WON'T GO.

ME AS A CHARACTER IN THIS STORY..I'M THE ONE WHO HAS ALWAYS STRUGGLED WITH SELF ESTEEM AND THE INTERNAL SCRIPT RUNNING THROUGH MY HEAD. THIS IS ALSO MY JOURNEY TO REWRITING MY INNER SCRIPT AND THE DIFFERENCE IT MADE IN MY LIFE. REMEMBER...SPEECHES ARE YOUR LIFE'S JOURNEY TO THE TRUTH YOU TEACH. DON'T TEACH ME THIS BECAUSE YOU READ IT IN A BOOK OR YOU GOT A DEGREE IN IT. TEACH ME THIS BECAUSE YOU LEARNED THE HARD WAY, AND I'LL BELIEVE YOU.

REMEMBER...DATA HAS NO IMPACT. THE STORY HOLDS THE EMOTION YOU NEED TO IMPACT AND INFLUENCE.

ALWAYS ASK YOURSELF, HOW DID I LEARN THIS LESSON I NOW TEACH? HOW DID IT PLAY OUT IN MY OWN LIFE, OR IN THE LIFE OF SOMEONE I KNOW?

11. I USED TO SIT DOWN AND WRITE A STORY START TO FINISH AND THEN I'D BE STARING AT THIS HUGE PIECE THAT WAS OVERWHELMING TO MEMORIZE.

THEN I DECIDED ON A THREE PARAGRAPH METHOD FOR WRITING STORIES – NOW THAT I KNOW WHAT THE STORY IS ABOUT – WRITE IT IN THREE PARAGRAPHS – THE FIRST TO SET UP THE STORY / CONTEXT.....SECOND PARAGRAPH IS FOR WHAT HAPPENED...THIRD PARAGRAPH IS FOR WHAT I LEARNED FROM IT. THIS FORCED ME TO WRITE A BASIC STORY WITH FEW FRILLS. THEN I COULD GO BACK AND ADD BETTER WORDS AND MORE FLAVOR.

MY PROCESS HAS NOW CHANGED EVEN FROM THAT, WHERE INSTEAD OF WRITING A STORY, I JUST DO AN OUTLINE OF BULLET POINTS. NOT EVEN COMPLETE SENTENCES – BUT FRAGMENTS – PLAYING WITH WHERE THE WORDS GO – SWAPPING OUT BETTER WORDS. I NEVER REALLY GO BACK AND WRITE COMPLETE SENTENCES UNLESS THE STORY WILL BE READ SOMEWHERE.

STORIES TO BE TOLD ARE DIFFERENT FROM STORIES TO BE READ. AND OFTEN WE WRITE SPEECHES AS IF WE WERE READING THE SPEECH, AND IT'S VERY HARD TO MEMORIZE AND DOESN'T SOUND LIKE US.

SO I WRITE THE STORY THE WAY I TALK, PRACTICING AS I GO. IF THE LINE DOESN'T FEEL AUTHENTIC OR COMFORTABLE OR LYRICAL ENOUGH, I CHANGE IT. SO I'M PLAYING WITH IT AND PRACTICING TELLING IT AS I WRITE IT. THEN WHEN IT'S TIME TO MEMORIZE, IT'S ALREADY PRETTY MUCH MEMORIZED. I DON'T HAVE THE BURDEN OF LEARNING A BUNCH OF WORDS. AND I BRING THE OUTLINE IN A NOTEBOOK ON A MUSIC STAND AS A GUIDELINE UNTIL IT'S COMPLETELY MEMORIZED AND HAS BEEN DONE ENOUGH TIMES THAT I KNOW HOW THE STORY GOES AND DON'T NEED IT.

BY THE WAY.....I ALSO MEMORIZE HOW THE STORY GOES – BLOCKING IT OUT IN SCENES – SO THAT IF I LOSE MY PLACE, OR DON'T REMEMBER THE EXACT WORDS, I STILL KNOW HOW THE STORY GOES AND IF ALL ELSE FAILS CAN AT LEAST TELL YOU ABOUT THE STORY. BUT I WORK HARD TO PAINT A PICTURE WITH WORDS. SO I WORK

HARD TO REMEMBER THE WORDS I'VE CHOSEN AND WHERE I HAVE PLACED THEM. LIKE NOTES IN MUSIC. IT MATTERS TO ME. THE SONG WOULD NOT BE THE SAME IF I JUST IMPROVISED.

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE I SEE PEOPLE MAKE IN CRAFTING AND TELLING STORIES, IS THEY BECOME SOMEONE ELSE. STORIES SHOULD BE CONVERSATIONAL. I WANT TO FEEL LIKE YOU ARE TELLING THIS STORY – NOT SOMEONE POLISHED AND MADE UP – YOU – THE REAL YOU – THE PERSON YOU ARE SITTING IN MY HOUSE HAVING COFFEE. BUT WITH BETTER WORDS.

I SPEND A LOT OF TIME FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN CONVERSATION AND SCRIPTING.

AND HERE IS WHAT THE STORY BECAME...OR AT LEAST IT AT THIS POINT IN TIME....

Her name was Babbette

Babette Bernadette ...

She was taken as seriously as her name

Never married

Insisted on being called Madame after a brief stint in Paris that led to a divine awakening that she could have been French

She blew with the wind, scattered as the pieces of hair that always escaped from her disheveled bun

Women called her tacky with a dash of over the top

Gay men loved her

Administration did not

For Bernadette had a bigger collection of eye rolls and shaking heads than she did sequined scarves and glittered tennis shoes

Nothing about babette was conventional

She followed the stars for guidance and clarity

Biding her time until one finally called her to a new place

Wrong to say biding, for that indicates one who is simply going through the motions

And Babette was anything but the type to go through the motions

More the type to defy them

Which is probably why this story is

For without Babette it never would've happened

And had I not been standing there in that moment there would be no teller of this tale

For as it is with most of the best stories ....they remain untold... whispered only by the stars

Babette Burnadette was the guidance counselor at Prides Hollow high

A job she took more seriously than anyone else

For what better job than this, for an aspiring fortune teller and palm reader in the making

Than to guide the children of the future

To unveil their destiny written in the stars

She found in that great power and providence

She was Babette Bernadette.....she'd proclaim with a flourish of her bedazzled scarf

Whisper of wishes....designer of destinies...shaper of stars

The biggest part of her job was the career assessment test....given to every student to help guide them into the right job or career path

The job of telling you what you should be when you grow up

Students coveted their results as further proof of their proper position in the high school pecking order.... appointed by other acne driven status seekers and eager parents who meant well but expected their child to be homecoming queen

What did you get? She whispers.

Teacher. What about you? Accountant.

This is bogus. I'm gonna start my own band.

Who cares about a dumb assessment test.

That's for losers.

Speaking of losers.

There was one assessment result that ranked below all the others.

That assessment that was couched in polite ways of saying get used to pumping gas, or your best hope at success is robbing a bank.

These assessments were well earned by the members of the at risk club

At risk of what you might ask...

at risk of slipping through the cracks...

in danger of repeating their father's cycle...

destined to disappoint their mothers

The ones voted most likely to keep prisons filled and social workers busy

The students who did not live up to their full potential

The ones teachers prayed would not be in their class again this year

The one administrators knew by phone number

The ones who faded into the scenery...who simply slipped through the cracks unnoticed

Obediently living out the story which they often never had a hand in writing

Who would receive their assessment as the final nail on the coffin of a life lost before it had begun.

Like Trevor - who at the very mention of his name would cause a shiver and a lip to curl

Trevor...whose dirty denim jacket often served as a pillow

Whose growling stomach and shoes that didn't quite fit, screamed of a second hand life not much better than the first

You didn't bother calling his parents

It just didn't matter

And neither did he

Focus on someone you can help

Your energy is best spent on the ones who are willing to try

He didn't need some stupid assessment test they bribed him into taking, to tell him what they already knew

Trevor had no future

He is not living up to his full potential

D.e.b. Don't even bother

He was just another member of the at risk club whose motto was survival

I'm not sure he even graduated with the rest of us who stood on that platform while Babette Burnadette sent us off with a flourish of her sparkled scarf. Off! off! she'd say...shooing us like cats...go! .live into your destiny ....which apparently mary Ann mayweather took to mean getting pregnant that summer. Apparently when her assessment test results recommended something domestic....she took it to mean now. Bless her heart, Mary Ann popped out babies like tic tacs. I think she had five. And gave them all names that rhymed with Doreen - one of those things that in the beginning seems like a good idea...kind of like me in skinny jeans.

So we all scattered to colleges, family businesses, and bad decisions with good intentions. It was years later when we were well into making up for the mistakes of our youth and setting better examples for our children ...well past wondering what we wanted to be when we grew up.....when we got word that Babette had died. Breast cancer. And that she had organized her own funeral....of course.....in the auditorium of the high school theater...with a glittered star theme and a harpist and dancing little people she had met while working on the set of wizard of oz at the community college.



According to her plan, the theater was done up in true Babette fashion  
Not a star in that town had been spared, including the collection from the prom theme supply closet over at the school which had provided the balloon covered arch where you could get your picture taken beside a life sized poster of Babette wearing her funeral robe, that looked mysteriously like one of the old choir robes over at First Baptist, only trimmed in fur. She had an overwhelming gardenia clipped to the side of her bun and a smile..  
And while you stood there getting your picture taken under the banner that said "heaven or bust".... if you leaned in close enough...you could almost hear her whisper....I'm Babette Burnadette...whisper of wishes...designer of destinies...shaper of stars

We all had different reasons for coming.....probably few of them being Babette.

Call it a morbid curiosity to see football jocks who had turned into middle aged dads who loved khaki, and cheerleaders who had morphed into weary moms whose children never called enough - sizing each other up once again in their newly purchased Botox masks and expressions that never wavered.

Sitting beside me near the front was this distinguished man with kind eyes rimmed in red  
I Wouldn't have known him if we didn't have name tags with out yearbook photo on them  
It was Trevor. Of all people.

Voted most likely to be a drain on society

He was...well....taller? Grown up. Poised.

We chatted while Ernestine Fink, choir director, sang Candle in the Wind with a few extra verses penned by Babette.

You are never going to guess what Trevor grew up to be....

A missionary!!!! I know, right?

He and his wife work in orphanages in remote villages.

They are in the process of adopting two more!!

And he goes around and speaks to raise awareness

And he's like really cute and hip!

Trevor! Of all people!

And while we sat there catching up and waiting our turn to go up front,

He shows me this worn piece of paper he had been holding.....so worn it had become soft

It was his career assessment test

From high school

And written across the bottom, in bright purple flamboyant handwriting that could only belong to an over the top tacky guidance counselor....were these words...

*The results of this test indicate that you will be a great leader with a kindness that can't be measured. In you beats the heart of someone with empathy. Go look it up. Empathy for the forgotten. Empathy for the downtrodden. Empathy for those who never got a chance to write their story. Your work will be mighty. But you won't always see it. For your view will be tiny. But when viewed from the stars, your work will matter more than you will ever know. Guard this heart and cherish this gift. Follow it where it takes you.*

And then it became clear. Babbett's secret. Her divine right as guidance counselor and teller of fortunes.....to bend the rules. And change the results of Trevor's test. To write him a new story. For that was all it took. For someone to give him a story he could believe in. It was Babette who finally told his fortune.

We lined up to say our final goodbyes to Babette. It was quiet up there at that casket. Probably the only time Babette and quiet ever existed in the same moment. I half expected her to jump out and sing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Trevor ahead of me, slipping his worn piece of paper into the casket. When I approached Babette, who had been made up with purple eyeshadow and a matching purple streak through her scattered bun, compliments of the team of drag queens who lived upstairs - I saw that Trevor's note was not the only worn piece of paper with purple handwriting. There were several others.

I hung back, off to the side, and watched as every so often someone would slip another worn piece of paper into Babbette's casket. While random, the people did have something in common....

They were the members of the at risk club, paying respects to their hero.

A missionary with a kind heart meant for empathy.

A singer with a voice meant to encourage youth.

A lawyer who would see that it's never too late to learn.

A boy who did not become his father.

A woman who found strength in her brokenness.

All who had received purple fortunes ... All students of Babette bernadette....whisper of wishes...designer of destinies...shaper of stars.

The only one who didn't walk up there....was me  
I'm keeping mine.....for personal reasons

Mine which says....one day you will find your voice and tell your story. One day you will see that it's okay to be different. One day you will take my place as whisper of wishes, designer of destinies..shaper of stars...go...and give them a message...help them write a new story....tell them who they will be when they grow up.

And they will believe you.

And so, in your seats, in that plain white envelope that I asked you not to open, sits your message in bright purple handwriting.

Consider it your fortune...consider it your destiny...I just ask that you consider it.

Change your story, change your life.

Change your story, change your business.

Change your story, change your world.

I'm Kelly Swanson.....whisper of wishes...designer of destinies...shaper of stars.