

## A Creative Writing Lesson (In One Hour Or Less!)

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My sister and I were driving home from the cottage. It was late August and it had been a long, hot day of a dry, dusty summer. She was in the process of writing a research paper, and going back to the city meant going back to work, the confining academics and the buzz of the library workrooms.

The sun was setting and there was a touch of coolness just starting to creep into the air, a fine haze of mist hanging low over the shorn hayfields that mingled with the dust from the gravel roads that blew off the car as our tires hit the highway asphalt.

"I want to learn how to write like you do," she told me. "When I write my papers it's such hard work. I want to write creatively."

She was driving. I was watching the sky change colours, pastel pinks and yellows fading into sorbet purples and blues against the crisp black silhouettes of the roadside trees and telephone poles. I could see not just look, I thought to myself. Why couldn't she?

"I can teach you right now," I told her. "All you have to do is look at things."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the road."

She did, the car's headlights starting to gleam on the pavement in the growing dusk. "It's black."

True, it was black. It was also oily, smooth, worn, warped, cracked. It was softened by the heat, or jagged with embedded stones. It smelled of dew, or creosote: it was dusted with the fine grey powder from the gravel shoulder, or it was strewn with new-mown hay after the rakes and combines had lumbered from field to field.

This was how I saw things. Always, and I told her this. I knew she understood, at least partly.

"Now tell me something else," I challenged. "Tell me something about what you see."

She was hesitant at first. Her eyes scanned the road, then the passing landscape. "That field," she said, "It's ragged where the cows have nibbled away at the edges."

What else can you see?"

"I can see where the cows have walked. Where they lie under the trees during the day, because there are soft depressions in the grass."

Now, I know that nobody can teach this kind of seeing, in the less-than-an-hour we had on our drive homewards. But I knew I had opened her eyes a little, and shared what it was like to see things the way I did, even for a little while.

## **POST SCRIPT**

As I was preparing this story for a hard copy, I gave it to my sister to proofread. Aside from mocking the way I wrote her, she also related this addendum:

"I was at the cottage, after a canoe ride around the lake, just lying on the dock with my dog. And I started looking at things, trying to see them the way you showed me during that car ride. I could feel the sun shining on me, and it was split down half my body. On the sunny side, it was nearly unbearably hot, and in the shade it was cooler."

## **ANALYSIS**

In thinking about how I was going to tell this particular story, I thought about how I've always been called "creative" or "imaginative" and what, exactly, the differences are between an artist and a "regular" person. Are the differences really in my imagination? (I can make up an entire story involving a gnome living in a hole lined with moss under the arching roots of a pine tree just from glancing at it). Or is there actually some way that I experience and perceive things that is fundamentally different than the way others do? And while I make no claim at all about my way being better/richer/more creative, I think it is merely that: Different.

Where I was born with the ability to see things in a detailed, creative way, I also rapidly gained the ability to work with words in attempting to capture some of the aspects of the things I saw. I have come to realize that this is not something "regular" people can do, at least without training themselves to do so. When I look at a busy street corner, for example, I am also able to see the centuries of history that came before, the fields that had been there before the pavement, the cows that had trodden there before the dirt roads. Somehow, I have the ability to fuse remembered or imagined worlds with the present, to meld the creative with the practical, and to weave the aesthetic with the actual.

And that is not to say that "regular," non-creative people cannot be taught that skill. It's as I said, a way of seeing, not just looking. It's an acquired ability that uses the muscles of perception and imagination, the way learning to ride a bike teaches equilibrium and

concentration. It's not outside anyone's grasp; you simply have to have the eyes, and a way to express it.

I can paint, but I am not a Painter. If I tried to express on canvas any of the things that had occurred in the car ride with my sister, I would quickly become frustrated that things were not being expressed the way I felt they should. I cannot use my muscles to paint the difference between road dust and misty hayfields, just as perhaps some people cannot use their eyes to see the difference aesthetically.

But we have language, and language is expressive. We have eyes, and they see aesthetic things. We just have to train our brains in the method of connecting the input and output, and we have the possibility for a creative moment to occur anywhere, anytime, with any kind of inspiration.

## **CONNECTIONS**

As teachers, we can't take for granted that the way we teach and experience subjects is the way that is most accessible for everyone. There is even no guarantee that the qualities we are asking our students to see are even apparent to them at all. But we can lay the framework, give them the perceptive and expressive tools to be able to identify those aesthetic moments, and allow them to do the rest of the work. It is as if we are using an infrared beam to explore a dark room: with our naked eyes, we are unable to gain any use from our source of illumination. But if we gave our students cameras that could see infrared, and used those highly perceptive lenses to find our way around, we would soon be able to identify every item of furniture!

In this case, I can't rewire my sister's brain to work the way mine does. (That would not only be egomaniacal but also messy) But I do have methods at my disposal to show and teach her what my experiences of the world are like. Now, she is my student. I can share with her experiences that I perceive as aesthetic, and let her develop her own methods of seeing them. She will add those aesthetic tools to her own toolbox, and they will always be at her disposal. Will she see things the way I do? No, and I hope not! Because we are all individuals, and it is diversity in perception and expression that lends so much richness to the aesthetic world.