

Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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Happy New Year Everyone! While the ticking down of days, years, and decades may seem like an arbitrary way to mark the passage of time, it's still a wonderful opportunity to look back at the year just past with gratitude and look forward to the year to come with hope. 2019 was a great year for me, between publishing the complete text of my first novel to restarting my blog to beginning this podcast. I've worked with some amazing artists, creators, actors, and musicians in the last 12 months, and I'm so thankful that all of you have stuck with the podcast while I was still getting my bearings. I believe that there are great things in store for 2020, but more than that, I'm planning for great things this year. To adapt an old saying, "Hope is not a strategy – but it's great fuel." There's a reason I end every episode with an encouragement to keep writing, and if you're waiting for an excuse to begin, then let the start of this New Year be just that.

I'm also very happy that 2019 is over, because it means I'm done with the lessons on Plot. I learned a hell of a lot in the last three episodes – probably more than any of you learned from listening to me babble on about it – and I think I've become a more effective writer and appreciative reader as a result. But now, we get to move on to the big idea – the concepts and techniques around discovering and developing Story. These next three lessons will be less heavy with nuts and bolts than the last six, largely because, in my definition, "Story" isn't the text you put down on the page. It's more philosophical and ethereal – the source from which you write your characters and plot, and the thing that is created by the reader's engagement with what you've written. It's the creative force for your narrative, and a thing created by your narrative. It's the dream that starts you writing and the movie that plays in the reader's head. It's translated through mediums ranging from puppet shows to television to novels heavy enough to stop a semi-truck. It can be told and retold again and again with different characters, plot, settings, and themes, yet still be the same at its core.

It is story, and it is a wonderful thing to behold.

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Everyone's a storyteller. Notice I didn't say everyone's a good storyteller. Of course it comes more naturally to some people than others – that's just how humans work. Hard as I exercise and train, I will never be as good a tennis player as Serena Williams, and it would be the height of arrogance to think I could be. Personally, I don't think I'm a very good storyteller by default. As anyone who's heard me recount some humorous encounter or what happened at work will probably tell you, I'm often rambling, unfunny, and rather boring (there are probably some people who would say the same thing about my podcast, but let's not think about that too much).

What I am good at, and what I've always been good at, is ideas. From a young age, I would often be emotionally captured by a set of concepts, an outline of a character, or a sense of a place and time that never existed. It was so strong of a feeling that I felt compelled to tell the story in whatever medium I had access to. At first this was usually through building those characters and worlds out of Legos (something I still do occasionally for my podcast episodes). Later it turned into writing stories and, even later, into screenplays for shorts that I produced with a small group of friends. Sometimes the call was so intense and immediate that I produced entire films in a single breathless day, with myself as the only actor, cameraperson, and grip. Other times, I spent my entire summer or winter break meticulously crafting props and planning sequences for films that often went unfinished. It didn't matter. I had an *idea...* a story to tell, and I wasn't going to let it slip away.

I believe everyone has these ideas at least sometimes, and as inherently creative beings we are compelling to get them out of our heads. Sometimes the idea is attached to things that really happened, and this impulse – this instinct – is served by simply recounting the anecdote as a story with beginning, middle, and end – or setup and punchline, as the case may be. Other people plan elaborate tabletop RPG campaigns for their friends, improvising as they go and collaboratively creating the story with them (or fighting them to keep the story on track). And some people – like me – don't do well telling our stories to people directly. We stutter and stumble and fear the unplanned, needing our tales to be perfect before they're ready to be consumed.

Now in no way am I saying the work of the “author” (and I'm making air quotes around that word here) is the best or highest form of storytelling. Not at all. It's one of the most time consuming and soul-wrenching, sure – but suffering does not make the “serious author” (air quotes again) any more a storyteller than the toddler who just stumbled their way through recounting what happened at school.

I'm not saying that to discourage or dissuade anyone from literary ambitions (no air quotes this time, I'm being sincere). In fact, if someone intends to be a great storyteller and sees themselves as the next best thing since Mark Twain, they've probably already switched this episode off. To everyone left, I want to say clearly that, in my experience, the best thing a storyteller can do is let go of their pretensions and tell the damn story. Tell it as best you can, knowing that it won't be perfect. Make mistakes. Use the wrong tense. Feel the color rise in your cheeks when you realize you forgot to pay off a major plot point. In the words of a certain wise Muppet in a galaxy far, far away: “The greatest teacher, failure is.” **But it's only a teacher if we are teachable.** Your ego is as much a vestigial organ as your appendix – mostly harmless, until it becomes inflamed.

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So what does all this have to do with improving your stories? Quite a lot, actually. Once again, I can only speak from my experience, but it seems like writing is and should be a humbling process – or at least, it has been for me. Learning and accepting that your story is not about you and could be told (and perhaps told better) by someone else makes you realize just how small you are in the face of the creative act. Your characters could live without you. Your plot could chug along quite nicely with a more experienced hand at the keys. But the story came to you – it originated in your experiences, your tastes, your subconscious. Accept it gracefully, and share it freely, because **the only way to not be a storyteller is quite obvious: you don't tell your story.**

It's not about your pride, your reputation, or your success. Countless writers throughout history have put pen to paper and published with the sole intent of winning wealth and infamy. Many of them have succeeded, and yes, I will concede that it is almost impossible to write anything without considering its reception by readers. I'm not asking you to suppress that thought – I'm simply asking you to recategorize it. **Allow those concerns, but place them secondary to your story.** It is to your inspiration and ideas that you are first and foremost obligated as a writer. The consequences of seeking profit first are all too apparent in the slate of Blockbusters released in 2019. There were some gems amidst the rubbish, but it was mostly rubbish: tepid remakes and stale sequels to the successes of yesteryear, developed without inspiration or wisdom or care for anything beyond being "good enough" to sell tickets to nostalgic fans in their millions. The screenwriters, talented and experienced as they were, were obligated by the system they were a part of to put corporate interests before storytelling integrity and craft. The cart was not only put before the horse: in some cases it seems like the horse didn't even show up, and so the writer had to push the cart themselves for the sake of Q4 profits.

I'm not saying that writers should be starving artists – far from it! Always make sure you have enough to feed, clothe, and house yourself and anyone who depends on you first. Take risks, yes, but be smart. As a single ace guy, I can work fewer hours and write more than most people, and I am thankful every single day for that fact. What I am saying is that the more money becomes a part of the equation while writing, the more you start writing *for* money, and not for the sake of story. We all need to eat, and care for the people in our charge, and support our communities as best we can. I just don't think that if we really love storytelling, we'll sacrifice quality and craftsmanship for financial success and fame. You can't take anything you earn in this life with you: not money or awards or anything else material. When the time come to pay the ferryman, however, you can leave this world knowing you created something worthwhile – something that will outlive and overshadow you, and make a positive impact on generations to come.

That's why Story is always above. It's a gift we have been given to tend and steward as best we can in this life, to pass along to others when we're gone. It's the lessons of a

lifetime and a summation of our experiences veiled in character, plot, narration, and dialogue. It is not us, but it came from us and is, in many ways, truer to ourselves than the many idle conversations we undertake every single day. It is the way in which we make sense of our own lives and try to help others see as we see.

So tell your story. Tell it honestly and earnestly and as best as you know how. Read and research techniques to improve your writing and make it clearer. Write your first draft in a white heat or at a slow crawl. Agonize over that second draft. Wonder if you're any good at all – and then keep writing. Keep writing. Keep writing. This world is not singular, but plural, and needs all perspectives and ideas to grow and thrive.

So please, if you would... **tell us your story.**

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Enough philosophizing. Let's talk about how you find your story in the first place: how you figure out what it is you feel called to write. For some people, it's fairly obvious.

They've been writing the same kinds of stories since the day they learned to hold a pencil, and can't imagine writing anything else. Others (like myself) are all over the shop, finding inspiration in a dozen different genres and mediums and wanting to get them all down while they have the chance. And still others wait their entire lives for that one idea that really captures them before writing that one brilliant book that everyone will remember.

Is there one right way to be inspired? No, of course not. But there is a wrong way, and that is to ignore it... **to let inspiration slip away out of laziness or fear or apathy.** A huge part of the finding and holding on to your inspirations is, as a certain ghost-hunting writer once said, "to catch them before they fade. If you don't... well, they're gone forever."

The best investment any starting writer can make, in my opinion, is a good notebook. It doesn't have to be a fancy leather-bound volume – though I do love snazzy journal, I won't deny. It especially doesn't have to be anything special or expensive if you're just getting started, and aren't sure if this whole "writer's life" thing is really for you (hey look, the air quotes are back!). A few sheets of notebook paper stapled together with a cardboard or cardstock cover will certainly do for a start – just make sure you keep a pen, pencil, crayon, quill, stick of charcoal from last weekend's barbecue, or any other writing utensil with it at all times. Failing that, a notepad app on your phone or tablet is a functional alternative, but there are problems with this, which have to do with my next point.

This second piece of advice is tricky. I won't claim I listen to it all the time – I'm not quite that delusional. **But being a writer is not about perfection, it's about persistence.** Illogical as it sounds, a huge part of writing in and for the digital age is to regularly

disengage from it – that is, turn off the phone, tablet, computer, console, and TV in those times when you have nothing better to do... because you do have something better to do. Social media, texting, and video games, engaging as they may be, are all forms of consumption. We take in stimuli that entertain and distract us almost constantly, leaving no room for idle daydreaming... the most important kind of dreaming a writer can do. Think about it: inspiration arises from the subconscious, which only speaks when our conscious minds are idle. Tech and entertainment companies have made ungodly amounts of money by commodifying that time and making sure our brains don't have a quiet moment while we're awake. It's only when we finally turn our phones off and go to bed that our minds are free to roam: to create vivid worlds and sprawling stories from all that we've experienced in our lives... worlds and stories that often fade too fast for us to write down.

The best thing any writer – and indeed any person – can learn to do is to dream with their eyes open: to let their subconscious wander, pushing through boredom and putting that idle source of energy to work on something besides crushing candy and counting retweets. For me (and Charles Dickens, Stephen King, and several other accomplished writers), the best way to silence the world and dream awake is to go for a walk. Hiking is the best for me, so long as it's not distractingly strenuous. But a nice walk around a park or around the block (so long as you're safe and appropriately attentive) can help silence your conscious mind and let your subconscious begin putting ideas together. Alternatively, if you work a service job with long hours of menial, nothing tasks, then use those hours: observe and daydream and imagine while you wait. If your brain is fully engaged by work or school for 8 or 9 hours of the day, then learn to resist the urge to tune in and tune out every night, and instead meditate on what happened in the day, allowing yourself to feel it fully. Lean into boredom, discomfort, and ambiguity. It will hurt at first (heck, it will always hurt a little), but it is so, so much richer.

That's not to say you should be constantly disengaged and in your own head. At some point you do need to take in creative stimuli and nourishment in the form of books, movies, TV shows, video games, audio dramas, or any other form of storytelling media. As you do, be open to inspiration and ideas from a wide variety of sources. Otherwise you'll find yourself imitating those you've consumed a million times when you start to write. Think of it like healthy diet and exercise. Fad diets tell you to avoid one type of food at all cost and exercise 6 hours a day. That might work some people, but they're almost never designed to work long-term. The equivalent to this would be a first-time writer saying they're never going to watch TV again, and commit themselves to writing 4,000 words every day. Noble aspirations, but what about all the well-written TV produced in the last decade? Will you turn up your nose to *Breaking Bad's* incredible character work and pacing because it belongs to the same food group as *Jersey Shore*? And 4,000 words a day, while doable, will almost certainly result in burnout within the year.

Instead, start small. Focus on watching, reading, and listening to acclaimed and beloved stories in genres you love. Don't be afraid to fall back on old comforts every once in a while: you fell in love with them for a reason, and even if they're guilty pleasures, they must have some quality that keeps you coming back. Commit to writing 100 words a day; then in a month, increase to 200, and then 250 – whatever you can reasonably expect to write in a day with the time that you have. Healthy habits, in writing as well as in life, are not what people we see as “healthy” do: they are what we can do ourselves, day by day, to improve our capacities and abilities. **Only by accepting our limits without judgement can we learn to reach beyond them.**

As you learn to be inspired in your day to day life, put those daydreams to work. For some writers, ideas come in fragments; first an interesting title and central concept, then characters, plot, and setting weeks, months, or even years later. That's what happened for me with *Disquiet* and *Return to the Echowood*. Those titles originally came to me with completely different stories attached several years ago. Other times, stories will drop gift-wrapped from the heavens, complete with three-act structures and a full cast of characters. I've already said that this wonderful outpouring is how a lot of my stories come. For C.S. Lewis, he said his fiction came to him in images: most famously that of a faun carrying packages in a snowy wood. **However inspiration comes – whole or fragmented, clear or fuzzy, as you daydream in class or in traffic or in the quiet comfort of your own home – write it down in your notebook.** Write it in as much detail as you can, as fully as you can, along with anything you can link to it in terms of inspiration or source material. Then, close the notebook.

Let it sit for a day or two. Reexamine it as your leisure, once the ideas have stewed in your head for a little while. Make notes and additions. Take a walk, letting your mind wander in and around your story. As it came from your subconscious, your natural thought process should tend towards it easily with a little conscious guidance from you. Go home. Write down everything you can remember thinking about on your walk. Begin to find the shape of the narrative you will can craft from this story. As soon as you feel ready, start writing. Give your subconscious room – don't suffocate your story with worries about what people will think of it, or how that turn of phrase will come off, or if this even makes sense. Those are questions for the second draft, and today, we're just talking about the process of inspiration and inception: **the where and how of finding our stories.**

This is where big Story is most important. Story is the beginning of your journey as a writer: a cyclical journey from inspiration through labor and love and loss to completion and back again. You go through this cycle with every story you write to one degree or another, but, as in many myths and fairy tales, what you take with you on the first stage of your journey decides how you will fare when the wolves begin to howl and the fire creeps closer and closer.

And so I urge you, as a fellow storyteller and human being: **make time to daydream this year.** Though I'm not a fan of New Year's resolutions, I hope you can resolve to make imagination, observation, and healthy creative habits a part of your life, starting now.

Even if you don't become an air-quotes "author" by doing so, your life will become richer and fuller through the simple act of dreaming with your eyes open, and working to make those dreams reality.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's inspiration integration was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the inspired and inspiring Miss Lauren Baker.

Remember how I told you to get off social media and *dream a little bigger, darling?* Well, that's still true, but after you're done with that be sure to swing over to twitter and Instagram, where you can find me at [trevor_vw](#). If you enjoyed this show, please share it out, and be sure to check out [homesteadonthecorner.com](#) for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show. If you enjoyed this lesson and want to help this show to grow, consider supporting Homestead on the Corner on Patreon as a monthly donor.

Next episode, Homestead is going out to sea, with a haunting tale of life, death, and all that lies between set in the Golden Age of Piracy. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it, and please rate and review us on Apple Podcast! It really does help get this show out to more people.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a happy New Year, and keep writing.