

Starting from Scratches 09/09/2005

The ideal outcomes of this writing exercise are to explore how great deprivation can be transformed into an unexpected gain and to produce a draft that reveals a character in the midst of a moment of transformation. First, remember a time when you had very little or nothing (i.e. in material, social, cultural or emotional terms). If you have always had an abundance of things, social contacts, great culture and a totally emotionally fulfilling life in every way, imagine a character who does not have any of these things now. You could also use a friend or relative for your character. Whether you use a real or an imagined character, you must be able to understand the inner life and the material situation of the character. Advice: try to pick a character and a situation that have meaning for you now and which will continue to have meaning for you in the future. **Write down the essential facts of the situation in any order.**

It often happens at times of great deprivation that people turn inwards and discover a different aspect of their situation. It could be as simple as feeling free from the burdens of material possessions and rediscovering other kinds of pleasure. It could be realizing that people in a different place have much to offer in unexpected ways. It could be recovering a deeper wellspring of creativity in the absence of being near many creative people all the time. It could be realizing the end of one relationship has created time and space for another. It could be discovering in a relationship with something more abstract like a disease or a disability that there are unexpected positive “side-effects.” It could be simply rediscovering a sense of one’s true identity.

Second, recreate the scene of deprivation around the central figure, i.e. you or your imagined character, in which the she or he realizes how little is there for her or him. If the character is inside, what is in the room, building or other interior space? How does it look and smell and feel? What is the light like in there? If the character is outside, what is the weather like, what time is it, and who else is around? If there is dialogue between characters or even between various sides of one character, try to capture as much of that dialogue as you can. **Write down all the sensory information that will reveal the situation.**

It often happens at times of transformation that people invest some material things with great emotional significance. It could be the room where something happened, it could be a gift (a shirt, a ring, a photo, a book) from someone important, it could be a car where the character had to live for a few weeks etc. When something like an object becomes invested with a lot of emotional energy, the way you talk about it will begin to reveal that emotion even if you do not explain the story behind the object. On the other hand, if it is not an object that matters but an event, you could use something that happened, which was later invested with great emotional energy.

So, third, focus the attention of your character on one thing or event that is invested with great emotional energy. How does that thing help or hinder the character? Does the character need it to survive in some way? Does it remind the character of who or what matters most? If it were e.g. a piece of music, a photograph or a literary work, how often would the character return to it? What would happen to the person in that time? If it is an event, how does the memory of the event grow or evolve over time? Would the character become more engaged in imagining a different future or remembering a past or both? **Write down the essential sensory information about the character and the thing that is invested with emotion— show what the character does or says.**

Lastly, read over the earlier stages of your writing and start writing your first draft not chronologically at “the beginning,” but wherever it seems that the energy that helps the character to transform is strongest. Then, as you go along, you can fill in the blanks. You may decide that you do not really need some parts of the previous stages. In general, try to get away with using only what is necessary from the prior parts of this exercise.