
The Enemy Within

BY BARBARA DEMARCO BARRETT

*"People in their right minds
never take pride in their talents."*

—Harper Lee
To Kill a Mockingbird

Most writers I know, from rank beginners to seasoned professionals, give themselves a hard time one way or another, at one time or another. We're not good enough writers, we procrastinate too long, we worry over how what we're working on is going to turn out. When we get notes back from friends we asked to read our drafts, our hackles go up and we experience everything from shame to embarrassment to anger. Sound familiar?

Los Angeles psychotherapist and author Dennis Palumbo has heard it all. Writers make up 80 to 90 percent of his practice. The rest work in other creative fields, so he deals with these issues every day of his working life.

Palumbo is a former writer for screen (*My Favorite Year*) and TV (*Welcome Back, Kotter*) and the author of *Writing from the Inside Out: Transforming Your Psychological Blocks to Release the Writer Within* (Wiley). He has published a collection of short stories, is currently working on his fifth Daniel Rinaldi mystery novel for Poisoned Pen Press and writes a column for PsychologyToday.com.

Palumbo was a successful screenwriter having his best year financially when he decided to leave screenwriting to become a therapist. While in Nepal working on a Robert Redford film on mountain climbing, he had what he calls "a little bit of a *Razor's Edge* experience." He returned home, started seeing a therapist and began taking psychology classes. He had no intention of becoming a therapist, he says, but decided it wasn't a bad idea for a writer to have a master's degree in psychology. As part of his training, he ran a group therapy session for schizophrenics. He was meeting with a producer about a movie the producer wanted him to write when his thoughts drifted to his patients and triggered a second insight. "I had a *Road to Damascus* moment and thought, I don't want to do this anymore."

Twenty-eight years later, he's a licensed psychotherapist who specializes in creative issues and has no regrets. He continues to write, but only what he loves. He spends most days with patients and their issues: writers' block, procrastination, anxiety, the inner

critic, author envy and more. During his lunch hour, he writes fiction.

It will likely come as no surprise to hear that writers' block is the most consistent of patient concerns. No matter how many successes writers have, he says, they suspect their success is a fluke. "With the next thing they write," he says, "they're sure they're going to be found out." He tries to impress upon patients the fact that writing is hard—very hard—and he encourages them to resist making themselves the problem. "What writers are trying to do is difficult," says Palumbo, "and the difficulty is not a referendum on their character or their talent." It's easy, he adds, "to imagine that you alone suffer from this fear, that Agatha Christie, F. Scott Fitzgerald, name your favorite writer—never struggled with it."

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And when writers are having a hard time, or thinking too much about the future of their writing, it can lead to procrastination. "If you've had good reception to your first book and are afraid of the critical reception you imagine awaits your second book, you'll procrastinate." And while you may think you're procrastinating because you need to know exactly what you're going to write before you begin, in Palumbo's view, it's more often caused by fear of self-exposure. "For many people, the smaller shame of procrastinating is better than the bigger shame of what people are going to say about you when the work is done."

As with most issues writers bring to him, he reduces that fear to "family of origin" issues. How you take criticism is a direct offshoot of how you experienced criticism as a child and echoes the messages your parents gave you as to your inner worth. It's up to the writer how that criticism is interpreted and personalized. "A parent can say, 'You're an idiot,' and one kid laughs it off while another crumbles. If you come from a family where you were highly criticized, criticism is horrible. If you were praised to the sky, you will also find criticism extraordinarily hard and painful."

The more a writer understands that criticism is subjective, that it's the opinion of someone with different artistic or commercial goals, the less it's seen as a critique of you as a person. "But," says Palumbo, "we're all human and it's very difficult not to take criticism personally. When an agent of mine once said I shouldn't take the rejection of a script of mine personally, I said, 'How should I take it—*im*personally?'"

Which is one reason he says screenwriters are the unhappiest writers. Apart from not owning the copyright to their work, screenwriters must deal both with too many people who have script approval over them and with the stream of notes that continually churn the writer's original story, something that rarely happens with fiction. The number-one horror of being a screenwriter, Palumbo says, is that "the writer is removed from his or her unconscious and begins to accommodate the studio or the star. The screenwriter, who knows the most about the story and character, and has labored hardest, sees his or her work changed in a minute. I was in advertising before I became a screenwriter and screenwriting is a lot like the advertising business. People come to Hollywood looking for an approving parent," he says, "and that's the worst place to find one."

Unlike a novel, the screenplay structure is unforgiving. "Structure is everything and every scene has to move the movie forward. Movies are mostly plot driven and the director is king. The best stuff for writers now is on television. It's character driven, like novels. In TV, the writer is king. Every screenwriter in my practice is developing TV projects."

Writer envy—and worship—rarely yield happy results. "So many writers come in and say, 'I'm no John Updike,' and I say, 'That job has been filled by John Updike so be the best you can be.'" Because "if you think that Hemingway was a great writer and that you're a piece of crap, it's going to be hard starting your next novel." Smart writers compare themselves to themselves rather than to someone else. And one of the many self-defeating forms of comparison is thinking you don't have an interesting enough life to be a



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writer. One of my favorite chapters in *Writing from the Inside Out* is "Write About Dogs." It's a take-off on an old Booth cartoon and it has to do with using who you are as the raw materials for your work. "The thing about writing," says Palumbo, "is no matter how particular or idiosyncratic your story is, it can generalize out to everyone. You didn't have to grow up in Dublin to understand *Angela's Ashes*. Ray Bradbury said there's only one story in the world and it's your story."

Many writers believe that self-aggrandizement is a lousy quality and that it's better to be humble. Humility is great, Palumbo says, but "successful artists of all stripes need a good amount of healthy narcissism. At some level, it has to feel urgent." And if you don't believe in you, who will? He goes on to say that writers should feel like that five-year-old coming home with a drawing: If you draw it, it has to go on the wall. The same goes for writing. It has to feel like a calling. You feel good when you write and bad when you don't. "Annie Dillard said if you write long enough, your body changes on a cellular level, so if you're not writing, it feels wrong."

That belief in the writing self is paramount. No matter when you started writing, you need that belief in yourself to be able to withstand rejection and all of the other obstacles the writing life brings. Writers who started at a young age usually see themselves more clearly as writers than those who come to writing later. But those who've had success in another profession can bring the same skill set, work habits and self-regard to writing that got them through med school or law school. "There is no one answer," says Palumbo. "What motivates or hampers one writer is not the same for all writers. There's no 'one size fits all.' I say keep giving them *you* until *you* is what they want. I see so many patients who say they want to write the next big seller. When *The Da Vinci Code* came out, a lot of my patients wanted to write that. When you do that, you're dead. The best thing is to write your own reality. If it's your karma, the powers that be will want that. We all know

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stories of authors who've written books we love that were rejected by dozens of publishers."

The goal of therapy, says Palumbo, is self-awareness, to be aware of the behaviors that are tripping you up. "I say insight is the booby prize of therapy. People don't change with insight. People change with courage. You have to coexist with that which makes you anxious. You can be anxious or fearful that what you're writing is not any good, but you write it anyway. If you sit around waiting to feel confident, you've got a long wait."

So does perseverance pay off? In his 28 years of practicing psychotherapy, Palumbo says he's never had a patient not achieve an element of his or her

dreams. It may be that the person who wanted to be a TV writer ended up writing a web series. The would-be novelist becomes a successful writer of nonfiction books.

"It may not be everything you want, but the ultimate goal for a writer is to develop a healthy relationship with his or her own writing process. Agents come and go, publishers come and go, trends come and go, but having a profound, intimate relationship with process is the best protection there is. It's the only thing that sustains." ♦

Barbara DeMarco-Barrett is a writer in Southern California. She is the host of Writers on Writing on KUCI-FM and teaches at Gotham Writer's Workshop. She has noir fiction in *USA Noir: Best of the Akashic Noir Series* and her book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within* is in its 11th printing.